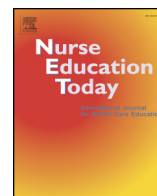




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An evaluation of a structured learning program as a component of the clinical practicum in undergraduate nurse education: A repeated measures analysis

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SUMMARY

Background: There is evidence that nursing students experience stress and anxiety and a reduction in self-efficacy when undertaking clinical placements. Previous reports have identified that a structured three-day program within the Bachelor of Nursing (BN) clinical practicum reduces the students self-report of anxiety and increases self-efficacy. However, it is unreported whether these improved outcomes are sustained for the duration of the clinical placement.

Objective: The aim of this study was to evaluate the duration of the effect of a three-day structured learning program within the clinical placement on final year Bachelor of Nursing student's report of anxiety and self-efficacy pre- and post-program participation in this intervention and following completion of the clinical practicum.

Design: A repeated measures design.

Setting: University-based Clinical School of Nursing, acute care clinical practicum.

Participants: Final year Bachelor of Nursing students.

Methods: The intervention comprised the three-day program on starting the clinical practicum. A questionnaire included the anxiety subscale of The Hospital Anxiety & Depression Scale (The HAD) and the General Self-Efficacy Scale (GSES-12). The questionnaire was completed on day one (time one), upon completion of the three-day program (time two) and upon completion of placement on day 18 (time three).

Results: The questionnaire response rate varied over time. There was a statistically significant effect in reducing anxiety over time: $F(1.73,74.46) = 25.20, p < 0.001$ and increasing self-efficacy over time $F(1.32,41.04) = 7.72, p < 0.004$.

Conclusions: This is the first report that we are aware of that has measured final year Bachelor of Nursing student's report of both anxiety and self-efficacy over repeated measures of time. Students continue to benefit from a structured learning program and the benefit of the intervention is sustained for the clinical placement duration.

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Introduction

Research studies and interventions aimed at understanding and improving clinical placement experiences for undergraduate nursing students are well described in the literature. An electronic search of the Cumulative Index in Nursing and Allied Health Literature (CINAHL)

database from 2002 to 2015 was undertaken to explore student stress, distress and anxiety in clinical placements. The literature described the nature of student stress (Chan et al., 2009; Cook, 2005; Elliott, 2002; Gibbons et al., 2008, 2009, 2011; Jimenez et al., 2009; Levett-Jones and Lathlean, 2008; Levett-Jones et al., 2009; Lo, 2002; Melincavage, 2011; Pulido-Martos et al., 2012; Shaban et al., 2012; Timmins and Kalizer, 2002); interventions to reduce student stress and anxiety (Charlotte et al., 2003; Demasi, 2010; Henderson et al., 2009; Levett-Jones et al., 2006; Moscaritolo, 2009; Watt et al., 2011); and interventions to improve the students' self-efficacy (Chesser-Smyth and Long, 2013; Gibbons et al., 2011; Watt et al., 2011). The aim of reducing student stress, distress and anxiety and increasing self-efficacy is important in the planning and conduct of clinical placements in order to improve learning outcomes and general well-being (Chan et al., 2009; Cook, 2005; Gibbons et al., 2008, 2009, 2011; Lo, 2002; Melincavage, 2011; Pulido-Martos et al., 2012; Shaban et al., 2012; Stump et al., 2012; Timmins and Kalizer, 2002).

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A previous study (Watt et al., 2011) reported on an evaluation of a three-day structured learning program delivered to three cohorts of final year students prior to the commencement of a four-week acute care clinical placement. Watt et al. (2011) found that participation in the structured learning program resulted in a statistically significant reduction in student anxiety ($p < 0.001$) and increase in self-efficacy ($p < 0.001$) across the three cohorts. However, the duration of this effect beyond day three of the clinical placement was not evaluated. Therefore, this paper will address this gap and will report on the evaluation of a structured learning program on levels of student anxiety and self-efficacy at three time points: pre-program, post-program and following completion of the three-week clinical placement.

Background

The students in the final year of a Bachelor of Nursing course were allocated to one of several clinical schools located in large acute care hospitals in a metropolitan city in Australia. Students undertake the theoretical and clinical program at the clinical school. The clinical placement model that has been developed involves the students working alongside a preceptor (Registered Nurse) on their weekly roster for the duration of the placement. The clinical school staff work closely in a supportive role with the preceptors and in the ongoing evaluation of student learning and application of theory to practice. A major aim of the clinical placement model was to improve the quality and learning outcomes of final year clinical placements.

