



Learning to nurse in China – Structural factors influencing professional development in practice settings: A phenomenological study

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Summary This paper describes findings from a stratified phenomenological investigation into Chinese nursing students' experiences of learning in practice placements. The investigation was undertaken in China whilst studying at an English University for a post-graduate degree. With the transition of Chinese nursing education into higher education institutions, clinical nursing experience remains a fundamental factor in students' preparation for qualification.

This small phenomenological study sought to understand the kinds of experiences students encounter, the factors that supported or inhibited their learning and the ways in which learning in practice could be enhanced. This paper concentrates on the structural factors that influenced students' learning. These structural factors included; the opportunities available for students to learn, students' participation in clinical nursing activities; the relationship that placement staff were willing to engage in with the students and the prevailing learning climate of the placement setting.

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Introduction

The aim of this study was to explore factors in the clinical environment that affected the clinical

learning outcomes of Chinese nursing students throughout their practice placement experiences. The central question of this study was 'What kinds of factors in the clinical environment influence students' achievement of their learning outcomes?' Because this study explored nursing students' lived experiences, a phenomenological qualitative research was considered to be a suitable methodology

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to adopt. This approach was chosen as a means to capture the essential features of the participants' experiences of learning to become nurses and to explicate their meaning. Phenomenology allows the researcher to interpret the data from the participants' perspectives and so to access deeper understanding of the meaning of their accounts. This approach helped to catch the main themes and factors influencing the participant nursing students' learning in and from clinical practice.

Nursing is a practice-based discipline that engages students in developing not only the theoretical knowledge on which to base client care, but also the practical skills required to utilize that knowledge. As in most pre-qualifying programmes for health care professionals, Chinese nursing students develop these fundamental skills through participation in the delivery and management of health care whilst attending clinical practice placements. In China clinical learning is the major component of nursing education and is located almost entirely in hospital. Moreover, it is within these practice placement experiences that nursing students are socialized into the profession of nursing.

Although nursing education in China has moved into higher education, clinical education remains a significant component and an integral part of the Chinese diploma in nursing curricula. Learning in a clinical environment presents nursing students with challenges that are very different to those encountered in university settings and such challenges are often unpredictable and even stressful for students, as this paper will illustrate.

Clinical education in China

In China, the changing pattern of nurse education and the move into the higher education sector has raised questions about the support and supervision of nursing students in clinical placements. These changes are in the way nurse education is offered and consists of moving away from hospital-based nursing schools and into university settings (Zheng and Zhang, 2005).

Since so much of nursing education is spent in clinical practice, it seems entirely appropriate to try to control the clinical factors that affect students' achievement of their learning outcomes and to ensure nursing competence. The quality of the clinical environment is crucial and a positive learning climate is defined as the place where maximum use can be made of learning opportunities that help the student to adapt to the role of becoming a nurse (Li Wuqing, 2006).

Research into Chinese nursing education in practice placements indicates that students are able to attain the required nursing competencies in the most effective manner, and also to achieve their full potential where there is a positive clinical environment (Wang, 2005; Xu Cuirong et al., 2006). Something that is essential to become a well-trained nurse able to deliver high quality care. Another qualitative study conducted by Chen Hongli et al. (2005) revealed elements that promoted clinical learning. These elements included the quality of the ward-learning environment; quality of nursing staff; patients; peers; being able to engage in routines, ward-based examinations; and staffing levels and skill mix. It was apparent from their results that students perceived a combination of teacher behaviours and ward climate as making a significant contribution to their learning.

Practice placements in the Chinese nursing curriculum

The three year pre-qualification nursing curriculum of the Chinese nursing school used for this study is spread over six semesters. It includes both clinical practice courses and university based lectures. Practice placements take place in three affiliated and accredited hospitals of Chongqing Medical University. In their first two years students are allocated to the same hospital for all their placements and spend six weeks in clinical practice at the end of each semester during their first and second years, a total of 24 weeks of practice experience. In their third year students change hospital and undertake eight months of practice experience (32 weeks of practice). Students are supported by clinical teachers who are chosen from the hospital nursing staff (staff nurses) whose posts are funded by the university. These clinical teachers must hold a nursing bachelor's degree, have at least five years of clinical experience and should have received training in teaching skills.

In their first and second years, students work four hour daytime shifts, five days per week. During the practice time, clinical teachers are assigned a group of 8–10 students, who in turn may be placed in two or three different nursing units. Initially the students are expected to undertake the same kinds of tasks wherever they are allocated. These tasks include making beds, moving patients, observing the vital signs, mouth care, and so on. Clinical teachers divide their time between each of their students, assisting them to plan and provide essential patient care, developing relevant nursing skills, and assessing their understanding of patient status.

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