Neighbourhood as community: A qualitative descriptive study of nursing students' experiences of community health nursing

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: Explore the use of a neighbourhood practice placement with nursing students to gain insight into how the experience influenced their learning and how the reconceptualization of community can be a model for students' professional development.
Background: The integration of community health nursing competencies in undergraduate nursing education is a critical element of student development. Neighbourhood placements have been found to support development of such competencies by exposing students to issues such as culture, social justice, partnership, and community development.
Design and sample: A qualitative design was used with a sample of 48 Year 3 baccalaureate nursing students enrolled in a community health nursing practice course.
Methods: Students submitted reflective reviews where they responded to questions and subsequently participated in focus groups. Meaning making of narrative data took place using the descriptive qualitative analysis approach.
Findings: Students became more self-directed learners and developed team process skills. Some found it challenging to adapt to a role outside of the traditional acute care context.
Conclusion: Nursing practice in a neighbourhood context requires students to be innovative and creative in problem-solving and relationship building. The placement also requires neighbourhood liaison persons who are adept at helping students bridge the theory-practice gap.

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Introduction

The integration of community health nursing (CHN) competencies in undergraduate nursing education is a critical element of student development. Neighbourhood practice placements have been found to support student development of CHN competencies by exposing students to issues such as culture, social justice, partnership, and community development (Aselton, 2011; Ryan and Koerner, 2012; Van Doren and Vander Werf, 2012). Further, student interaction and participation in the health of neighbourhoods has resulted in positive outcomes for the community members served (Aselton, 2011; En et al., 2011). Although CHN is recognized as an important aspect of preparing baccalaureate (BScN)

graduates, faculty in undergraduate nursing programs are having difficulty finding a sufficient number of community placement experiences to support student learning in this area (Association of Community Health Nursing Educators, 2012; Aponte and Egues, 2010; Broussard, 2011; Canadian Association of Schools of Nursing [CASN], 2010; Pilj-Zieber and Kalischuk, 2011; Simpson, 2012). The result has been the development of 'less-traditional' community practice learning experiences. These practice placements have been developed in an effort to expand nursing students' thinking in relation to what constitutes a community, as well as to offer additional opportunities for students to develop an understanding of the scope of practice in CHN. The limited research literature which examines the use of 'neighbourhood as community' practice placements identifies that further research is necessary to understand student perspectives of this learning environment, and how these innovative placements can be an effective model for student professional development.

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Background

Neighbourhood placements in nursing education are beginning to be used to provide students with substantive CHN experience. This practice experience can be considered a form of service-learning, as such a placement can foster student achievement of educational learning objectives, while meeting the needs of the community (Broussard, 2011; Dietrich-Leurer et al., 2011; En et al., 2011; Evenson et al., 2005; Gillis and MacLellan, 2010). Student engagement in areas which are considered an aspect of a neighbourhood placement include: neighbourhood vaccination clinics, settlement houses, low income community areas, community schools, non-profit advocacy and service organizations, neighbourhood libraries, centres of faith, and neighbourhood health networks (Aselton, 2011; Evenson et al., 2005; Kruger et al., 2010; Pennington et al., 2010; Ryan and Koerner, 2012; Van Doren and Vander Werf, 2012).

A 'less-traditional' CHN placement that is being used in a BScN program in Ontario, Canada with Year 3 nursing students is the 'neighbourhood as community' (NAC) approach. This practice-based course is predicated on a collaborative teaching-learning approach that encourages students to fully participate in the development of knowledge and self-efficacy for practice. It supports students to incorporate theory in a unique practice environment. Nurse educators have a professional obligation to prepare students in a manner consistent with up-to-date expectations of the profession and the public we serve. Thus, it is critical for students, as soon-to-be nurses, to focus their practice not only in acute care settings, but also in neighbourhoods where community members experience health and illness.

