



Nursing students' belongingness and workplace satisfaction: Quantitative findings of a mixed methods study



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ABSTRACT

Background: The relationship between nursing students' belongingness and workplace satisfaction has received limited attention in the literature to date.

Aim: The aim of this study was to explore the relationship between, and factors that may influence final semester nursing students' need to belong, sense of belonging and workplace satisfaction while on clinical placements.

Methods: A cross-national longitudinal multiphase explanatory sequential mixed methods study underpinned by a pragmatic theoretical framework was used for this study. A convenience sample of third-year nursing students from two Australian and one Canadian university ($n = 468$) were recruited. Participants were asked to complete a 62 item survey which was a composite of three previously validated surveys: the 10 item 'Need to Belong Scale', the 34 item 'Belongingness Scale: Clinical Placement Experience (BES:CPE)' and the 18 item 'Nursing Workplace Satisfaction Questionnaire'. Data were analysed using descriptive and inferential statistics.

Results: Key results indicated that participants wanted to have someone to turn to, and to be accepted; they found nursing work interesting and considered it worthwhile to make an effort in this meaningful job. Participants were usually comfortable to ask for and accept help but many felt discriminated against during clinical placements. Only belongingness was strongly correlated with workplace satisfaction.

Conclusions: Irrespective of site, nursing students' satisfied sense of belonging influenced their workplace satisfaction while on clinical placements. Workplace satisfaction is a key determinant of career decisions and the results from this study have the potential to inform clinical placement practices and policies and to influence beginning nurses' decisions to continue in the profession.

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1. Introduction

Internationally, nursing workforce issues such as staff satisfaction, recruitment and retention remain problematic. Although a body of research has explored registered nurses' workplace experiences and career decisions, the impact of clinical placements on nursing students' workplace satisfaction, attrition and employment choices has received limited attention. This paper presents the quantitative findings from a longitudinal mixed methods study of nursing students from two Australian universities and one Canadian university. The relationship between participants' sense of belonging and workplace satisfaction is examined. The results from this study may help to inform education providers and employers so that appropriate support strategies can be

implemented to improve students' placement experiences and enhance retention.

2. Background

Registered nurses' (RNs) turnover intentions and attrition within the first two years post-graduation remain high (Brewer et al., 2012, Cho et al., 2012, Newhouse et al., 2007, Spence Laschinger, 2012). Reasons given for this include: poor job satisfaction and commitment to their employer, lack of socialisation, emotional exhaustion, dissatisfaction with workplace environments, poor interpersonal relationships with staff, and having witnessed and/or experienced bullying. In addition to the personal costs for the individual nurse, the financial costs associated with attrition are significant, ranging between \$26,652 to \$48,970 in Canada and Australia respectively (Duffield et al., 2014).

Retention of RNs in the workforce is important to countries with struggling healthcare systems and economies (Duffield et al., 2014, El-Jardali et al., 2011, Zinsmeister and Schafer, 2009). There is a moral

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imperative for employers to provide safe and satisfying workplaces for nurses (Borrott, 2012), so as to overcome national and international shortages (Cubit and Ryan, 2011, Day et al., 2007). As a result, a body of research has explored the factors that influence RNs workplace satisfaction and career choices. Less attention has been given to undergraduate and graduate nurses' workplace experiences. However, research has identified consistent themes such as: unmet psychosocial needs (Lavoie-Tremblay et al., 2008), the need to belong (Levett-Jones and Lathlean, 2009, Sedgwick and Rougeau, 2010), failure to assimilate within an organisation's culture and values (Feng and Tsai, 2012), the need for job satisfaction (Spence Laschinger, 2012), inadequacy of mentoring systems (Tuckett et al., 2015), and strategies that support socialisation into professional roles (Newhouse et al., 2007).

Nursing students undertake clinical placements in hospitals, community settings and aged care facilities, as well as many other contexts. They are often not familiar with the facility, staff, and the inherent workplaces' culture. Yet students' clinical learning is impacted by relationships made (or not) while on clinical placement (O'Mara et al., 2014). Students reported poor relationships with staff when they were excluded from ward based activities, when staff were unwelcoming, hostile towards and critical of students, and when nurses made disparaging comments about nursing as a career choice (Clarke et al., 2012). Clinical placements and in particular the staff that students encounter, have significant influence on their learning and future career decisions (Ha, 2015).

