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Connecting intentional learning and cardiac specialty practice: The experiences of bachelor of science in nursing students

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ABSTRACT

Internationally pre-registration education programs have ranged from entirely specialist to entirely generalist with varying degrees of specialty preparation in between. Students in generalist programs with specialty practice options may benefit from novel pedagogical approaches, such as intentional learning, to ease the transition from generalist to specialist practice. The purpose of this qualitative descriptive study was to understand undergraduate students' experiences of intentional learning in a 4-week consolidated cardiac specialty practicum. Eight students (7 females, 1 male) participated in a combination of weekly Blackboard discussions and an end-of-practicum focus group and completed a competency self-rating. Students had marred expectations about the integration of intentional learning in their specialty practice experience. They reflected advantages and disadvantages of both intentional and total patient care learning models but worked with their instructor to find the right balance that maximized learning. Students identified features that maximized intentional learning including open-ended questions, using learning versus workspaces, receiving feedback, and integrating peer interaction. Despite advancing their confidence and competence in specialty practice students remained anxious about their ability to assume the role of the graduate nurse in a years' time. Preparing a generalist nurse for the workforce needs to be balanced with meeting students' needs and increasing professional demands for specialty experiences in undergraduate nurse education programs.

1. Background

The role of undergraduate education in the initial preparation of a nurse for practice has been a matter of international debate over the years. In particular, the generalist versus specialist approach to undergraduate nursing education has been an ongoing issue and associated with considerable variability across countries (Robinson and Griffiths, 2007). The movement of nursing education into the university sector, initially led to an emphasis on generalist undergraduate preparation so that students were equipped for nursing care in any setting (Grant, 2006), with specialty practice education reserved for post-qualification. However, an aging nursing workforce, growing nursing shortages, and vacancies in some specialty areas such as critical care, have put growing pressure on educational institutions to prepare new graduates for specialty practice (King et al., 2009). Consequently some countries with generalist undergraduate programs, only, have integrated selective specialty experiences.

There are few pedagogical models or approaches for integrating discrete specialty practice components into generalist undergraduate baccalaureate nursing programs. Curricular approaches have ranged from observational experiences to intense, hands-on experiences (King et al., 2009). One novel pedagogical approach for enhancing student comfort, confidence, knowledge, skills and experience, when introducing specialty practice within a generalist curriculum, is intentional learning. Intentional learning is a focused and directed approach to learning that fosters deep learning and

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critical thinking with the potential to advance and prepare students for specialty practice (Gubrud-Howe and Schoessler, 2008). To the authors' knowledge no studies have explored the use of an intentional learning approach during a specialty practicum with pre-registration students in a generalist curricular model. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to understand undergraduate students' experiences of intentional learning in a consolidated cardiac specialty practicum.

2. Review of the literature

International diversity exists as to pre-registration specialty preparation and qualifications. Pre-registration education programs range from entirely specialist to entirely generalist qualification with varying degrees of specialty preparation in between (Robinson and Griffiths, 2007). Despite its wide-scale international implementation, the generic model of pre-registration education has been challenged for being less effective in preparing graduates to work in specialty nursing areas, such as psychiatric/mental health (Grant, 2006), or critical care (Lakanmaa et al., 2013). Some countries (e.g., Germany, Ireland) have addressed this through the creation of specialist streams for direct entry practice or created specialist streams following a generic core (e.g., United Kingdom) (Robinson and Griffiths, 2007; Rosser, 2015). The majority of countries (e.g., Canada, US, and Australia) offer predominantly generalist undergraduate programs with specialist clinical placements sometimes offered that may or may not be supported with theoretical content (King et al., 2009; Ruth-Sahd and Wilson, 2013). Advantages and disadvantages have characterized generalist programs that integrate selective specialty placements to prepare students for specialty practice.

