

SPIRITUALITY-BASED NURSING PRACTICE BY NURSING STUDENTS: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY

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This exploratory mixed-method study examines the nature of awareness and application of spirituality in senior nursing students in two separate nursing baccalaureate degree nursing programs. A comprehensive study of the literature yielded 45 statements on personal spirituality and its use in patient care, which were converted to a Likert-type scale questionnaire used as the instrument for this study. A purposive sample consisted of 86 senior-level nursing students in their final semester of study in both schools. Independent *t* tests, stepwise regression analysis, and factor analysis were used to determine the nature of spiritual-based nursing practice by these students in terms of their awareness, use, and understanding of this metaphysical dimension of health care. Combined mean spirituality score was 128.76; spirituality scores from the two groups were not significantly different, $t(64) = 0.668$, $P = .507$. Factor analysis extracted five dimensions of spirituality-based nursing. Results were used to support the development of a practice theory of spirituality-based nursing practice. Findings can be used to advance nursing theory, provide direction for curricular development, and strengthen nursing practice. (Index words: Spirituality; Alternative therapies; Nursing education research; Spirituality in nursing education; Spirituality in curriculum development) *J Prof Nurs* 27:255–263, 2011. © 2011 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

ALTHOUGH NURSING AS a profession is based upon the physical and social sciences, it also has metaphysical dimensions that are sometimes acknowledged but poorly understood. This study explores the meaning and uses of spirituality by nursing students who are preparing to graduate into the profession. Results can be used to inform curriculum design, enhance clinical learning exercises, and contribute to nursing therapeutics.

An ontologic-based perspective (Polit & Beck, 2009) focuses on the search for the true nature of a phenomenon and is used first in this study to generate the three questions that guide our study:

1. Do nursing students recognize a metaphysical component of patient needs and nursing practice?

2. Do nursing students use and apply spirituality-based practices in their clinical learning experiences?
3. What is the nature of spirituality-based nursing practice?

The purpose of this exploratory study is to develop an evidence-based Level 1 practice theory of spirituality-based nursing practice using an inductive theory building process. The recommendations for middle-range theory building (Liehr & Smith, 1999) have guided our approach to this process. This practice theory is the first step toward developing and testing a middle-range theory that nurse educators can use to determine the best curriculum, clinical experiences, and strategies to enhance students' ability to provide effective spirituality-based nursing care.

Nurses in basic and advanced practice can also use this examination of metaphysical meaning in nursing practice to assess, understand, and support the spirituality of their patients.

Literature Review

The profession of nursing focuses on providing holistic care that meets the patient's individual needs in a variety of settings. One aspect of holistic care is spirituality.

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There is an emerging body of research linking the mind–body–spirit connection to disease processes and even in the prevention of diseases. Florence Nightingale embraced the importance of spiritual care, integrating it into bedside practice. However, over time, this practice was lost only to be reborn when holistic care became a focus in nursing both in the classroom and in practice.

Spirituality and religion are often and erroneously generalized as though they were one, when in fact they are two different concepts. Organized religion and its practices are formalized forms of expressing spirituality. However, spirituality goes beyond religion and includes both the understanding of one's own beliefs and those to whom we care for. Such expressions of these beliefs and how one relates to their self and others, their world, and their God or higher power can influence how one perceives the meaning of life and death. During illness and stressful experiences, a person may challenge, deny, or have a need to reinforce these beliefs. During such times, the care and support a nurse provides become invaluable. Being properly educated to provide that support based on the patient's perception and cultural and ethnic influences, and not on one's own personal bias, is of utmost importance as a basic nursing competency (Burkhart & Solari-Twadell, 2001; Pearce, 2009; Sherman, Matzo, Panke, Grant, & Rhome, 2003).

Given that nurses are expected to provide spirituality-based nursing care, they must be taught about spirituality and understand it (Lantz, 2007). What evidence is there that nursing education is providing students with the content and experiences to acquire the skills to provide such care and what are the prevalent strategies for providing that content and those experiences? Lastly, are those strategies effective? A review of the literature on spirituality-based nursing should provide the basis for the answers to these questions.

Pesut (2008) investigated what nursing students are learning about spirituality by examining the spirituality content included in 10 fundamentals of nursing texts. He found of the 10 texts, 7 had sole chapters devoted to spirituality, and all the texts delineated spirituality from religion. However, the researcher concluded that the importance of self-awareness and its effect on providing effective spirituality-based nursing care was not emphasized. Although these fundamentals texts provided a sound starting point for introducing this topic, educators must provide students the opportunity to assess their own spiritual self-awareness and help students to overcome their discomfort in discussing spirituality with their patients.

There have been a number of strategies reported in the literature that enhance students' awareness of spirituality, including storytelling, use of case studies, reflection, parish nursing clinical experiences, and clinical journaling. However, the most prominent strategy found in the literature is that of journaling and/or reflection.

Catanzaro and McMullen (2001) describe the use of journaling, which includes reflecting on one's own relationship with God or any higher being with whom

they relate. This activity precedes the student's parish nursing clinical rotation, where the focus is on the understanding and caring for the spiritual needs of the patient. The use of clinical journals is discussed by Callister, Bond, Matsumura, and Mangum (2004, p. 163) as a forum for identifying an understanding of their own spirituality using the "what–so what–and now what?" format to guide their journaling. Similarly, Lavanio and Wallace (2007) provided a description of their pilot project, which not only included student nurses journaling their personal experiences related to spirituality but also required a literature review on the subject, and the completion of a nursing care plan that focused on the spirituality-based needs of the patient.

Additional authors describe varying iterations of strategies related to journaling, reflection, and examination of one's own level of spirituality. According to Johns (2009, p. 7), "Definitions of reflection are characterized as learning through experience toward gaining new insights or changed perceptions of self and practice." Narayanasamy (1999) describes a model, the ASSET model, for spiritual care education that also focuses on the students becoming aware of their own spiritual awareness, whereas Bush (1999, p. 24) describes the practice of reflection "as being a useful method of examining the themes of connectedness and a search for meaning, which are key factors of spirituality." Pimple, Schmidt, and Tidwell (2003) describe the strategies of storytelling in addition to reflection, use of case studies, and role-playing as effective strategies in enhancing the nurse's ability to identify and understand the patient's spiritual needs.

A particularly unique strategy described by Mitchell, Bennett, and Manfrin-Ledet (2006) is the use of care mapping as a tool to enhance the skills necessary to specifically assess the spirituality aspect of care. Students in a medical–surgical course developed nursing care maps for their patients prior to caring for those patients, which included an assessment of the patient's culture and spirituality.

Although a number and a variety of teaching strategies that enhance students' awareness of spirituality are reported in the literature, few provide analysis that would indicate the degree to which these strategies were actually effective. There are, however, exceptions. Both Wallace et al. (2008) and Lavanio and Wallace (2007) used the Spirituality and Spirituality Care Rating Scale, which was developed by McSherry, Draper, & Kendrick (2002), to determine, respectively, the effectiveness of spirituality curriculum integration and the effectiveness of a student education project focusing on spirituality. This 17-item, Likert scale instrument was designed to "discover and explore nurses' understanding of and attitudes toward the concepts of spirituality and spiritual care" (p. 724). In both of the aforementioned studies, statistically significant results were found between the pre- and posttests after the intervention.

In a study conducted by Cavindish et al. (2004), RNs' spiritual perspectives were analyzed using a question-

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