There are a number of sources of stress and anxiety identified in studies of nursing students in clinical placements. These include the placement setting, congruence between what has been learned and what is actually practiced in the clinical environment, fear of making mistakes (Pulido-Martos et al., 2012), clinical staff attitudes towards students and time constraints (Gibbons et al., 2008, 2009), lack of professional knowledge and skills (Chan et al., 2009; Watt et al., 2011), student interaction with clinical staff and their perceived commitment and interest in working with students (Melincavage, 2011; Pearcey and Elliott, 2004; Salamonson et al., 2015; Shaban et al., 2012; Sundler et al., 2014), and the completion of assessment tasks (Shaban et al., 2012). All of these factors resulted in increased anxiety and lack of confidence that we perceived was impacting the effectiveness of clinical learning.

To address the multiple causative factors contributing to students' stress, anxiety and reduced self-efficacy about clinical placement, a three-day structured program was developed (Watt et al., 2011). The program was conducted over the first three days of the clinical placement and involved a variety of activities, including group learning, peer mentorship, reflective activities and high-fidelity simulation all specifically chosen for their proven efficacy in reducing student anxiety and increasing self-efficacy in the clinical environment (Dearmon et al., 2013; Gibbons et al., 2008; Hutchinson and Janiszewski, 2013; Li et al., 2011; Moscaritolo, 2009; Prescott and Garside, 2009).

For the purposes of this paper, anxiety is defined as "a vague uncomfortable feeling exacerbated by prolonged stress and the presence of multiple stressors" (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984, p. 4). High levels of stress and anxiety have been shown to adversely affect student learning and progress in a clinical placement (Chan et al., 2009; Gibbons et al., 2008; Levett-Jones and Lathlean, 2008; Manning et al., 2009; Moscaritolo, 2009) as well as affecting a student's general health and well-being (Jimenez et al., 2009). It is noted that the terms 'stress' and 'anxiety' are often used interchangeably in the nursing literature (Melincavage, 2011; Watt et al., 2011).

Self-efficacy has been defined as "the belief of a person in his or her ability to organize and execute certain behaviours that are necessary in order to produce given attainments" (Bosscher and Smit, 1998, p. 339). Terms related to self-efficacy include: self-control, self-actualization, self-confidence, self-care agency and perceived competence (Berarducci and Lengacher, 1998). Behaviours associated with high self-efficacy are

increased interest, motivation and academic performance, whilst behaviours associated with low self-efficacy are apathy, stress, depression and self-doubt (Bandura, 1982). Generalised self-efficacy has been described as a global confidence to cope across a range of situations (Barlow et al., 1996) and is therefore an important aim for clinical education in the final year of a nursing course. Increased anxiety has the potential to decrease a person's self-efficacy (Watt et al., 2011).

Methods

Study Aims

The aims of the study were to evaluate the duration of the effect of a three-day structured learning program, delivered during the first three days of the clinical placement on the final-year nursing students' reports of anxiety and self-efficacy pre- and post-program participation. In addition, we aimed to measure if the reported outcomes were sustained for the duration of the clinical placement.

Design

A single-factor repeated measures design with three levels was used for this evaluation. The study sample was composed of final-year undergraduate nursing students on an acute care placement in a large public hospital in the metropolitan city.

Ethics Approval

Prospective ethics approval was obtained for this project from the University's Faculty of Health Sciences, Human Ethics Committee. Students were assured (verbally and in writing) of their anonymity, informed that participation in the study was voluntary and formed no part of their formal assessment. To enable matching of data collected at the three time points, students were asked to generate their own identification code using a combination of their parents' initials: a method previously reported (Edwards et al., 2004). Completion and submission of the questionnaire implied consent to participate in the study. Students returned the questionnaire to a locked mailbox in the clinical school's reception area by the end of each time point to ensure participant anonymity.

The Participants and Setting

All prospective participants were enrolled in the final year of a Bachelor of Nursing (BN) degree in an Australian metropolitan university. All students who participated in the structured learning program in the first semester of the year were eligible to participate in the study ($N = 118$). The participants were from a variety of cultural and ethnic backgrounds and the majority were female (90%). All participants had been exposed to a broad range of clinical placements in the two previous years of the BN program. Due to the volume of students in each year group of the BN program, they are allocated into one of three cohorts (A, B or C) to undertake their four-week acute care clinical placement during the 13-week semester in addition to their weekly theoretical (classroom) schedule.

Data Collection Tools

A 30-point questionnaire was developed which included several questions related to previous nursing experience in addition to the anxiety subscale of The Hospital Anxiety & Depression Scale (The HAD) and the General Self-Efficacy Scale (GSES-12). Participants completed the questionnaire at three time points: day one of the clinical placement, upon completion of the three-day structured clinical program (time two) and upon completion of the clinical placement on day 18 (time

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