The learning environment in nursing education should be carefully cultivated to ensure positive, meaningful experiences are provided to students. These experiences are critical in order to prepare students to become competent, entry-level nurses upon graduation. Yet, little is known about students’ perceptions of their learning environment, including the people, places, policies, processes, and programs (Purkey & Novak, 1996). Thus, exploring students’ perceptions of the learning environment is vital to the profession to identify strengths and weakness in current undergraduate nursing education.

Background

Through learning experiences, nursing students develop the necessary knowledge and skills needed for entry-level practice (Benner, Sutphen, Leonard, & Day, 2010). These experiences allow students to develop critical thinking skills and the ability to reason, which can lead to more appropriate care for patients (Dauphinee, 2012; O’Mara, McDonald, Gillespie, Brown, & Miles, 2014; Paans et al., 2012). Yet, preparing graduates of nursing programs for their careers has become a substantial challenge for educators. Students currently entering nursing programs across the country have diverse learning needs and backgrounds, such as different life experiences, ages, abilities to utilize technology, and personal demands (Popkess & Frey, 2016). Also, nurse educators report budget cuts in higher education, a nationwide nurse faculty shortage, and note there is a lack of available clinical sites (American Association of Colleges of Nursing, 2015; Benner et al., 2010). Even though many barriers and challenges exist, educators must maximize learning experiences to ensure graduates will be prepared to handle complex situations that will arise in the clinical setting. This can be accomplished, in part, by providing an intentionally inviting learning environment for students’ experiences.

Gaps noted in the literature pertained to the overall learning experiences of prelicensure nursing students. Most of the published literature focused on quantitative research methods, teacher-student relationships, the clinical environment, and the evaluation of students. It is critical that the nursing profession explore students’ experiences of learning to ensure programs provide an optimal environment to promote student development.

Methodology

This study aimed to explore and interpret the lived experiences of undergraduate students as they learned in a nursing program. Data gathering occurred through face-to-face interview sessions with 12 prelicensure, senior-level students from two BSN programs in the southeastern United States. Interviews were transcribed and narratives examined through the lens of invitational theory (Purkey & Novak, 1996) and the National League for Nursing’s excellence in nursing education model (National League for Nursing, 2006). First and second cycle coding methods as described by Saldaña (2013) were utilized. Next, van Manen’s (1990) thematic analysis process provided guidance for the identification of themes and thematic statements.

Presentation of Findings

From data analysis, themes and subthemes emerged to describe prelicensure nursing students’ perceptions of their learning experiences and the environment. The identified themes were: Preparing and Learning, Inviting Versus Disinviting, “Roll With the Punches,” and The Evaluative Process: “Clicking Through.” In addition, nine subthemes were discovered.
Learning and Preparing

One of the strongest themes to emerge from the data focused on preparing and learning. Participants told numerous stories highlighting the importance of preparing for class activities, tests, the simulation lab, and clinical experiences. These participants believed teachers and students should prepare for all activities. Each participant’s preparation ritual appeared different; but, all students stressed the importance of being prepared and knowing what they needed to do in order to maximize learning experiences.

Inviting Versus Disinviting

Participants perceived many aspects of the learning environment, including the people, places, processes, programs, and policies, as inviting or disinviting to their personal knowledge development. As congruent with invitational theory, participants felt the people aspect of the learning environment had the greatest impact on their personal learning. Students wanted faculty to serve as professional role models, be relatable, easy to have a conversation with, knowledgeable about the content, and approachable.

Participants reported the layout of the building housing the nursing program greatly impacted their learning experiences. Study spaces and access to faculty offices were necessary to facilitate their learning. One surprising finding from this study, was several participants told stories of how the whiteboards were inviting to their learning. In a world where educators always want to utilize an application or other technology to promote learning, several participants noted the simple whiteboards in the library and study rooms helped them to “connect the dots” while studying concepts.

When asked about processes and programs, participants voiced their need for clear and realistic expectations. Unrealistic expectations were extremely frustrating to students. Also, they struggled with the “ever-changing schedule.”

“Roll With the Punches”

“Roll with the punches” focused more on students’ perceptions of what was helpful for their learning and how they progressed through the nursing program. The title came from a comment made by Lee, who said:

I mean that’s just a learning process of how to handle that kind of situation and what to do . . . So, I’ve had to learn how to handle those kinds of situations and just kind of…roll with the punches.

