



Impact of a stand-alone course in gerontological nursing on undergraduate nursing students' perceptions of working with older adults: A Quasi-experimental study



Amy Reitmaier Koehler ^a, Susan Davies ^{b,*}, Linda Reveling Smith ^a, Tisha Hooks ^c, Hailee Schanke ^d, April Loeffler ^e, Courtney Carr ^f, Nicole Ratzlaff ^g

^a Department of Nursing, Winona State University, P.O. Box 5838, 175, West, Mark Street Winona, MN 55987, USA

^b Department of Nursing (Rochester Campus) Winona State University, 859 30th Ave SE, Rochester, MN 55904, USA

^c Department of Mathematics and Statistics, Winona State University, P.O. Box 5838, 175, West, Mark Street Winona, MN 55987, USA

^d 11004 Terra Glenn Ct. Apt. 417, Charlotte, NC 28277, USA

^e 5125 W 7th Place Winona, MN 55987, USA

^f 2724 County Road 102, Wrenshall, MN, 55797, USA

^g 17680 Jaguar Court Lakeville MN 55044, USA

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ABSTRACT

Background: With an aging population, it is critical that nurses are educated and prepared to offer quality healthcare to this client group. Incorporating gerontology content into nursing curricula and addressing students' perceptions and career choices in relation to working with older adults are important faculty concerns.

Objectives: To examine the impact of a stand-alone course in gerontological nursing on undergraduate nursing students' perceptions of working with older adults and career intentions.

Design: Quasi-experimental, pre- and post-test design.

Setting: Medium-sized state university in the Mid Western United States

Participants: Data were collected from three student cohorts during the spring semesters of 2012 ($n = 98$), 2013 ($n = 80$) and 2014 ($n = 88$) for a total of $N = 266$ with an average response rate of 85%.

Methods: A survey instrument was administered via Qualtrics and completed by students prior to, and following completion of the course.

Results: There was an overall significant increase ($p = 0.000$) in positive perceptions of working with older adults among nursing students following completion of the course. The majority of participants (83.5%) reported having previous experience with older adults. Those with previous experience had higher perception scores at pre-test than those without ($p = 0.000$). Post-test scores showed no significant difference between these two groups, with both groups having increased perception scores ($p = 0.120$). Student preferences for working with different age groups suggested an overall increase in preference for working with older adults following the course.

Conclusions: A course in gerontological nursing, incorporating learning partnerships with community dwelling older adults, promotes positive perceptions of working with older adults, independently of the quality of prior experience. There was some evidence that students changed their preferences of working with different age groups in favor of working with older adults. Further research should be conducted to determine the mechanisms through which this takes place.

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1. Introduction

As a result of increases in human longevity and the aging of the baby boomer generation, 20% of the United States (US) population will be

aged 65 and over by the year 2030 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, CDC, 2013). Older adults are major users of healthcare, with two-thirds of older adults in the US having more than one chronic illness (CDC, 2013). As health care needs continue to expand, nurses must be well prepared to offer high quality care to older adults in every area of the healthcare system. With this goal in mind, nursing programs have been encouraged to incorporate gerontology content into focused courses or to ensure that this is clearly threaded throughout the curriculum (Baumbusch et al., 2012; John A. Hartford Foundation,

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: AKoehler@winona.edu (A.R. Koehler), SDavies@winona.edu (S. Davies), LSmith@winona.edu (L.R. Smith), THooks@winona.edu (T. Hooks), hailee_schanke@yahoo.com (H. Schanke), April.g.32@gmail.com (A. Loeffler), cleland11@yahoo.com (C. Carr), nikkiratzlaff@yahoo.com (N. Ratzlaff).

2013). However, studies report mixed findings when attempting to identify the impact of such learning on student attitudes towards, and perceptions of working with, older adults. The relationships between nursing education and nursing students' knowledge about, and attitudes towards, older people have been studied extensively, with recent studies suggesting that nursing students attitudes are generally positive, and that it is their *perception* of what it is like to work with older adults that is more important in their career choices. Studies evaluating the impact of educational programs are limited by the use of small convenience samples, potential nonresponse bias, and the investigation of unique curriculum changes that limit the generalizability of findings (Evers et al., 2011). It is therefore essential that curriculum innovation is accompanied by systematic and rigorous evaluation to determine effectiveness in preparing students to work with older people and prompting them to consider a career in gerontological care.

