



Midwifery Education in Practice

Academic-related stress among graduate students in nursing in a Jamaican school of nursing



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ABSTRACT

Graduate students perceive their education as highly stressful, have consistently rated their stress levels as above average and have consistently scored above average on stress scales. The consequences of stress include negative academic outcomes, reduction in cognitive ability, impaired coping and incompleteness of graduate studies. Stress is also associated with physical and psychological symptoms such as altered appetite, sleep pattern disturbances and headache.

A descriptive correlational design was used to determine the perceived levels and sources of academic-related stress among students enrolled in a Master of Science in Nursing (MScN) degree programme at school of nursing in urban section of Jamaica. The Perceived Stress Scale-14 and Stress Survey were used to collect data from the 81 students enrolled in full or part time study in the MScN programme. Univariate and bivariate analyses were conducted using SPSS version 20.

The majority (50.9%) were moderately stressed while 22.8% and 24.6% had high and low levels of stress respectively. Stress associated with the preparation for and prospect of final examinations received the highest overall mean stress rating, causing “a lot of stress”. Attendances at classes and relationships with lecturers received the lowest mean stress rating. Research was not listed as a stressor.

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1. Introduction

Graduate students are of the perception that their educational experience is highly stressful and have consistently scored above average on stress scales (Pfeifer et al., 2008; Faro, 2013). Stress can result in negative outcomes such as poor academic performance, reduction in cognitive functioning, impaired coping and incompleteness of graduate studies (Tinglin, 2006). It is also associated with a gamut of physical and psychological symptoms such as anxiety, altered appetite, sleep pattern disturbances, headache and increased heart rate (Kurebayashi et al., 2012; Nelwati et al., 2013). Failure to identify and address the graduate student's perceived source of stress could lead to role confusion, decreased effort and productivity upon graduation among other things (Hartnett and Katz, 1977). Every educational institution has a fundamental duty of providing an optimal learning environment for students and the first essential step towards this is the identification of the students' level and sources of stress (Madhan et al., 2011).

There are few studies conducted within the past three decades

which investigated stress in the graduate student nurse population (Mancini et al., 1983; Maville et al., 2004; Judkins et al., 2005; Tinglin, 2006). While these studies provide valuable insight into the level and sources of perceived stress in graduate nursing students their applicability to the local setting may be limited in various ways. Previous studies were conducted using small sample sizes chosen by convenience, and the ethnic differences between those studies' largely Caucasian and Hispanic make up and Afro-Caribbean make up of the local site. Additionally, the studies sampled students of a particular nursing speciality track, therefore the ability to generalize to students pursuing graduate studies outside nursing administration and nurse practitioner programmes is limited.

Therefore, it is necessary to determine the perceived level and sources of academic-related stress in the graduate student nurse population so as to assist nurse educators in the development and implementation of strategies to reduce or eliminate the perceived stressors. This is of significance as it can assist in the prevention of the negative impacts of stress on the student's emotional and physical well-being and cognitive functioning.

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2. Background

Stress is produced through an individual's interaction with their environment and occurs as a result of an individual's appraisal of their ability to cope with a taxing situation which exceeds the resources they have available at their disposal, thus endangering their physical, psychological and emotional well-being (Evans et al., 2007; Lyon, 2012). Academic-related stress is that which is perceived during an educational course of study.

Undergraduate nursing education has been established to be a stressful experience for students (Tully, 2004; Llewellyn-Johnson et al., 2011; & Chipas et al., 2012). Studies have reported a high prevalence of stress among undergraduate nursing students who reported that clinical placements were their main source of academic-related stress (Seyedfatemi et al., 2007; Nelwati et al., 2013). Additionally, as the students progress up the various academic levels there is a concomitant increase in the perception and intensity of the stress they experience (Tully, 2004; Byars, 2005).

While discipline-specific stressors may be present, the consensus is that graduate education is perceived as a stressful experience (Heins et al., 1984; Ramos, 2011; Faro, 2013). Graduate students in nursing have rated their academic-related stress between low and the highest it has ever been in their lives (Maville et al., 2004). Similar to the students at the undergraduate level, graduate students in healthcare and other disciplines perceive high levels of stress which intensified as their studies progressed (Hartnett and Katz, 1977; Maville et al., 2004; Judkins et al., 2005; Ramos, 2011; Faro, 2013).

