



Original research

The stories of nursing student repeaters: A narrative inquiry study

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ABSTRACT

This narrative inquiry study examined community college nursing student repeaters, who failed a required nursing course and then went on to repeat the course. The purpose of this study was to learn about the experience of this group of students who are at high risk for attrition. While each participant had a unique story, common narratives emerged and were presented as storylines. Two storylines that are new to the literature were: Repeating is an Emotional Journey, and Ultimately Repeating was the Best Thing for Me. These findings suggest that there is a need for additional support for this population.

1. Introduction

Nursing student success and failure has been researched from a variety of perspectives (Beauvais et al., 2014); however, the experience of United States community college students repeating a required nursing course has had little attention. For the purpose of this study, repeaters are defined as nursing students who have successfully made it through the rigorous admission requirements and challenging foundational pre-requisite coursework, yet subsequently fail a required nursing course and return to retake the course. Jeffreys (2004, p. 125) notes “any low or failed academic outcome measure places a [nursing] student at risk for attrition”. This study was intended to learn more about the experience of nursing student repeaters, with an additional goal of identifying opportunities to improve retention of this group of students.

Gaining a deeper understanding of the experience of repeating nursing students was beneficial for several reasons. First, there was the opportunity to identify potential interventions that might help repeating students be successful, thus decreasing attrition. Secondly, the knowledge resulting from the study offered clarity and encouragement for students who face academic failure in nursing school, which is associated with shame, embarrassment and self-doubt (Mortenson, 2006; Williams, 2010), to come back the next semester and repeat.

2. Background

In the United States, like many other countries, nursing school attrition is a significant problem. While precise numbers are rarely made public, academic failure is the most common reason for students to leave nursing school (Karsten and DiCicco-Bloom, 2014; Ryan and

Davies, 2016). When nursing students fail a required nursing course, they are at a crossroads. The decisions made at this crossroads have the potential to impact the school, the student, and even the nursing profession. Jeffreys (2004) described retention as a decision that a student makes, that may be voluntary or involuntary, to take one of several actions: remain in a course, persist in a program, stop out, return, dropout, graduate, take the licensure exam (National Council Licensure Examination for Registered Nursing or NCLEX-RN) and enter the nursing workforce. Nursing student repeaters have made the decision to return and repeat a failed course, yet they are still at high risk for subsequent voluntary or involuntary attrition. Some nursing student attrition is expected and appropriate; when students are exposed to the reality of the academic and professional rigor, not all will choose to continue the path toward becoming a nurse. However, nursing student repeaters are a unique population that have already met many of the requirements to become nurses and may just need some different or additional support to be retained in the program and, ultimately, the profession.

The literature focused on nursing student repeaters is extremely limited. Reports of only three studies were found: a dissertation study (Gerow, 2011) that involved registered nurses who had failed and repeated a course in nursing school, a grounded theory study (Karsten and DiCicco-Bloom, 2014) of nontraditional nursing students who failed and repeated, and a study (Crow and Bailey, 2015) that highlighted the intervention of narrative pedagogy for faculty working with nursing student repeaters. Evaluating or even developing interventions for nursing student repeaters is a challenge when so little is known about their experience.

Nursing student attrition impacts nursing schools due to the limited capacity of programs and the cohort model of education. When nursing

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students fail and must repeat courses, this results in an inefficient use of limited resources. Enrollment in nursing programs is limited for a variety of reasons including a shortage of faculty and clinical placements. A recent survey of over 1800 nursing schools in the United States found that over 40% of qualified applicants were turned away due to lack of capacity (National League for Nursing, 2013). Due to the cohort model of nursing education, a student who leaves a nursing program prior to graduation leaves a spot that is unlikely to be filled by another student (Edmonds, 2013); this results in a higher cost for nursing education (Abele et al., 2013). In the United States, many nursing programs are offered at community colleges, which are public, two-year institutions for post-secondary education, workforce development and training, and continuing education. Community college nursing programs have additional pressure to retain students due to the national agenda for increasing college completion rates (Mullin, 2010).

The institutional cost of nursing student repeating is not clearly documented in the literature, but there is evidence that academic failure is a problem in the United States and internationally, for nursing students as well as other health professions students. An Iranian literature review addressed this issue, reporting that 10.6–16.9% of nursing students, 36.73% of dentistry students, 16.72% of medical students and 28.7% of allied health students failed and repeated at least one course (Tagharrobi et al., 2013). Dante et al. (2016) documented nursing student failure rates in five countries in the European Union, reporting failure rates as high as 11.3% in the first year.

