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Servant Leadership in a Baccalaureate Nursing Program: A Case Study

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Background

All nurses are leaders every day (Anderson, 2016; Fahlberg & Toomey, 2016). The immediate need for complex skills, including leadership skills, challenges entry-level nursing professionals who have limited leadership experience (Tropello & DeFazio, 2014). Despite the many challenges they face, entry-level practitioners must master leadership skills to succeed (Anderson, 2016; Fahlberg & Toomey, 2016). Nurses enjoy benefits of leadership including: increased care coordination, quality, safety, and outcomes (Anderson, 2016; Fahlberg & Toomey, 2016; Tropello & DeFazio, 2014). Thus, leadership development is an important and essential element in entry-level, specifically baccalaureate, nursing programs. The principles of Greenleaf's Servant Leadership Theory (1977), such as service to others, mirror the vital leadership skills needed by nurses; thus, it is an ideal framework to study leadership development in baccalaureate nursing programs (American Association of Critical-Care Nurses [AACN], 2016; Anderson, 2016; Fahlberg & Toomey, 2016; Fields, Thompson, & Hawkins, 2015; Robert K. Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership [RGCSL], 2016). Greenleaf (1977) based his Servant Leadership Theory on the premise that leaders first serve, then decide to lead. Greenleaf asserted the focus on others’ needs and sharing of power by the leader increases performance and personal development of the people being led (RGCSL, 2016; Spears, 2010). Principles and characteristics important to servant leadership include, for example: service to others, holistic approach to work, listening, empathy, caring, trust, altruism, and empowerment. Despite formal recognition of Greenleaf’s Servant Leadership Theory over 40 years ago, incorporating servant leadership principles into baccalaureate nursing education is not well studied (Anderson, 2016; RGCSL, 2016, Tropello & DeFazio, 2014). Available literature focuses on defining theory ideals, with a few studies examining how servant leadership is measured, demonstrated in practice, or used in education (Anderson, 2016; Neill & Saunders, 2008; O’Brien, 2011; Tropello & DeFazio, 2014; van Dierendonck, 2011). Most empirical evidence focuses on individual and organizational outcomes of servant leadership; for example, servant leaders tend to have followers with increased satisfaction, commitment, and performance (Hanse, Harlin, Jarebrant, Ulin, & Winkel, 2016; Sturm, 2009; van Dierendonck, 2011; Yancer, 2012). Research is limited on how to develop servant leadership skills. Anderson (2016) and Tropello and DeFazio (2014) note the limited study on servant leadership in baccalaureate nursing education, despite the urgent need for these skills. Examining a case of a baccalaureate nursing program, through the lens of Greenleaf’s Servant Leadership Theory, can provide understanding of leadership development into entry-level programs.

Methods

Thus, the purpose of this case study was to describe how a baccalaureate nursing program (unit of analysis) incorporates the principles of Greenleaf’s Servant Leadership Theory. The study was constructed around two propositions (1) the baccalaureate nursing program intentionally promotes service to others, holistic approach to work, sense of community, and sharing of power in decision making when teaching nursing, including leadership, skills and (2) the baccalaureate nursing program encourages character attributes, such as listening, empathy, and healing, that are consistent with Greenleaf’s Servant Leadership Theory. Case study methodology was selected to understand the theory in a contemporary, real-world context (Yin, 2014). This study was appropriate as case study research since experimental control was not possible or needed (Yin, 2014). Multiple sources of data were sought to increase study rigor and allow a comprehensive understanding of the case (Yin, 2014). Additional strategies to ensure study quality and rigor included: triangulation, peer-debriefing, documented audit-trail, detailed study protocol, thick descriptions, pattern matching, and use of theory to structure the study.
Studies conducted in a private, Christian college in the eastern United States. In this baccalaureate nursing program, there are approximately 200 enrolled students and 10 full-time faculty employed. The study’s site clearly prioritizes servant leadership principles; thus, it was determined an ideal case to examine (Yin, 2014). Data sources included (1) review of the nursing program website, student handbook, course catalog, program description, and relevant course syllabi, (2) alumni survey data, and (3) faculty semi-structured interviews. Institutional Review Board approval was obtained before data collection commenced. Fifteen nursing program recent alumni (i.e., 2015 and 2016 graduates) surveys were completed and three faculty completed the semi-structured interviews. Systematic data analysis followed an inductive approach. Data were analyzed and evaluated for empirically-found patterns (themes) and compared to study propositions.

Results

Empirically-found themes included: service to others, holistic approach, building community, compassionate care, humility, empowerment, professionalism, and lifelong learning. Pattern matching revealed discovered themes were consistent with study propositions, thus with key principles and characteristics outlined in Greenleaf’s Servant Leadership Theory.

