



What are the primary concerns of nursing students as they prepare for and contemplate their first clinical placement experience?



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ABSTRACT

Nursing students' first clinical placement experience can be a critical turning point—reinforcing professional aspirations for some, and for others, a time of emotional turbulence. There is a paucity of research focusing on students' perceptions and concerns *prior* to their first placement experience. Thus, the aim of this study was to explore the concerns of first year bachelor of nursing students from one Australian university as they prepared for their first clinical placement.

Participants completed an online 'readiness for practice' survey consisting of 22 items. This paper focuses on participants' responses to the one open ended question: 'Please comment on any concerns that you have in relation to being prepared for your first clinical placement'. Summative qualitative content analysis was used for analysis.

144 students (55%) responded to the open ended question. Responses were categorised into six themes including: Not prepared for placement; feeling nervous, anxious and worried; bullying and belonging; practicalities; patient safety and making mistakes; and working outside of my scope of practice.

It appears that activities designed to equip students with the capacity to manage the inherent challenges of undertaking a clinical placement may sometimes have a paradoxical effect by increasing students' level of stress and anxiety. An enhanced understanding of students' concerns may help educators implement appropriate support strategies.

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Introduction

Nursing students' first clinical placement experience can be a critical juncture in their educational and professional journey. It can provide an entrée into the unfamiliar world of healthcare and signal a time of significant change and growth. For some students however, the first placement can be a turbulent and sometimes

distressing experience. Students' preparation for their first placement and, more specifically, students' fears, concerns and issues during this lead up time, have received limited attention in the literature; yet this period of preparation can be pivotal to students' clinical performance, the degree of satisfaction they gain from the placement experience, and their ultimate clinical success (Levett-Jones and Bourgeois, 2015).

The clinical environment provides an authentic context for nursing students to develop the knowledge, skills, attitudes and values of a registered nurse. Students have experiences on clinical placements that cannot realistically be provided in classrooms or simulated settings. However, as academics and clinicians frequently point out, nursing students are not always adequately prepared for clinical placements and concerns related to the development of students' competence and confidence, and their preparedness or "fitness for practice" remain contentious issues

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(Levett-Jones et al., 2006). As part of a larger study addressing first year nursing students' readiness for practice, this paper explored the concerns of students who were preparing for their first clinical placement and makes recommendations for addressing these concerns proactively.

Background

There is widespread agreement that clinical placements are of central importance to nursing education and specifically designed to facilitate authentic learning opportunities (Levett-Jones and Bourgeois, 2015). From the apprenticeship-style training undertaken decades ago to contemporary university-based education, the integral nature of clinical placements for the attainment of competence remains undisputed (Brown et al., 2011). The first clinical placement experience is critical to nursing students' professional identity formation and socialisation (Trede, 2012). It provides an authentic context that introduces students to the knowledge, skills, behaviours, attitudes and values of registered nurses. The quality of placements, and students' initial clinical learning experiences in particular, generate a range of intense emotional responses and can span a continuum from excitement, exhilaration, joy and pride through to confusion, anxiety, fear, apprehension, and distress (Levett-Jones and Bourgeois, 2015). Importantly, the experiences encountered during the first placement and the way in which students process the resultant feelings are key determinants of students' decisions to withdraw from or remain enrolled in nursing programs (James and Chapman, 2009; Killam and Heerschap, 2013).

A number of studies have identified that nursing students frequently experience high levels of stress on their first clinical placement (Moscaritolo, 2009; Sendir and Acaroglu, 2008; Shaban et al., 2012; Sheu et al., 2001), and that this can negatively impact their learning, performance and professional growth (Sun and Sun, 2011; Khater et al., 2014). Students who struggle to adjust to their role during the first placement are also at risk of diminished self-esteem and depression (Wang et al., 2010).

There are multiple sources of anxiety, stress and distress when students undertake their first placement. They include intrinsic, extrinsic, personal and professional factors, for example: feeling ill-prepared for human suffering, death and dying (Parry, 2011); exposure to nudity and the need to provide personal and intimate patient care; and fear of looking 'stupid', making mistakes and causing harm to patients (Killam and Heerschap, 2013; Cobo-Cuena et al., 2010). Further areas of student concern during first placement experiences include a lack of clarity about placement expectations; misconceptions about their role and responsibilities (Andrew et al., 2009); a perceived inconsistency between theory and practice; feeling unwelcome and unwanted in the clinical environment (Levett-Jones et al., 2009); and an erosion of confidence when feeling undervalued (Chesser-Smyth and Long, 2013). Students also report difficulties sleeping due to feeling anxious and as a result experience increasing exhaustion throughout the placement period (Killam and Heerschap, 2013). It should be noted however, that the identification and quantification of recurrent stressors and anxiety provoking events related to first placements is sometimes difficult because of the diverse nature of both practice environments and the individuals who enrol in nursing programs. Thus, addressing students' concerns in a proactive manner can be challenging.

Nursing students are prepared for their first clinical placements using a range of approaches including clinical skills sessions, simulations (McCaughy and Traynor, 2010; Ricketts, 2011), lectures, tutorials and online modules. Professional behaviours and expectations are highlighted and key workplace health and safety issues

related to placements are generally introduced. While most studies indicate that students consider their clinical placement preparation to be adequate, Chesser Smyth (2005) identified that some aspects require a shift in focus to be more student-centred and aligned with students' *actual* learning needs and concerns rather than what educators *believe* is most important.

A search of the literature reveals a considerable number of studies focused on nursing students' views and placement experiences; however for each of these studies data were typically collected during or subsequent to students' first clinical placement. There is a paucity of research about the perceptions and concerns of nursing students in the lead up to their first placement. Undoubtedly, this period of time will be daunting for many students; however, without an in-depth understanding of students' specific issues, fears and concerns, strategies designed to support and prepare them may well be inadequate and ill-conceived. For this reason, the study described in this paper is unique in many respects – (a) it was conducted at a time when a group of beginning students were contemplating and preparing for their imminent clinical placements, (b) a large number of students completed and returned the surveys, and (c) the nature of the issues they described were recurring. Analysis of and reflection on these common issues of concern allowed us to suggest recommendations for addressing students' concerns and better preparing future students for their first placements.

Methods

Study aim and design

This findings profiled in this paper formed one component of a multi-site mixed methods study. The aim of the overall study was to elicit information regarding first year nursing students' perceptions of their readiness for practice and the impact of a one semester long preparation for practice course. Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the university ethics committee prior to contacting potential participants.

Recruitment

Students were recruited from a first-year cohort of undergraduate bachelor of nursing students from one semi-metropolitan university in Australia. Recruitment was via an email sent to nursing students in the target population and an announcement posted on the electronic learning management system (Blackboard™). Students who expressed an interest in the study were emailed a copy of the participant information statement with a link to the survey. Submission of the survey was taken as implied consent.

Data collection

Participants were asked to complete the 22 item online 'Fitness for Practice' survey distributed in weeks 1 and 6 of a 12 week semester. The results presented in this paper were from the second of these surveys with data collected immediately prior to students' first clinical placement experience. The data analysis presented below addressed participants' responses to the open ended question: 'Please comment on any concerns that you have in relation to being prepared for your first clinical placement'.

Data analysis

Hsieh and Shannon's (2005) strategy of summative qualitative content analysis was used for analysis. This approach has a

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