This study addresses nursing students' experiences of belongingness and workplace satisfaction, two concepts that are particularly relevant to workplace satisfaction and future career planning. Belongingness is a universal, fundamental human need (Baumeister and Leary, 1995) in one's personal life, social life and work environment (May, 2011, Mellor et al., 2008). To feel a sense of belonging is to feel accepted by others, respected, and like one 'fits in' (Mohamed et al., 2014). Within the workplace, belongingness also influences workplace satisfaction and retention. Workplace satisfaction is perceived congruence between personal and ethical values and those of the organisation (Valentine et al., 2011), identification with the organisation (de Moura et al., 2009), and degree of support provided within a just system (Gillet et al., 2013).

The relationship between nursing students' sense of belonging and workplace satisfaction has been given limited attention to date. This paper reports the quantitative findings from a longitudinal, cross-national mixed methods study that examined this issue.

3. The Study

3.1. Aim

The aim of the study was to examine the extent of, and factors that influence, final semester nursing students' need to belong, sense of belonging and workplace satisfaction while on clinical placements. The research questions were:

1. How did nursing students experience a need to belong, belongingness in the workplace and workplace satisfaction?
2. To what extent did nursing students' need to belong influence their sense of belonging in the workplace?
3. To what extent did nursing students need to belong influence their workplace satisfaction?
4. To what extent did nursing students' sense of belonging influence their workplace satisfaction?

4. Methods

Underpinned by a pragmatic theoretical framework, that is, to determine the outcome of an experience (Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, 2004), this study used a cross-national, longitudinal multiphase explanatory sequential mixed methods design. Integration of analysed responses

from both quantitative and qualitative methods result in refined reasoned conceptualisations, thus enabling a deeper understanding of the social phenomena of interest, nursing students' sense of belonging and workplace satisfaction (Creswell, 2014, Fielding, 2012). This paper reports on the quantitative results of Phase 1 of the project.

4.1. Participants

Participants were undergraduate nursing students in their final semester of enrolment at three universities. The two Australian universities were large regional universities, one in Queensland (Site 1, $n = 134$) and one in New South Wales (Site 2, $n = 289$). The Canadian university was located in Alberta, Canada (Site 3, $n = 53$). During students' final semester, they undertake between 200 and 359 clinical placement hours placement (Site 1 = 320 h; Site 2 = 200 h; Site 3 = 359 h) (personal communication, Day, January 13, 2015; personal communication, Levett-Jones, October 24, 2015; personal communication, Sedgwick, October 23, 2015).

4.2. Study Instruments

As the study aimed to determine whether there was a relationship between students' belongingness and workplace satisfaction, a compilation of three validated tools were used. To ascertain participants' need to belong, the 10 item, 'Need to Belong Scale' (Cronbach's $\alpha > 0.8$) was used (Leary et al., 2013). The 34 item 'Belongingness Scale: Clinical Placement Experience (BES:CPE)' measured participants' experience of belonging with the subscales of esteem ($\alpha = 0.9$), efficacy ($\alpha = 0.8$) and connectedness ($\alpha = 0.82$), with an overall Cronbach's α of = 0.92 (Levett-Jones et al., 2009). The 18 item 'Nursing Workplace Satisfaction Questionnaire' measures extrinsic ($\alpha = 0.9$), intrinsic ($\alpha = 0.7$) and relational job satisfaction ($\alpha = 0.9$), with an overall Cronbach's α of = 0.90 (Fairbrother et al., 2009). Each instrument used a Likert scale of 1 to 5, where 1 indicated strongly disagree/never true/definitely disagree, through to 5 indicated strongly agree/always true/fully agree. Participants were also asked eight demographic questions.

4.3. Ethical Considerations

Ethics approval was received from all three universities. Anonymity, confidentiality and security of participants' details and responses were assured. All identifiable information was assigned codes, accessible by research team members only. Return of completed surveys signified implied consent. Data were collected in the late 2014. Hardcopy surveys was distributed by academic staff (who were not involved in the study) during regularly scheduled classes.

4.4. Data Analysis

Of the 476 students who returned the survey, 468 completed 80% or more of the 62 survey questions. Data from the remaining 12 participants was excluded from analysis. Missing values were assigned the code, '9999', and for statistical analyses, were managed by 'exclude cases analysis by analysis' (Allen and Bennett, 2010). Quantitative data was entered in the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) (Version 22). Descriptive and inferential statistical analyses were conducted for the questionnaire as a whole, and for each of the three individual scales. Statistical significance was attributed to results where $p < 0.05$ (unless otherwise indicated). Analyses included t -tests and correlation tests between the individual scales to determine whether relationships existed. As the cohort was a non-probability sample, appropriate t -tests are reported based on the presence or absence of homogeneity of variance. These tests are robust to varying group sizes (Allen and Bennett, 2010). For brevity, only the statistically significant analysis of variance (ANOVA) and post-hoc analysis result is reported.

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