Discussion

Both study propositions were supported. To avoid bias and present a high-quality study, alternate explanations for the empirically-found themes were also considered (Yin, 2014). Both the Christian paradigm and the Transformational Leadership Theory can be considered rivals in this case study. First, since the nursing program is part of a Christian college, the possibility exists that the emphasis on service, humility, and building community results from the religious affiliation (i.e., the Christian paradigm). Many of the principles encouraged by servant leadership are also promoted by Christian theology (Robinson, 2009). However, as Robinson (2009) asserts, many other religious and nonreligious traditions promote service and other principles of service leadership. Therefore, although the program may attribute its emphasis on servant leadership to faith, the two are not necessarily dependent on one another. Next, as Transformational Leadership Theory premises, such as: leaders inspiring followers, role-modeling expectations, and encouraging intellectual pursuits, match some of the case’s empirically-found themes, this theory must also be considered as a rival (van Dierendonck, Stam, Boersma, de Windt, & Alkema, 2014). However, servant leadership differs in its prioritization of meeting others’ needs and, thus, best fits with the nursing program. Available literature focus on individual and organizational outcomes of servant leadership; however, studies are limited in providing insight on how to develop these essential skills (Anderson, 2016; Hanse et al., 2016; Sturm, 2009; Tropello & DeFazio, 2014; van Dierendonck, 2011; Yancer, 2012). This study serves as a foundation and provides insight into the important, complex process of leadership development in entry-level nursing programs (Yin, 2014). As all nurses lead every day, it is vital that leadership skills are introduced early in such programs. Greenleaf’s Servant Leadership Theory could be considered a framework in designing curricula to promote leadership skill and in meeting baccalaureate essentials outlined by the American Association of Colleges of Nursing (2008).

Servant nurse leaders “speak up, volunteer, advocate,” and listen “not because [they] want power or prestige, but because [they] care” (Fahlberg & Toomey, 2016, p. 50). Nurse servant leaders get involved in (1) “initiatives around safety, quality, staffing,” (2) “mentoring new nurses or nursing students,” and (3) “helping others get their work done” (Fahlberg & Toomey, 2016, p. 50; Savel & Munro, 2017). They not only listen and advocate for patients, families, and coworkers, but also empower those they serve (Fahlberg & Toomey, 2016). In these sentiments, one can see the connection to the study’s empirically-found themes. Nurse servant leaders can help realize the servant leadership individual and organizational outcomes (i.e., benefits) emphasized in current literature. Deliberate and comprehensive integration of leadership development, ingrained in the culture of nursing programs, could support successes. Benefits of skilled leadership include improved care coordination, quality, safety, and outcomes. Training entry-level practitioners, in baccalaureate nursing programs, to be skilled leaders can help realization of these benefits.
Title:
Servant Leadership in a Baccalaureate Nursing Program: A Case Study

Keywords:
case study research, leadership development in baccalaureate nursing programs and servant leadership

References:


**Abstract Summary:**

Explore leadership development in baccalaureate nursing programs, through the lenses of Greenleaf’s Servant Leadership Theory and case study research. Discover the importance of the empirically-found themes –service to others, holistic approach, building community, compassionate care, humility, empowerment, professionalism, and lifelong learning– as they are integrated throughout a nursing program.

**Content Outline:**

1. *Introduction*
   1. *Background*
      1. Leadership development is an important element in entry-level, specifically baccalaureate, nursing programs
         1. All nurses are leaders every day
         2. Immediate need for complex skills, including leadership skills, challenges entry-level nursing professionals who have limited leadership experience
         3. Benefits of leadership are multifaceted including improved care coordination, quality, safety, and outcomes
   2. Greenleaf’s Servant Leadership Theory as a framework for leadership development in baccalaureate nursing programs
      1. Principles of servant leadership, such as service to others, mirror vital leadership skills of nurses; thus, it is an ideal framework for studying leadership development in entry-level nursing programs
      2. Principles and characteristics of Greenleaf’s Servant Leadership Theory recognized in the literature: service to others, holistic approach to work, a sense of community, sharing of power in decision making, listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment to the growth of people, building community, humility, caring, trust and authenticity, love, learning, gratitude, forgiveness, altruism, empowerment, providing direction
   2. *Literature review*
      1. Incorporating Greenleaf’s Servant Leadership Theory into baccalaureate nursing education is not well studied
1. Studies focus on defining theory ideals, a few studies examine how servant leadership is measured, demonstrated in practice, or used to guide education.

2. Literature focuses on individual and organizational outcomes of servant leadership, not how to develop these skills.

3. Study purpose and propositions

   1. Purpose of the case study was to describe how a baccalaureate nursing program (unit of analysis) incorporates the principles of Greenleaf's Servant Leadership Theory.

   2. Propositions

      1. The baccalaureate nursing program intentionally promotes service to others, holistic approach to work, sense of community, and sharing of power in decision making when teaching nursing, including leadership skills.