Nursing student attrition has a personal price for nursing students, whether they leave voluntarily or involuntarily. Loss of time, money, and possibly a dream of becoming a nurse are all consequences that may be experienced by nursing students who leave school.

Nursing student attrition impacts the nursing profession in terms of the supply of nurses and workforce diversity. The nursing shortage is a problem that has been cyclical and recurrent for the last century (Mason, 2011). Health policy researchers vary in their predictions for the coming decade, with some calling for more severe local or national shortages (Buerhaus et al., 2009; Health Resources and Services Administration, 2014).

While academic failure is known to be the most common reason for nursing student attrition, reasons for lack of academic progress are varied and individual. Karsten and DiCicco-Bloom's (2014) study found that students did not expect the level of academic rigor they experienced in nursing school. Dante et al. (2016) found that other obstacles to academic success included limited financial resources and un-supportive environments for clinical placements. In the United States, many nursing students attend school full time while working part time in a healthcare setting to earn money for school and living expenses. Employment as a nursing assistant provides nursing students with additional experience interacting with patients and healthcare professionals, but also creates additional stress and takes time away from studies. Interventions to support nursing students are not targeted solely at those who have failed and are repeating. Fontaine (2014) described a program that implemented seven different strategies to improve nursing student retention, including financial support, peer tutoring, and enhanced orientation to the program. While retention rates improved, there was no statistical correlation between any particular intervention, and data were not reported that separated repeaters from other students. Without such information, it is difficult to know what type of support would be specifically helpful to repeaters.

Interventions to support repeating nursing students to continue and complete their schooling could have a positive impact on retention and thus a positive impact for the student, the school and the profession. In order to develop such interventions, it is important to have a better understanding of the experience of nursing student repeaters. This study used narrative inquiry to explore the repeater experience because this methodology is particularly valuable for studying topics about which little is known, and experiences that are very personal and individual (Connelly and Clandinin, 1990).

3. Method

3.1. Design

This qualitative study was conducted using the narrative inquiry methodology, inspired by the work of Connelly and Clandinin (1990). The goal was to collect and analyze the lived stories of nursing student repeaters, as they told those stories.

3.2. Participants

Purposive sampling was used to choose fourteen participants for the study, based on the criteria of either currently repeating or having repeated within the last year a required nursing course at one of the community college sites, after initially failing that course; and being fluent in English (spoken and written). The study participants included one man and thirteen women; ten who identified as White and four who identified as Black, Latino or biracial; and they ranged in age from 22 to 55. Participants were recruited via email listserv and posted notices at the schools.

The study took place in nursing programs within two community colleges in the Southeastern United States. Community colleges are an important entry to the nursing profession for a diverse population of students (Starr, 2010) by offering flexibility and lower tuition costs, as well as less rigorous admission criteria. This addresses the need for an increased number of nurses as well as the need for increased diversity in the profession.

3.3. Data collection

Participants in this study took part in a face-to-face interview for sixty to ninety minutes. The study was designed to allow time for developing trust and rapport with the participant and to encourage a conversational experience, in which the participants would be motivated to tell stories and share experiences. Open-ended questions in a loosely structured interview schedule (Stone, 2015) were used to accomplish these goals. At the end of each interview, participants in the study were asked to complete an additional task on their own: to write a letter that offered their anonymous advice to another nursing student who is required to repeat a nursing course after initially failing it. After transcribing the interview data, each participant was offered the opportunity to review these field texts, to allow them to check for accuracy and to identify any confidentiality concerns.

3.4. Data analysis

Interview data, written participant letters, and field notes and memos were all analyzed. Data analysis was guided by the narrative inquiry methodology of Clandinin and Connelly, who define a concept of restorying. Restorying involves reading the data, looking for elements of story in the transcripts, such as plot and characters, putting the story into chronological order, and, ultimately, retelling the story (Ollerenshaw and Creswell, 2002). Connelly and Clandinin (1990) emphasize analysis of narrative inquiry data by considering the stories as a whole and avoiding deconstructing or coding. However, other narrative inquiry researchers have noted (Whiffin et al., 2014) that coding may still be appropriate so long as the important elements of the narrative are not lost.

The restorying process for this study involved transcribing data into field texts, verifying the field texts with the participants, analyzing and coding the field texts, and ending with final research texts. Data were analyzed with the help of NVivo qualitative data analysis software (QSR International, 2012). To maintain the integrity of the stories and Connelly and Clandinin's (1990) philosophy of data analysis, the stories were initially analyzed without preconceived themes or codes. McCormack (2000) describes a type of open coding process, in which

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