An important aspect of any neighbourhood practice experience is for learners to be able to link theoretical course content either prior to the student engagement in the neighbourhood setting (Cohen and Gregory, 2009; Evenson et al., 2005), or concurrently as the student progresses through the placement (Dietrich-Leurer et al., 2011; En et al., 2011). In the BScN program that served as the focus of this study, the NAC placement experience provides students with a twelve week opportunity to engage with local community neighbourhoods to participate in identifying health concerns and facilitating the development and implementation of a community generated health promotion plan. Students are assigned to a group of 12 which is guided by a Registered Nurse faculty with community health nursing expertise. There can be up to 10 student groups each semester, each with their own faculty who provides indirect supervision and leads a weekly two hour seminar for the student group. The neighbourhoods selected for inclusion are those which house a diverse population, with numerous social and economic backgrounds. Students are assigned in pairs or groups of 4 to a neighbourhood setting to spend one to two full days in the NAC per week. Students base their practice in alignment with an overarching community health nursing professional practice model that outlines community health specific practice standards (Community Health Nurses of Canada, 2011). Students' specific learning goals for the neighbourhood practice experience include: collaborating with members of the multidisciplinary team; applying therapeutic communication techniques with families, population groups, and communities; conducting a community analysis to identify populations at risk for disease, disability, and premature death; accepting responsibility for nursing actions; and practising according to legal, ethical, and professional standards.

To develop an understanding of the NAC, students first engaged in conducting a community needs assessment. The assessment requires students to view the neighbourhood through the lens of members of the neighbourhood in order to form an understanding of community members' health education and service needs (Aselton, 2011; En et al., 2011; Ryan and Koerner, 2012). Students are then able to contribute to the community by developing and implementing an intervention in partnership with members of the neighbourhood which will assist in addressing the health disparities identified in the initial needs assessment. Students collaborated with neighbourhood members to develop health interventions such as a sustainable reading program where neighbourhood volunteers were committed to support the development of seniors' literacy skills. Students also conducted a wellness health fair based on health issues identified by neighbourhood members. Further, nursing students collaborated with student leaders at schools within a neighbourhood to create a 'move for health' physical activity health promotion program. Another student group used a population health model to partner with pharmacies and neighbourhood community groups to make available free head lice treatment kits and associated learning resources. Such health initiatives, which are situated in neighbourhoods, exemplify students' efforts at integrating community health theory and practice beyond a single community agency to a broader neighbourhood context.

Literature review

There are a limited number of studies reporting on neighbourhood practice placements. Researchers have evaluated the influence that community experiences have had on student learning as well as for the health of community members served. Overall, community practice placements were successful in assisting students to meet course objectives (Dietrich-Leurer et al., 2011; Kruger et al., 2010; Pennington et al., 2010; Van Doren and Vander Werf, 2012). En et al. (2011) studied a partnership between a university and community service agency located in a low income neighbourhood. Medical and nursing students provided an in home health screening program. Results from this study identified that the placement improved nursing students' perception of their leadership, communication, teamwork, and critical thinking skills. Students also reported a strong overall rating of the neighbourhood placement experience.

Van Doren and Vander Werf (2012) discussed the use of neighbourhood placements in a faith-based community and a local agency for individuals with disabilities, as providing students with opportunities to encounter issues such as poverty and disability. Although research evaluation methods were not discussed, conclusions made in this case study suggested that this learning experience challenged students' thinking about vulnerable populations as well as enhanced understanding of the barriers to accessing healthcare (Van Doren and Vander Werf, 2012). Similarly, feedback from students involved in a neighbourhood influenza clinic provided insight that this learning experience provided students with an opportunity to "work with other health professionals in the community and to interact with community members" (Evenson et al., 2005, p. 18). Student evaluative comments also identified that the experience provided them with an opportunity to practice their teamwork and task specific nursing skills (injections) (Evenson et al., 2005). Likewise, Aselton (2011) described a neighbourhood practice experience where nursing students worked with elderly and disabled residents in a public housing program. Students learned to conduct a needs assessment and plan learning interventions such that they were specific to a particular population (i.e., elderly). Students were able to connect with the elderly to understand how chronic diseases affect the human body and quality of life (Aselton, 2011, p. 164). Results from a study conducted by En et al. (2011) identified that student involvement in the *Neighbourhood Health Screening* program achieved an