The purpose of this paper is to present findings from an evaluation of a standalone course in gerontological nursing that forms one element in a four-year undergraduate nursing program. The course builds upon research evidence suggesting the most effective teaching and learning strategies to prepare nursing students to work with this age group, and incorporates the development of learning partnerships between nursing students and community-dwelling older adults. The curriculum was designed to reflect the evidence base underpinning gerontological nursing practice (Kelly et al., 2005; Nolan et al., 2006; Robinson and Cubit, 2007; Joy et al., 2000) (Fig. 1) and the topical outline includes communication, assessment, active aging, illness management, and end of life care. For the practicum component, students are paired with an older adult living in the community, conduct five informal interviews with them and write reflective papers about their experiences. Students also develop and implement group health promotion projects for the communities within which the older adult partners reside.

An evaluation study was designed to answer the following research questions:

- Do nursing students' perceptions of working with older adults change following a standalone course in gerontological nursing?
- Do nursing students' perceptions before and after the course differ based on their prior experiences of working with older adults?
- Do student nurses' intentions to work with older adults change following a standalone course in gerontological nursing?

1.1. Background/Literature

To inform this study, literature was examined that described teaching and learning approaches for preparing nurses to work effectively with older adults. Studies describing nursing students' career intentions were also reviewed.

1.2. Gerontological content within undergraduate curricula

In a joint position statement, the National Gerontological Nursing Association (NGNA) and the Canadian Gerontological Nursing Association (CGNA) recommend that gerontological content should be infused into current nursing courses and that nurse educators should have experience, interest, and knowledge in older adult health (NGNA and CGNA, 2008). In the context of pre-licensure nurse education, debates continue about whether gerontological content should be integrated throughout the curriculum, or developed as a stand-alone course, with evidence to support both approaches (Baumbusch et al., 2012; Clendon, 2011; Rodgers and Gilmour, 2011). Baumbusch et al. (2012), found that even when integrated with general adult content, students' knowledge and beliefs about older adult care were positively influenced by gerontology content. There is evidence that baccalaureate nursing curricula in the US are incorporating increased gerontological content and more diversity of clinical sites (Gilje et al., 2007). Curricula must provide students with information and practice experiences related to aging and older adults, both in order to correct misconceptions (Ryan and McCauley, 2004) and enable required practice competencies to be met (American Association of Colleges of Nursing and John A. Hartford Institute for Geriatric Nursing, 2010). This requires nursing faculty to have a sound knowledge base about caring for older adults, particularly when gerontology concepts are integrated throughout the curriculum (Baumbusch et al., 2012). However, studies suggest there are insufficient numbers of faculty with specialist expertise in caring for older adults (Baumbusch et al., 2014; Gray-Miceli et al., 2014). Students also need access to effective role models when learning to care for older adults, and this can prove challenging, particularly in long-term care settings (Baumbusch et al., 2014; Chen et al., 2007).

Research suggests that effective educational programs in gerontological nursing should:

- Promote acceptance and integration of older people (Kelly et al. 2005)
- Emphasize the potential for job satisfaction which can be derived from working with older people (Nolan et al. 2006)
- Allow student nurses opportunities to explore the concerns that they themselves may have about ageing (Robinson & Cubit, 2007)
- Emphasize the need to take account of the wishes of carers and the importance of working in partnership with them (Nolan et al. 2006)
- Utilize positive learning environments that enable students to retain clear caring values and to realize the potential of caring practice while reconciling its demands (Nolan et al. 2006)
- Emphasize quality of life and life satisfaction as outcome measures (Nolan et al. 2006)
- Emphasize the following concepts: enablement, therapeutic interventions, health promotion, negotiated goals, respect and dignity (Kelly et al., 2005)
- Recognize the challenges of ageing and the need for equity of access to high standards of care (Joy et al. 2000)
- Recognize the significance of person-centered and relationship-centered care (Nolan et al. 2006).

Fig. 1. Requirements of educational programs in gerontological nursing.

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