



Creating stories for learning about the neonatal care experience through the eyes of student nurses: An interpretive, narrative study☆

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ABSTRACT

Background: Storytelling is an increasingly well recognised and valued platform to learn about the human experience within healthcare. Little is known however about how stories can enhance understanding in neonatal care, a specialised field offering rich opportunities for learning. This study focuses on the creation of stories based on the experiences of student nurses to inform teaching and learning strategies in the neonatal field.

Objectives: The study aimed to create stories from the narratives of student nurses working within the neonatal field and identify what key themes for learning emerged in order to develop a storytelling resource to share experiences with their peers.

Design: An interpretive, constructivist approach was used to collect, analyse and create stories from student nurse's experiences, in line with narrative inquiry.

Participants: Six pre-registration children's nursing students were selected by purposive sampling.

Settings: Interviews were undertaken within six weeks following placement completion in an agreed location.

Methods: Narratives were obtained by semi-structured interviews. Narrative analysis and core story creation was undertaken to construct stories and key learning themes emerged which provided the pedagogical basis for subsequent digital resource development.

Findings: Key themes emerged relating to the insight and observances of student nurses and the neonatal journey they had experienced, including the nature of neonatal care, experiences of the neonate and parents, the environment and their own learning transition. Preliminary peer evaluation of the storytelling resource revealed storytelling as an interesting and novel approach to teaching & learning, learning from ones' peers, preparation for practice and a valuable insight into a new specialist area.

Conclusions: The study has value to teaching and learning by enabling an appreciation of how narrative can be used to portray the experiences of learners. Findings also support an approach to analysing narrative to create stories for learning and inform subsequent digital resource development.

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1. Introduction

This study focuses on the creation of stories from the narratives obtained by interviews with children's nursing students, as a means of learning about and understanding the neonatal care experience. Storytelling is an important strategy in the provision of healthcare, whatever speciality (Hardy and Haigh, 2011). Its importance has been realised in recent decades and is now an increasingly well recognised and valued platform to learn about the human experience. Due to the fact that the healthcare environment is increasingly using technology to collect depersonalised information and data within healthcare systems, storytelling has personal appeal (Davidhizar and Lonser, 2003; Stacey and Hardy, 2011). It offers us a unique way to share information that is

more personally meaningful than statistics and to consider the patient as a central concept (Fix et al., 2012). In this environment that can potentially detach health professionals from their patients, stories offer a compassionate approach that responds to emotional need rather than data driven targets, computerised checklists or form filling, however essential these may be. The need for such a compassionate and 'person-centred', humanistic approach to care delivery is seen as essential in today's healthcare climate at national level and the neonatal speciality is no exception.

2. Background

Within the literature, work has mainly emerged from the medical profession and the adult nursing field that has explored learners' perspectives on the use of storytelling for teaching and learning (Hughes and Huby, 2002; Paddam et al., 2010; Wright et al., 2014). Within the author's professional discipline, the field of children's nursing had produced more limited research into the value of narrative (DasGupta, 2007; Green et al.,

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2015). This is even less prevalent within the specialty of neonatal care, the author's area of specific interest and the focus of the current study. The neonatal specialty offers a wide range of learning opportunities relating to the physical and psycho-emotional care of vulnerable, sick and small babies and their families which are often challenging and complex. It follows then, that there is much to learn from those who have experienced being part of such a specialised environment such as parents, health professionals and learners themselves. In relation to the latter group, student nurses who work within specialised areas such as neonatal care for their practice placements are exposed to very new and challenging learning demands. However, their experiences have not been explored so little is known about them but more importantly in the context of nurse education, how they can be used to enhance teaching and learning for those new to working in this field. This study focuses therefore on the creation of stories from the narratives of student nurses and how they have informed subsequent resource development as a strategy to enhance understanding and learning about the neonatal field.

Storytelling in a research context is part of narrative inquiry; research that captures personal and human dimensions of experience over time, and takes account of the relationship between individual experience and context (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000; Lore, 2008). The integral connection between stories and narrative can be viewed within the theoretical perspective of constructivism; that is how we 'construct' our own meaning and understanding of the world by building on previous knowledge and experience through narrative. Bruner (1991) speaks of narrative 'structuring' whereby we produce knowledge of something by showing how it interacts with other parts in contributing to a whole. He also argues that story making is central to creating an understanding of the world.

