



## Sadness, socialisation and shifted perceptions: School pupils' stories of a pre-nursing scholarship



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### SUMMARY

**Background:** Providing opportunities for aspirant nurses to obtain pre-nursing experience features prominently in the UK Government's response to The Francis Inquiry. Evidence from the USA suggests that pre-nursing experiences, such as summer camps, have the potential to contribute to effective nurse recruitment, selection and retention strategies. However, few similar pre-nursing experiences exist in the UK, and none have been evaluated. This paper reports the experiences of participation in a pilot pre-nursing scholarship among secondary school pupils in Scotland.

**Objectives:** To explore pupils' experiences of a pre-nursing scholarship to inform future design and delivery of similar programmes in the UK and internationally.

**Design:** Qualitative focus group study.

**Settings:** Two university campuses in Scotland.

**Participants:** Twenty-two secondary school students (all female, aged 15–18 years).

**Methods:** Two focus groups were facilitated through the use of 'anecdote circles' to elicit pupils' stories of their scholarship experience. Anecdote circles allowed each pupil to share their story in turn and then collectively assemble, figuratively and physically through interlocking written cards, shared stories of the scholarship. Discussions were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. Data were analysed thematically.

**Results:** Three stories emerged: 1) sadness; 2) socialisation; and, 3) shifted perceptions. Sad stories were transformative affirming the pupils' desire to become a nurse. Stories of socialisation revealed how demonstrating practical skills affirmed the pupils' ability and suitability to nurse. Perceptions of the life and work of a (student) nurse, their future career, and the lives of older adults, shifted through the scholarship, especially during practice learning experience.

**Conclusions:** Storytelling revealed how a pre-nursing scholarship helped secondary school pupils to decide whether to pursue a nursing career by providing an opportunity to explore their ability, suitability and desire for nursing. The practice learning experience emerged as an important element of this decision-making process and should be integrated into similar pre-nursing experiences.

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### Introduction

#### Pre-Nursing Experiences

The Francis Inquiry into Mid-Staffordshire National Health Service (NHS) Trust has provided renewed impetus for the development and evaluation of effective nurse recruitment, selection and retention (RSR) strategies in the United Kingdom (UK) (Francis, 2013). Pre-nursing experience features prominently in the UK Government's response to Francis through a proposal that aspirant student nurses spend up to a year working as a Healthcare Assistant (HCA) before commencing a pre-registration

nursing programme (Department of Health, 2013). This proposal has, however, faced considerable criticism (Council of Deans, 2013; Maxwell, 2013). Maxwell (2013, p. 2480) has argued that:

"In the future, as the workforce demographic changes [i.e., ages], we will need to attract bright and enthusiastic school leavers to choose nursing studies over other degree courses to deliver high quality healthcare. If school leavers are obliged (rather than allowed to choose) to delay the start of university to spend a year as a healthcare assistant, many may find applying to study nursing a less attractive option."

Central to such critique is a concern that the proposal's underpinning assumptions are flawed (Council of Deans, 2013) and that the approach is untested. Although piloting is underway (Department of Health, 2013), this debate highlights that little evidence exists around pre-nursing experiences in the UK to inform policy around nurse RSR.

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Research evidence from the United States of America (USA) suggests that pre-nursing experiences, specifically summer camps, do have potential to attract high school students to nursing programmes and provide opportunities for students to determine whether nursing is the 'right' career choice. Summer camps have been found to help students discern whether they were 'wired' for nursing (Daumer and Britson, 2003) and significantly increase the likelihood that students consider nursing careers (Drenkard et al., 2002). The pre-nursing experiences could potentially contribute to the nurse RSR. However, few similar pre-nursing experiences exist for UK students, and, to our knowledge, there are none that have been evaluated.

### Pre-nursing Scholarship

In 2012, the School of Nursing, Midwifery and Health at the University of Stirling, working in partnership with local NHS Boards and education authorities, piloted a nine-month 'pre-nursing scholarship' for penultimate and final year secondary school pupils (aged 15–18 years) from remote and rural parts of the Scottish Highlands and Western Isles (Chisholm, 2013). This scholarship was delivered in the University of Stirling's Highland Campus in Inverness and Western Isles Campus in Stornoway, which provide pre-registration nurse education to remote and rural areas of the Highland and Western Isles of Scotland. The scholarship had four components:

1. *Residential week* at the start of the scholarship comprising hands-on skill sessions and lecture-based input to prepare students for practice;
2. *Practice learning experience* week in a local NHS hospital and/or community setting that focussed on the care of older adults, supported by a qualified nurse mentor and a final year student nurse 'buddy';
3. Completion of a Skills for Work (Health Sector) *qualification* accredited by the Scottish Qualification Authority (SQA);
4. *Graduation* to celebrate completion of the scholarship with parents/carers, teachers and other education partners, academics, practice mentors and student nurse buddies.

