



Belongingness: A prerequisite for nursing students' clinical learning

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Accepted 4 April 2007

KEYWORDS

Belongingness;
Nursing student;
Learning;
Clinical placement

Summary The concept of belongingness has intuitive appeal. Human beings are social creatures; the need to belong and be accepted is fundamental, and social exclusion can be devastating. This paper reports on the selected findings from the qualitative phase of mixed-methods study that explored nursing students' experience of belongingness while on clinical placements. The 18 interview participants in this study were from Australia and the United Kingdom. They provided a range of perspectives on belongingness and how it influenced their placement experience. Central to this discussion was their strong belief that belonging is a prerequisite for clinical learning. This theme dominated all of the interviews. Given that the primary purpose of clinical placements is for students to learn to nurse, there needs to be a clear understanding of the relationship between belongingness and learning. With reference to the published literature and excerpts from interview transcripts, this paper proposes that reconceptualising nursing students' clinical learning experiences through a 'lens of belongingness' provides a new perspective and reveals yet unexplored insights.

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Introduction

This paper reports on selected findings from the qualitative phase of a mixed-methods, cross-

national study that explored nursing students' experience of belongingness when on clinical placements. While the study participants described a broad range of related experiences, it was the influence of belongingness on their capacity and motivation to engage in clinical learning opportunities when on placements that emerged as a critical and recurring theme; it is this phenomenon that is the focus of this paper. Given that clinical placements are

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specifically designed to provide positive experiential learning opportunities, there needs to be a clear understanding of the relationship between belongingness and student learning. By integrating excerpts from the interview transcripts with published literature this paper provides valuable insights into nursing student's experience of belongingness and its impact on their clinical education.

Background

There is widespread agreement that clinical learning is of central importance to nursing education. Although a theoretical and research-based education is vital for contemporary nursing, on its own it is not enough. Effective clinical placements are essential to becoming a competent professional nurse. Learning in the clinical environment provides the real world context for nursing students to develop the knowledge, skills, attitudes and values of a registered nurse. Students have experiences on clinical placements that cannot be realistically provided in a classroom or laboratory setting. While immersed in the 'messiness' and complexity of practice students have opportunities to communicate with patients and their families, observe and learn from role models, and practise their skills under supervision. When on clinical placements they receive feedback on their real world performance and are guided to reflect on their lived experiences as individuals and nurses. However, as academics and clinicians frequently point out, clinical placements are not without problems. The last decade has seen a plethora of reports that provide evidence of the longstanding and multidimensional nature of the problems that surround clinical placements (Clare et al., 2003; Council of Deans and Heads of UK University Faculties for Nursing Midwifery and Health Visiting, 1998; Department of Health, 1999, 2000; FitzGerald et al., 2001; Heath et al., 2002; Johnson and Preston, 2001; Peach, 1999; Senate Report, 2002). Concerns related to the development of students' competence and confidence, and their preparedness or 'fitness for practice' remain contentious issues (Clare et al., 2003; Mallik and Aylott, 2005). This paper will provide a new perspective on the challenges that surround clinical placements and student learning, a perspective that emerged through the exploration of nursing students' perceptions and experiences of belonging.

Belongingness – definition

This study sought to explore and define belongingness through a detailed interpretation of nursing students' clinical placement experiences. A broad definition was derived from analysis and interpretation of the study data:

Belongingness is a deeply personal and contextually mediated experience that evolves in response to the degree to which an individual feels (a) secure, accepted, included, valued and respected by a defined group, (b) connected with or integral to the group, and (c) that their professional and/or personal values are in harmony with those of the group. The experience of belongingness may evolve passively in response to the actions of the group to which one aspires to belong and/or actively through the actions initiated by the individual.

The literature on belongingness

In a literature review previously undertaken by Levett-Jones et al. (2007a) the psychosocial dimensions of belongingness and its implications for nursing students were discussed. That paper identified a broad range of social science and psychological literature that detailed the importance of belonging, as well as the deleterious emotional, psychological, physical and behavioural consequences of having this need thwarted. Empirical and anecdotal evidence suggests that people who are deprived of belongingness experience diminished self-esteem (Maslow, 1987), increased stress and anxiety (Anant, 1967), and depression (Sargent et al., 2002), as well as a decrease in general well-being and happiness (Lakin, 2003). At the behavioural level, the absence of meaningful personal relationships reportedly leads to an increase in affiliative behaviours, such as unquestioning agreement with another person's decision, acquiescence, modification of behaviour, or engaging in negative behaviours sanctioned by group members (Clark, 1992). The review proffered that while the psychological and social science literature is replete with studies of belongingness, the concept of belongingness has been inadequately explored in the nursing education literature. Despite the broad range of studies focused on the clinical placement experiences of nursing students and the many papers that refer to the importance of students being accepted, welcomed and supported on clinical placements, few studies focused specifically on the experience of belonging. The method-

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