Factors which tended to increase the students' perception of stress included changes in scheduled examinations, assignment due dates and class cancellations (Mancini et al., 1983). Furthermore, it was suggested that as students transitioned through the programme, their perception of stress changed in alignment with the current courses/learning experiences (Polychronopoulou and Divaris, 2010). That is, as students transitioned from a didactic to a clinical component of their training, less stress was perceived related to lectures and academic work, and more clinical related stressors were perceived. In addition to this, graduate students in nursing perceived class requirements/coursework challenges (Maville et al., 2004); time management issues/undesired changes in social life ((Maville et al., 2004; Tinglin, 2006); financial problems (Maville et al., 2004); interaction with faculty; and research report/thesis writing (Mancini et al., 1983; Maville et al., 2004; & Tinglin, 2006; Lindo et al., 2013) as their main stressors.

One's perception of stress has been shown to vary in different socio-cultural contexts and this variation had not been captured in previous studies' sample makeup. Stress has been shown to lead to negative academic, physiological and professional outcomes. However, nursing research has focused on stress experienced in the undergraduate student nurse population. Consequently, there exists a dearth of research related to the stress perceived by graduate students in nursing. It is essential that research is targeted at filling this gap as doing so will assist nurse educators to design and implement mitigation strategies, thereby reducing the occurrence of its deleterious effects. Therefore, the study sought to determine the levels and sources of academic-related stress and the relationship between perceived stress and social demographic variables, enrollment status and specialty track.

2.1. Theoretical framework

Lazarus and Folkman's Transactional Model of Stress and Coping formed the theoretical framework of the study (Lazarus and Folkman, 1987). A central concept of the theory is stress, which Lazarus defines as the product of the relationship between the

person and his/her environment (Lazarus and Folkman, 1987). The theory was useful for guiding the study as it emphasizes the importance of an individual's perception upon the extent to which they perceive a situation to be stressful. Each participant's appraisal of the situation (primary appraisal) and of their ability to cope (secondary appraisal) will differ, thus leading to differing perceptions of the stress. It also proposes several internal and external factors which may affect how the individual perceives a potentially stressful situation. The theory proposes that demands which are perceived to be difficult, time consuming and ambiguous tend to be those which cause the individual to perceive the situation as stressful. Graduate education is replete with such situations; hence the theory may offer a useful explanation for possible findings of the study (Mancini et al., 1983; Byars, 2005; Pfeifer et al., 2008; Polychronopoulou and Divaris, 2010).

3. Methods

3.1. Study design and setting

A descriptive correlational cross-sectional design was used to answer the research questions. The study was conducted in urban Jamaica at one of the island's largest schools of nursing which offers undergraduate and graduate level programmes. Annually, the school's undergraduate and graduate enrollment exceeds 100 and 80 students respectively. An MPhil/PhD in Nursing programme is also offered and has an enrollment of approximately 5 students. The Master's of Science degree programme is offered solely face-to-face and students can choose from the following specialist areas: Nursing Education, Nursing Administration, Clinical Nurse Specialist, Family Nurse Practitioner and Mental Health Nurse Practitioner. All Master's level courses are offered on a one-year, full-time basis or a two-year, part-time basis with the exception of the practitioner specialist tracks which are offered on a two-year, full-time basis. Students are required to self-finance tuition and miscellaneous expenses, however, some are granted government sponsorship or financial aid from their place of employment.

3.2. Population

The target population consisted of 81 students enrolled either part time or full time in a Master of Science degree in nursing programme. Using a 50% response distribution, a 5% margin of error with a 95% confidence interval the sample size was calculated to be 384. An adjustment was made to account for the small sample size which yielded a new sample size of 67. A census was conducted considering the closeness of the calculated sample size and the population size. All students who were enrolled on a full or part time basis in the MScN programme at the School were eligible to participate. Students who were enrolled in an undergraduate or MPhil/PhD programme were not eligible for sampling. Also, persons pursuing an MScN degree who are registered only to sit the course examination or to complete only a specific aspect of a course(s) were not eligible for sampling.

3.3. Data collection instruments

The PSS-14 (Cohen et al., 1983) and the Stress Survey (Nicholl and Timmins, 2005) were used to gather information relevant to the topic. The PSS-14 consists of 14 self-report items which measures the extent to which an individual appraise situations as being stressful (Cohen et al., 1983). The PSS-14 is highly reliable, with a Cronbach's α coefficient ranging between 0.84 and 0.86 (Cohen et al., 1983). Among this study population the tool was highly reliable, with a Cronbach's α coefficient of 0.97. Validity of the PSS-

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