This common theme was noted in many interviews, as students claimed they were “getting through” in numerous instances.

Participants routinely voiced the importance of being focused in order to learn. This required, for some participants, finding quiet study spaces, moving to the front of the classroom in order to not be distracted by peers, and adapting to challenging situations. Though, participants noted classmates served as a great source of distraction in the nursing program, they also believed relationships with fellow classmates were vital to success in a program.

The Evaluative Process: “Clicking Through”

Students were asked to share their experiences of evaluating their learning during the nursing program. When questioned about the evaluative process, students focused their reflections on course evaluations. Most were unsure of the purpose of and how institutions utilized the evaluations. Participants also reported feeling overloaded at the end of the semester and did not put much effort into completing the
evaluations. These findings lead one to question the accuracy of student evaluations and the reliability of the data produced by these evaluations.

Implications and Recommendations for Nursing Education

Several implications and recommendations for nursing education were noted. Nurse educators should provide clear and realistic expectations, serve as professional role models, and prepare the learning environment and students for all activities. In regards to evaluation, educators must inform students of the processes and procedures regarding evaluation in order to obtain reliable results from course evaluations. Overall, this study provides valuable knowledge to nursing education because results can guide faculty as they structure and evaluate learning experiences. In the future, more research should focus on the student-teacher connection, technology to enhance learning, various approaches to teaching/learning in nursing education, the evaluative processes, and how to cultivate all aspects of the learning environment to promote student success.

Title:
An Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis of Prelicensure Nursing Students’ Perceptions of Their Learning Environment

Keywords:
interpretive phenomenological analysis, learning experiences and undergraduate nursing education

References:


Abstract Summary:
This presentation describes the findings from an interpretive phenomenological study of prelicensure nursing students' experiences of learning in a BSN program. Findings described inviting and disinviting characteristics and behaviors of the learning environment, how participants learned to be successful in the program, and their experiences with evaluation.

Content Outline:

1. Introduction
   1. Positive, meaningful learning experiences are important to prepare students for careers in healthcare
   2. These experiences are greatly impacted by the learning environment provided by nurse educators
   3. Little is known of students' perceptions of the learning environment, including the people, places, processes, programs, and policies
   4. This study aimed to understand and interpret students’ perceptions of their learning experiences and the environment

2. Background Information
   1. Nurse educators face numerous challenges and barriers to providing an optimal learning environment to students
   2. Yet, it is important educators provide an intentionally inviting learning environment to students in order to prepare them to be competent, entry level nurses
   3. Search of the published literature noted gaps related to students' perceptions of their learning experiences and environment
   4. It is important to gain greater understanding in this area to highlight strengths in nursing education and other areas that need to be improved

3. Methodology
   1. Interpretive phenomenological analysis
   2. Invitational theory and the National League for Nursing’s excellence in nursing education model served as the theoretical framework for the study
   3. Purposive sampling strategy
   4. Twelve one-on-one interviews sessions were performed with prelicensure, senior-level nursing students
   5. Interviews were recorded and transcribed
   6. Formal analytic coding methods guided thematic analysis

4. Presentation of Findings
   1. Preparing and Learning
   2. Inviting Versus Disinviting
   3. “Roll With the Punches”

5. Implications and Recommendations for Nursing Education
   1. Findings provide educators with valuable information as they prepared learning environments, learning experiences, and/or structure programs and processes
   2. More research needs to be performed to understand the student-teacher connection, technology in nursing education, teaching/learning strategies, evaluation, and other aspects of the learning environment

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**Professional Experience:** My background is in leadership and critical care nursing. I served as a leader in the hospital before I transitioned to academia. Also, I currently teach in the macro leadership course. Over the years, I have been involved in health policy, advocacy for the profession and patient care, and leader for guiding change.

**Author Summary:** Dr. Watts received her BSN and MSN degrees from Samford University and a PhD in nursing degree from Mercer University. Dr. Watts is a member of the Alabama State Nurses Association, The Honor Society of Phi Kappa Phi, Sigma Theta Tau International Honor Society in Nursing, Golden Key International Honor Society, and Omicron Delta Kappa National Leadership Honor Society. In 2016, she was awarded the NLN/SNRS Dissertation Research Grant to fund her dissertation study.

**Any relevant financial relationships?** Yes

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