Polkinghorne also argues that narrative knowledge is maintained in *emplotted stories* (Polkinghorne, 1995). Definition of 'story' in the context of the present study stems from this theoretical perspective of narrative; a story is a real or imagined account, or plot, of events that is constructed from experience and context and is interpreted to generate knowledge; in other words, a plot makes narrative understandable and clarifies connections between events.

In the present study, narrative is the starting point, in other words, the raw, unstructured whole account that is acquired from whoever has lived through and offered their version of experience. The story that then is created is a reconfiguration of the narrative, an account that relays significant events and *constructed* to relay meaning and chronology, with a beginning, middle and ending in the context of a plot. The latter is also discussed by Emdin (1998), who uses Polkinghorne's term 'emplotment'. In relation to the neonatal care context, the story in the form of a plot is akin to how we often view the neonatal 'journey', from the start of life (prenatal events), birth (first vital transition) and through the varying dependency levels of neonatal care until the transition to the home environment and beyond. These transitions are a vital part of the neonate's emplotment journey.

A limited amount of research has used plot creation as a way to organise and make sense of narrative. Haidet et al. (2006) undertook sixteen qualitative, in-depth interviews with primary care patients and using their illness narratives, developed a narrative framework for each one including characters, where they were positioned, a start and end point with the events positioned in between, in the form of a plot. Findings revealed a level of complexity to patients' healthcare participation and this was explained by thematic story elements that the authors felt were 'in dynamic interplay', revealed from the *storied* narratives. Therapeutic emplotment has also been documented as being a narrative construction of lived time such as that used in the field of psychiatric medicine where the creation of story-like structures have emerged through therapist-patient interactions (Mattingly, 1994; Tropea, 2012). In neonatal care, a descriptive study by Korhonen and Kangasniemi (2013) analysed nurses' narratives with Polkinghorne's model of narrative analysis and emplotment principle. They described the relationship between nurses and parents as a *plot* starting with

formation, through the process caring for the baby over time leading to when this relationship ended.

Kelly and Howie (2007) continued this 'storied' outcome focus in a study that explored the use of nurses stories to examine the effect of therapy on professional practice in psychiatric nurses. They described an eight staged narrative analysis approach of *emplotment* taking principles from Polkinghorne's model. This comprised: connecting with someone's life story, scrutinising the life events, chronologically ordering events, core story creation, verification, plot examination and theme identification, examination of plot structure ending with the resultant emplotment whole narrative. The final product was a narrative construct that gave meaning and understanding to the data. They concluded nurses' stories can be an effective means of exploring, comprehending and conveying nursing practice principles.

Finally, to re-iterate an earlier point, there is a gap in both the literature and practice development in terms of how stories are used to enhance learning and in the development of storytelling resources tailored to the needs of a speciality such as neonatal care. This present study therefore takes up these key points, striving to explore how this can be achieved and how storytelling can contribute to teaching and learning in this area. Furthermore, as little is known about how experiences and narratives of student nurses who have worked in such a specific area of care for the first time can be used to inform others, it is their stories of interest here.

3. Objectives

Leading on from the above context, the research question posed is: What can be learnt about the neonatal care experience from creating stories constructed from student nurses' narratives?

The study aimed;

- To develop stories from the narratives gained from student nurses working within the neonatal field using one form of narrative analysis.
- To identify what key themes for learning emerged from the stories with view to them being used to share perspectives and enhance learning in others about the care experience within this speciality by the eventual development of a digital storytelling resource.

4. Design

This study adopted an interpretive paradigm; that is where the purpose is to assign meaning and explain phenomena in order to arrive at shared meanings with others. This is fitting with the theoretical perspective of constructivism outlined earlier where meaning making is central and an emphasis is placed on co-creation and sharing of knowledge.

5. Participants

Six student nurses undertaking the children's pre-registration programme who had completed a placement in a neonatal unit within 4–6 weeks were selected and interviewed. The group comprised five female and one male participant which is congruent with the usual gender balance in children's nursing. There were two first years, three second years and one first year student allowing stories to be collected across the whole breadth of training levels. However, all were completely new to neonatal care and had not been on a previous placement in this area.

The sample was purposefully small due to the subsequent digital resource development and the need to avoid overload of content for both its creation and the eventual usability by the learner. Six selected stories were deemed to be sufficient for such a purpose since this was also a new idea for resource development.

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