



Uncovering nursing students' views of their relationship with educators in a university context: A descriptive qualitative study



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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Power dynamics is a key element in the educator-student relationship, and can be influential to the learning outcomes of students.

Background: Power relations are inherent in the interaction between educators and students. The educator-student relationship is still an under-explored area of power dynamics.

Aim: The aim of the study was to investigate nursing students' perceptions of the power dynamics in the educator-student relationship in a university learning context in order to offer educators some understanding of how such a relationship was perceived by students.

Design: A descriptive qualitative study using focus group inquiry.

Methods: Through convenience sampling, a total of 56 students were recruited and eight focus group interviews were conducted. Thematic analysis was adopted to capture the meanings extracted from the student narratives.

Results: Four core themes of the educator-student relationship were identified. Referring to these themes, some implications were drawn, such as the significance of the educator-student relationship; an educator's power matters; and polarized views among the students on whether or not an educator should be a friend.

Conclusions: The power dynamics varied depending on an educator's personality, communication skills, ability to effectively monitor large classes, and teaching style. More efforts are needed to investigate the preferred conceptions and types of educator-student relationships in order to evaluate the impact that these have on learning.

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1. Introduction

The relationship between educators and students is considered to be one of the most important factors in the learning outcomes of students. Power dynamics exist in all kinds of relationships, including in the educator-student relationship. This paper presents a study on students' perceptions of the power dynamics in the educator-student relationship and its implications.

1.1. Background

Power and knowledge are interconnected, and each implies the other (Foucault, 1977). The construction of knowledge provides a foundation for power relations and orders the reality; similarly, power and authority presuppose the formation of knowledge (Chambers and Narayanasamy, 2008). When a human relationship grows and people interact more often with each other, there will be power dynamics

(Ponic et al., 2010). The Foucaudian view of power relations is that power is produced and reproduced through everyday activities and social encounters (Lupton and Fenwick, 2001). Foucault's contention is that power should be studied from the bottom-up rather than from the top-down and that any analysis of power should involve an exploration of the ways in which it penetrates into the very extremities of life (Gilbert, 2003, p. 38). By uncovering students' views of their relationship with educators in a university context, this particular type of power within the educator-student relationship in nurse education can be portrayed from the bottom-up approach.

1.2. Power in Educator-Student Relationships

There is a diverse range of studies on educator-student relationships, such as on the use of humour (Abraham et al., 2014), the sharing of mutual experiences (Dale et al., 2013), trust and respect (Eller et al., 2014), incivility (Del Prato, 2013), interpersonal relationships (Shahsavari et al., 2015), gender-based power dynamics (Levine et al., 2013). In the early 1980s student-centred pedagogy attracted more nurse educators' interest and they worked within the approach in the belief that a more egalitarian educator-student relationship would improve learning outcomes (Gillespie, 2005). Mikkonen et al. (2015) found that showing

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care and empathy to students within the educator-student relationship can foster constructive learning experiences and have positive effects on professional development. [Kantek and Gezer \(2010\)](#) adopted a quantitative approach in examining differences between the actual use of power by faculty members and the expectations of midwifery students. The results showed that the students expected the faculty members to use more expert power, but the latter instead used more coercive power. [Shahsavari et al. \(2015\)](#) were interested in understanding the influence of the initial interaction between educator and student on the development of their relationship. It was found that the pre-existing expectations of students about their educator also affect their expectations of their future interactions and relationship with that educator. However, to focus solely on interpersonal interactions and neglect the power dynamics interwoven in the educator-learner relationship is to ignore the existence of power in all human relationships. [Gillespie \(2005\)](#) concluded that a constructive educator-student relationship leads to positive learning outcomes and even helps students. It is important for educators to support students in facing academic challenges and requirements.

Some previous work has been conducted on power relationships between learners and educators in healthcare disciplines. [Kantek and Gezer \(2010\)](#) suggested that positive learning outcomes are driven by educator-student power dynamics. They also found that students preferred expert power to coercive power from their educators, which implies that educators have to consider whether or not the nature of their own power facilitates learning outcomes. [Donetto \(2010\)](#) suggested that it is worthwhile to determine how medical students view power in doctor-patient interactions, as this could lead to enhancing pedagogical measures to make curricula more patient-centred. Even within the educator-student relationship, power can take many forms. [Henriksen and Ringsted \(2011\)](#) identified differences in power dynamics between faculty educators and students and among patients, instructors, and students. Similarly, while the educator-student relationship is also an important topic in nurse education, how students perceive power in this relationship is still unknown. Thus, the researchers of present study explored the perspectives of nursing students on the power dynamics in their relationship with their educators.