Students participating in generalist programs with integrated specialty experiences such as oncology, renal dialysis, (Coyne and Needham, 2012), operating room (Ruth-Sahd and Wilson, 2013), and intensive and critical care (King et al., 2009; Lakanmaa et al., 2013) have been highly positive about the experiences. They have reported feeling like experts, receiving support in belonging to the team (Coyne and Needham, 2012), acquiring specialty knowledge and understandings of the various team roles (Ruth-Sahd and Wilson, 2013), and gaining significant confidence in care strategies, decision-making, dealing with ethical issues and using the nursing process (King et al., 2009).

Despite identified advantages, specialty practice for undergraduate students continues to pose some challenges. Callaghan (2011) found that third-year undergraduate nursing students who participated in a two-week perioperative clinical placement viewed many aspects of specialist practice as overwhelming. Students in another study reported a lack of knowledge and preparation for specialty experiences in renal dialysis and ambulatory oncology and identified the need for learning objectives that were specific to the specialty (Coyne and Needham, 2012).

For students in generalist programs who may lack optimal preparation for specialty practice experiences, finding pedagogical approaches to facilitate their transition to specialist practice becomes imperative. Intentional learning is a novel approach that may be used to bridge gaps in students' specialty practice knowledge and competency when pre-registration programs lack, or include only limited, specialty content. Intentional learning has emerged as a model of learning to address the issues in total patient care learning, an approach that is often unpredictable, unfocused, random (Gubrud-Howe and Schoessler, 2008; Nielsen et al., 2013) and task oriented (Ironside et al., 2014). Intentional learning involves focused, planned learning aimed at enhancing deep learning, critical thinking and clinical judgment, geared to the developmental level of the student (Nielsen et al., 2013). Nielsen et al. (2013) identified five components that are core to intentional learning: intervention skill-based learning, case-based learning, concept-based learning, focused direct client care, and integrative experiences.

There is a paucity of empirical evidence examining intentional learning with the bulk of the work emphasizing its theoretical underpinnings. Students and faculty have had favorable evaluations of intentional learning as a curricular redesign (Giddens and Morton, 2010; Ostrogorsky and Raber, 2014), but there has been limited examination of students' experiences of intentional learning within the context of clinical practice. Lasater and Nielsen (2009) compared intentional learning used with junior nursing students in a child and family practice course to students in an acute care course engaged in traditional total patient care. They found clinical judgment to be significantly higher among students participating in intentional learning with students describing the value of this learning approach in enhancing development of their thinking. For students new to a specialty area intentional learning may ease the transition.

3. Method

3.1. Design

A qualitative descriptive design (Sandelowski, 2010) was used that combined virtual online (Blackboard Connect) discussions, a face-to-face focus group, and a post-experience competency self-rating tool. Following two days of orientation and skill practice (e.g., IV insertion, cardiac procedures), students began the specialty practicum. It took place on two units – medical cardiology and cardiac surgery – as part of a third year consolidated practice experience in spring 2014 term. Students had two weeks on one unit and one week on the other unit for a total of 126 h in practice. For these students this experience followed total care patient experiences in years one and two of their program and intentional learning in their preceding third year terms as part of child health, maternal-newborn and mental health practica.

The intentional learning specialty practicum, outlined in Table 1, incorporated three of Nielsen et al.'s (2013) five core intentional learning activities that were appropriate for an upper level student. The specialty experience was initially designed with a learning focus each week to include two intentional learning days, followed by a total patient care day. Students completed readings prior to their clinical practice weeks. Students were assigned to 3 patients during each intentional learning day, and with unit turnover often had 6 different patients over the two days. During the first two days emphasis was on concept-based learning, in which students completed study guides related to a concept that addressed the patient's history, lab and diagnostic testing and involved a head-to-toe assessment. Students also completed focused, direct client care in which learning activities were intentionally selected to parallel the weekly concept, such as managing chest tubes in conjunction with respiratory assessment. The third day involved an integrative experience in which students integrated and applied previous learning (e.g., concepts, skills) to total patient care for 2 to 3 patients within their scope of practice. Post-conferences had students share their learnings and provide feedback about the intentional learning.

3.2. Sample

A convenience sample of students was recruited as part of a consolidated third year clinical practice placement (CPP). In preparation for setting up practice placements the Practice Placement Coordinator invited third year students (n = 126) to identify and