      2. The baccalaureate nursing program encourages character attributes, such as listening, empathy, and healing, that are consistent with Greenleaf's Servant Leadership Theory.

2. Body

   1. Methods

      1. Research design, i.e., a single-case study

         1. Provides an understanding of theory, in this case Greenleaf’s Servant Leadership Theory, in a contemporary, real-world context.

         2. Experimental control not needed or possible.

         3. Used multiple sources of data including (1) review of nursing program, website, student handbook, course catalog, program description, and relevant course syllabi, (2) alumni survey data, and (3) faculty semi-structured interviews.

         4. Multiple sources of data allowed comprehensive understanding of the case.

      2. Setting

         1. Private, Christian college in eastern United States.

         2. College offers baccalaureate, master’s, and doctorate of nursing practice degrees.

         3. In baccalaureate nursing program, 200 students and 10 full-time faculty.

         4. Determined to be ideal site as the college prioritizes principles and characteristics important to Greenleaf’s Servant Leadership Theory.

      3. Participants

         1. Alumni participants

            1. Eligibility: 18 years or older, could read, write, and speak English; recent (2015 and 2016) alumni of the nursing program; potential participants were identified by the college’s alumni office.

            2. Demographics (15 completed the survey): evenly split in terms of graduation year (53.3% graduated in 2015 and 46.7% graduating in 2016); all aged 20-29; most employed full-time (86.7%); most employed in a hospital setting, in a staff nurse role (80%).

         2. Faculty participants

            1. Eligibility: 18 years or older, could read, write, and speak English; purposive sampling; current full-time faculty teaching in the baccalaureate nursing program for one year or greater.

            2. Demographics (three completed the interview): most doctoral prepared (66.7%); most had taught at the college for 20 years or greater (66.7%); all taught in a variety of undergraduate courses in multiple class years.

      4. Data collection
1. Phase one: publicly accessible documents including the nursing program website, student handbook, course catalog, and program description
2. Phase two: human participants including survey and interview participants
   1. Survey procedure (1) participants were emailed a survey invitation letter and (2) participants complete the survey through an anonymous, electronic link
   2. Survey content was mostly closed-ended questions regarding alumni perceptions of the nursing program’s incorporation of servant leadership principles and characteristics with one open-ended question allowing participants to share additional thoughts
   3. Interview procedure (1) if participants agreed to participate, a member of the research team scheduled a mutually acceptable date, time, and location for the interview, (2) informed consent given at least three days in advance for review, (3) course syllabi requested at this time, (4) semi-structured interviews were audio-recorded with participants’ permission, conducted using a script, and (5) interviews lasted 30-45 minutes
   4. Interview content related to faculty perceptions regarding leadership principles and characteristics promoted in the college’s baccalaureate nursing program
5. Methods to ensure quality and rigor
   1. Credibility: enhanced with triangulation (i.e., multiple sources of data) and peer-debriefing (i.e., at least two members of research team conducted data analysis before debriefing)
   2. Confirmability and dependability: augmented with a documented audit trail kept by research team
   3. Transferability: enhanced with thick descriptions in data collection, analysis, and results reporting
   4. Construct validity: enhanced with triangulation (i.e., multiple sources of data)
   5. Internal validity: detailed study protocol and database
   6. External validity: use of Greenleaf’s Servant Leadership Theory to structure the study
6. Data analysis techniques
   1. Comprehensive analysis
      1. Inductive approach, i.e., analysis included discovering empirically-found themes and comparing to study propositions
      2. After individual analyses of data sources and peer debriefing, coded and raw data were transferred to separate theme documents to evaluate prominent themes and track exemplar data
      3. Final pattern matching inductively revealed ultimate results
      4. Individual analyses varied slightly by source, see next sections
   2. Document, interview, and open-ended survey analysis
      1. Steps (1) transcribed to electronic documents, (2) read through completely, (3) line-by-line analysis, (4) coded, (5) separated into empirically-found patterns (themes), (6) peer debriefing, and (7) coded and raw data were transferred to separate theme documents
   3. Closed-ended survey analysis
      1. Descriptive (i.e., frequency) statistics reported
7. Ethical considerations
   1. Institutional Review Board approval obtained before data collection commenced
2. Interview participants received written and verbal information at least three days prior to the interview; written informed consent obtained
3. Survey participants received written information in email invitation and immediately before beginning the survey; electronic consent was embedded into the survey, with forced completion and skip logic attached
4. Confidentiality for interview participants with a fictitious name assigned for reporting
5. Survey participants remained anonymous
6. Interview audio-recordings were listened to and transcribed by a member of the research team and destroyed upon transcription completion

2. Results
   1. Empirically-found patterns, or themes which were consistent with study propositions and found throughout the nursing program
      1. Service to others
      2. Holistic approach
      3. Building community
      4. Compassionate care
      5. Humility
      6. Empowerment
      7. Professionalism
      8. Lifelong learning