1.3. Research Question, Research Aim and Research Objectives

The results of an educational study on nursing students' perceptions of the power dynamics in the educator-student relationship in their university context were shown in this paper. The other parts of the study relate to the educator-student relationship in the students' clinical learning and involve a metaphorical analysis of the educator-student relationship. The core research question of this study was: What are the perspectives of nursing students on the power dynamics in their relationship with their educators? The aim of the study was to investigate nursing students' perceptions of the power dynamics in the educator-student relationship in the university learning context in order to offer educators some understanding of how such a relationship was perceived by the students. Two research objectives were delineated: to explore students' perspectives of the educator-student relationship and to make some recommendations about students as an active agent in this relationship for educators to consider in the future.

1.4. Research Design

A descriptive qualitative design was adopted in this study. [Foucault's thoughts \(1990\)](#), such as those on the importance of unfolding secondary discourses like students' voices and on awareness that power is everywhere within human relationships such as in the educator-student relationship, are in line with the merits and nature of a qualitative study. In addition, a qualitative descriptive design provides "a comprehensive summary of an event in the everyday terms of those events" ([Sandelowski, 2000](#)). Qualitative descriptions use inductive reasoning,

which involves generalizing a pattern or theoretical construction based on specific observations in a way that is open and exploratory in nature ([Thorne, 2016](#)).

1.4.1. Setting and Recruitment of Participants

This study was carried out within the School of Nursing of one university. By convenience sampling, participants from both Year 1 and the final year of study were recruited in order to capture a diversity of experiences, ranging from elementary learners to mature learners in their clinical placement. Ethical approval for the study was obtained. All of the relevant ethical principles and measures were carefully considered. Participation in the study was voluntary, and it was stressed that there would no penalty for refusing to take part in the study. The information sheet handed out to the participants indicated the aim and objectives of the study and the level of involvement expected of the participants, such as the duration and format of the focus group interviews.

1.4.2. Data Collection: Focus Group Interviews

The researchers employed a focus group approach to conducting interviews. Instead of asking questions of each person in turn, in a focus group interview the participants are encouraged to talk to one another: asking questions, exchanging anecdotes, and commenting on each others' experiences and points of view ([Stewart and Shamdasani, 2014](#)). The interviews ranged in duration from 1 to 2 h. The first author and the research assistant conducted and audiotaped all of the interviews. A semi-structured interview schedule was developed based on the aim of the research and in accordance with the consensus reached by the research team. Furthermore, the interview schedule was piloted to develop and verify meanings, clarify the interview questions, and determine the relevance of the schedule by inviting three students who were not included as study participants to comment on the schedule.

1.4.3. The Interview Schedule Contained the Following Six Main Questions

1. Can you recall an unforgettable/significant experience of interacting with your educator during campus learning? Please describe this experience.
2. Why do you consider this experience to be unforgettable?
3. Can you describe the power dynamics between educators and students on campus?
4. What factors do you think could facilitate the interaction with your educator? Are these factors related to the power dynamics in campus learning?
5. What factors do you think could hinder the interaction with your educator? Are these factors related to the power dynamics in campus learning?
6. Overall, what is your desired power relationship between educators and students on campus?

1.4.4. Analyzing the Focus Group Data

Field notes were taken throughout the study. For example, at the end of each focus group interview, both the first author and the research assistant recorded the observations and initial impressions of the students. All of the interviews were transcribed from audiotapes; afterwards they were coded and analysed using general content coding and specific content coding ([Berg, 2012](#)). Thematic analysis was adopted, which analyzes the "narrative materials of life stories" ([Vaismoradi et al., 2013](#)). The first author and the research assistant separately conducted an initial analysis. A comparison of their findings was then made. Coded sections of text were checked against the themes to ensure they fit the data well. A degree of reflexivity was maintained during the entire course of analyzing and interpreting the data and a thinking state of mind is required to be reflexive ([Doyle, 2012](#)).

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