In this paper we tell the story of this scholarship from the perspective of its school pupil participants. Our aim is to explore the pupils' experiences to provide evidence to inform the future design and delivery of similar pre-nursing scholarships in the UK and internationally to enhance the nurse RSR strategies.

### Stories and Storytelling

Stories shape our lives and selves. Listening to stories invites us to live and learn vicariously (Roberts, 2010), to sense and share delight and despair, and pleasure and pain, and hence attune ourselves to others' circumstances and experiences in the pursuit of empathy (Bowles, 1995; Fairbairn, 2002). Telling (and re-telling) stories can be a cathartic and therapeutic process that arrives at an acceptance or remembrance (Fairbairn, 2002) of trauma or tragedy (Gunther and Thomas, 2006), and thereby contributes to the development of personal and professional resilience (East et al., 2010).

Storytelling has therefore been used widely in nurse education (Fairbairn, 2002; Haigh and Hardy, 2011), practice (Gunther and Thomas, 2006), and research (Bowles, 1995; Kock, 1998; Grassley and Nelms, 2009; East et al., 2010). Fairbairn (2002) shares how using storytelling encouraged student nurses to develop empathy and understanding and explore ethical dilemmas within the safety of a 'moral gymnasium' as a way of 'limbering up' for practice. Similarly, Gunther and Thomas (2006) described how encouraging registered nurses to tell stories about traumatic care episodes triggered moral distress and existential questioning that changed (and sometimes inhibited) their practice. Grassley and Nelms (2009) tell of how inviting women to share breastfeeding stories proved to be a powerful emancipatory act, illustrating how storytelling has potential to both change and challenge

the social structures and received discourses that shape our experience (Frank, 1995).

Following East et al. (2010, p. 19) in this paper we define *stories* as 'personal accounts of experience'. *Narratives*, by contrast, are considered 'structured and formal accounts containing researcher additions and omissions' (East et al., 2010, p. 19). Hence, we weave pupils' *stories* with our interpretations to co-create a *narrative* account of pupils' scholarship experiences.

## Methods

### Data Collection

Health researchers have used a range of research methods to access 'storied knowledge' (Milligan et al., 2011) including: in-depth unstructured interviews (Gunther and Thomas, 2006), journals and diaries (Kock, 1998; Milligan et al., 2005), narrative correspondence (Kralik et al., 2000; Milligan, 2005), autoethnography (Furman, 2004), as well as focus groups (Krueger and Casey, 2008), and participatory approaches (Israel et al., 1998).

One increasingly popular approach is anecdote circles (Callahan et al., 2006). Akin to a focus group, anecdote circles are lightly-facilitated discussion fora through which stories (and associated emotions) are told by a group of individuals who have shared a similar experience.

In this study, an adapted anecdote circle approach was adopted incorporating personal reflection and writing, as well as group discussion. At the start of the session participants were each provided with several hexagon-shaped cards. Group facilitators then asked pupils to think about and write on the cards the story of a particular aspect of the pre-nursing scholarship, such as the residential week, practice learning experience or the completion of their SQA qualification. Each aspect of the scholarship provided the 'story title' which was written on a hexagon and placed in the centre of a table. Then, each pupil shared the story they had written on their hexagon in turn and, after telling their story, placed it around the central hexagon. In this way successive stories assembled – figuratively and physically through interlocking hexagons – a shared story of the scholarship. Throughout this process the facilitators encouraged a discussion about the stories being shared.

Twenty-two pupils (all female, aged 15–18 years) from the first scholarship cohort participated in one of the two anecdote circles for Highland (n = 12) and Western Isles (n = 10) held on the day of their scholarship graduation in March and April 2013, respectively. Limited opportunity and prohibitive cost inhibited gathering the pupils' resident across remote and rural parts of the Scottish Highlands and Western Isles together on more than one occasion. Data collection took place on graduation day to maximise the opportunity when the pupils were together. Each anecdote circle was around an hour in duration on both campuses and was directed by two facilitators. Discussion during anecdote circles was audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

### Data Analysis

The data corpus included comments written by students on hexagons and verbatim transcripts of the group discussion during the anecdote circle. Thematic analysis was conducted on both data sources to identify common themes across sources and campuses, although the analysis approach differed by data source.

Analysis of written comments on hexagons was conducted at a face-to-face 'data workshop' involving all co-authors in May 2013 and followed a three-stage process. First, hexagons were read by each co-author and were grouped according to the components of the programme (except graduation). Second, themes were extracted from the stories shared about that component and were discussed by researchers until core themes were agreed. Third, inter-relationships between themes were explored and discussed to derive a narrative account of the scholarship (East et al., 2010).

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