1. Discussion
   1. Findings
      1. Empirically-found themes match study propositions
      2. Rival theories
         1. Christian paradigm: many of the principles encouraged by servant leadership are also promoted by Christian theology; however, although the program may attribute its emphasis on servant leadership to faith, the two are not necessarily dependent on one another
         2. Transformational Leadership Theory: premises of this theory—including care for followers, recognizing others’ contributions, leaders inspire followers—are similar to the empirically-found themes—lifelong learning, humility, building community, and empowerment—; however, the emphasis on service suggest servant leadership is the better framework
   2. Limitations
      1. Time constraint for data collection, analysis, and results reporting
         1. However, quality and rigor ensured using outlined approaches
      2. Additional data sources could have been included
         1. However, study provides foundation for future study
         2. Also, study aids in understanding the complexity of servant leadership and its real-world incorporation in a baccalaureate nursing program
   3. Suggestions for future research
      1. Other data sources in this organization such as administrative interviews, class observations, clinical observations, resumes
      2. Multiple case studies, including some in nonreligious based organizations (to see if incorporation varies)
      3. Intervention research, with a variety of samples and settings
      4. Longitudinal study
   4. Conclusions
      1. Results support study propositions including demonstrating (1) intentional promotion of Greenleaf’s Servant Leadership Theory principles and (2) encouragement of character attributes consistent with Greenleaf’s Servant Leadership Theory throughout the nursing program
2. Literature traditionally focuses on outcomes without guidance on how to develop leadership skill.

3. Study provides insight into the complex process of incorporating leadership development in entry-level nursing programs.

4. Academics should consider Greenleaf’s Servant Leadership Theory as a framework in designing curricula to promote leadership skill and meet baccalaureate essentials outlined by the American Association of Colleges of Nursing.

5. Servant nurse leaders speak up, volunteer, advocate, and listen not for power or prestige but because they care.

6. Nurse servant leaders can help realize the servant leadership individual and organizational outcomes (i.e., benefits) emphasized in current literature.

7. Deliberate and comprehensive integration of leadership development, ingrained in the culture of nursing programs, could support successes.

8. Since all nurses lead every day, it is vital that leadership skills are introduced early in nursing programs.

9. Training entry-level practitioners, in baccalaureate nursing programs, to be skilled leaders can help realize the benefits of leadership including improved care coordination, quality, safety, and outcomes.

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**Professional Experience:** Jennifer Chicca, MS, RN, is a PhD student at Indiana University of Pennsylvania, anticipated graduation 2021. She is pursuing her PhD in nursing education. Jennifer completed a Master’s degree in nursing education from the University of Maryland School of Nursing in 2014. She has worked in education with undergraduate and graduate students in a variety of roles and settings including as an instructor, tutor, preceptor, and professional development specialist throughout her eight-year career. Jennifer has also worked supporting and educating staff nurses. As staff and in formal leadership roles, Jennifer has practiced in inpatient and outpatient care settings. She is passionate about improving pre- and post-licensure nursing education.

**Author Summary:** Jennifer Chicca, MS, RN, is a PhD student at the Indiana University of Pennsylvania, anticipated graduation 2021, pursuing her PhD in nursing education. Jennifer has held a variety of informal and formal leadership roles throughout her career such as preceptor, charge nurse, tutor, and professional development specialist. Jennifer sees leadership as vital to the nursing role and is committed to improving education for pre- and post-licensure nurses, including incorporation of leadership development into education.

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**Professional Experience:** Nancy Frank, MSN, RN, CNE, is a PhD in nursing education student at Indiana University of Pennsylvania, anticipated graduation 2021. She completed her Master of Science in
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**Author Summary:** Nancy Frank, MSN, RN, CNE, is a PhD in nursing education student at Indiana University of Pennsylvania. As an Assistant Professor of Nursing, she teaches baccalaureate level nursing students. In addition, she practices as a bedside nurse on an acute care medical oncology unit. She is currently on the board for the Lambda Kappa chapter of Sigma Theta Tau International. She aspires to be a servant leader, believing that true leadership means serving others.

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**Professional Experience:** Jenna Hagy, MSN, RNC-NIC, is a PhD student at Indiana University of Pennsylvania, anticipated graduation 2021. She is pursuing her PhD in nursing education. Jenna completed her Master's degree in nursing education from Mansfield University of Pennsylvania in 2016. She has worked in education with undergraduate students in a variety of settings including as a clinical instructor, preceptor, and professional development specialist throughout her six-year career. Jenna has also worked supporting and educating staff nurses. As staff and in formal leadership roles, Jenna has practiced in the inpatient neonatal intensive care for five years. She is passionate about improving nursing education for novice nurses.

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