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Exploring the transition and professional socialisation from health care assistant to student nurse

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Summary

Background: Minimal research is available examining the socialisation process from the perspective of students with health care knowledge who prior to undertaking their training worked as a health care assistant (HCA). The transition and professional socialisation process undertaken by students is an important factor in contributing to the successful completion of a pre-registration nursing programme. Despite this, limited empirical research explores the impact prior health care knowledge plays in this process.

Objective: The studies aim was to determine the transitional processes associated with moving from a HCA to Student Nurse.

Design: A descriptive qualitative study undertaken over an 8-month period at a university in the northeast of England.

Population, sample, setting: A homogeneous sample of 14 students with previous experience as a HCA within the field of adult nursing was used.

Methods: Data were collected through 4 focus group interviews and analysed using [Burnard, P., 1991. A method of analysing interview transcripts in qualitative research. *Nurse Education Today* 11, 461–466.] thematic content analysis.

Findings: The main themes that emerged around culture shock and clinical issues identified both positive and negative perceptions upon this process. Equally a new concept is introduced from the findings, that of 'the comfort zone', which explores

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the intentional reversal into the HCA role by the participants of the study. From the findings a framework for the transition and professional socialisation from HCA to student nurse is provided. The findings will assist the university and others in identifying, addressing and aiding the socialisation needs of these students into their new role as a student nurse.

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Introduction

This qualitative study owes itself to a statement, which a senior nurse said of a student nurse. When visiting the student on clinical placement, who prior to commencement of her training had been a health care assistant (HCA), the senior nurse said of the student "the problem is she is at the end of her first year, and she still thinks and acts like a health care assistant". This raised the question; "How do students who were HCA's stop thinking and acting like a HCA?" The study aimed to identify

- The realities of the transitional and professional socialisation process undertaken by HCA's as they progress through their nurse training.
- What experiences alter a students perception of thinking from a HCA to a student nurse?
- How this transition and its meaning affects the students perspective upon their own prior level of knowledge?

This topic is important to fill a gap in existing research and literature. A HCA is a term used in the United Kingdom to describe a support worker for the qualified nurse. It is therefore timely at this juncture in nurse education to consider the impact of socialisation from HCA to student nurse. Current policy (Department of Health, 2000) is encouraging the increased recruitment of HCA's into nurse education. Understanding the realities and potential difficulties these students encounter will assist in raising the levels of awareness to their needs.

Literature review

The socialisation and transitional process undertaken by nursing students is well documented (Howkins and Ewens, 1999; Fitzpatrick et al., 1996; Du Toit, 1995). Existing literature focuses upon the students experience and influencing factors such as culture and clinical areas. This literature review is important in understanding how student nurses develop but fails to explore the influencing factor of prior health care knowledge.

A review of this literature identified that certain principals could be utilised in the exploration of the HCA's transition and socialisation process.

Defining transition and socialisation

In examining the transition and socialisation process it is necessary to define their meanings. The notion of transition is well documented, with Meleis (1986) cited in Hunter et al. (1996) being the most utilised. Meleis (1986) identifies that transition is never a singular event, but rather an individualised process, occurring over an undetermined period of time. During this transition, the individual's patterns of behaviour change in relation to abilities, identity, role and relationships and that the concept of transition demonstrates an acceptance of change.

Socialisation, according to Fitzpatrick et al. (1996) is the key aim of any pre-registration nursing programme, gradually socialising the student into their future professional role. Various definitions of socialisation exist. Howkins and Ewens (1999) cite Cohen (1981) as an appropriate definition relevant to nursing. Cohen views professional socialisation as

"The complex process by which a person acquires the knowledge, skills, and sense of occupational identity that are characteristic of a member of that profession. It involves the internalisation of the values and norms of the group into the person's own behaviour and self-conception. In the process a person gives up the societal and media stereotypes prevalent in our culture and adopts those held by members of that profession"

Cohen's (1981) definition recognises the importance of values as being a central concept within the socialisation process. Throughout their training the student is attempting to acquire the values, knowledge and skills to enable them to be accepted into the established professional group of the registered nurse. Lacey (1977) emphasises that not only is an individual's personality and qualities important, but that past experience influences the socialisation process. This raises the question of how much impact prior health care knowledge

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