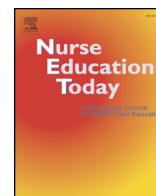




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Research Paper

A sense of belonging and perceived stress among baccalaureate nursing students in clinical placements

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SUMMARY

Introduction: The rigorous efforts students put into baccalaureate nursing programs to become a professional nurse is compounded by their need to have a sense of belonging in their clinical placements. In addition, the students' perceived stress may contribute to their physiological and psychological wellbeing undermining academic achievements and confidence.

Background: A sense of belonging and perceived stress have research history in psychological and sociological realms; but not used together in the nursing profession as applied in clinical placements. The Perceived Stress Scale is a psychological instrument used globally; however, the Belongingness Scale–Clinical Placement Experience (BES–CPE) measurement tool has not been used in published research in the United States.

Methods: A descriptive correlational research design examining the relationship between a sense of belonging and perceived stress among baccalaureate nursing students in clinical placements. Three measurement tools were used for data collection: BES–CPE, Perceived Stress Scale (PSS–10) and demographic questionnaire. Students were able to access the online survey through SurveyMonkey®.

Participants: A national study was conducted using 1296 volunteer nursing students from the National Student Nurses Association (NSNA) database. These nursing students were currently enrolled in a baccalaureate nursing program, 18 years of age and completed at least one clinical experience.

Results: The findings from this study revealed a statistically significant low inverse relationship ($r = -.277$) between a sense of belonging and perceived stress among baccalaureate nursing students in their clinical placements. The findings also supported the use of BES–CPE as a reliable and valid measurement tool for nursing students in clinical placements.

Conclusion: The results of this study supported the concept of a sense of belonging as a fundamental human need, having a positive influence and impact on students' learning, motivation and confidence. In contrast, perceived stress has negative consequences on the students' self-concept, learning skills and competence.

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Introduction

One of the hallmarks of nursing education is for students to practice and understand how to care for patients in a clinical placement. Clinical placements have prevailing influence on the learning processes and interpersonal relationships which are critical for nursing students' success (Baumeister and Leary, 1995; Levett-Jones and Lathlean, 2009); and provide them with opportunities to perform nursing skills which emulate a professional nurse (Benner et al., 2010; Chen et al., 2011; Cowen and Moorhead, 2011). The students learn the necessary socialization skills and the social connectedness in developing the capacity for engaging in relationships with patients and families (Benner et al., 2010; Walton and Cohen, 2007). Students need a sense of belonging because it is a pivotal concept which impacts student nurses' acceptance and connectedness with nurses in their clinical placements (Levett-Jones and Lathlean, 2009). On the other hand, perceived stress negatively impacts the student's confidence and motivation to learn. Nursing students who are not confident may have a more difficult

time fitting in with the nurses; leading to overwhelming feelings of being unprepared for the challenges of nursing (AACN, 2014; Ulrich et al., 2010; Levett-Jones and Lathlean, 2007).

The purpose of this study was to describe the level of a sense of belonging and perceived stress among baccalaureate nursing students in their clinical placements. According to Hagerty et al. (1992) a sense of belonging has been negatively associated with stress and depression (p. 173). A sense of belonging and perceived stress are important concepts researched in this study among nursing students as they transition to their roles as professional nurses. Belonging is defined as a personal involvement with a group or system which is characterized as feelings of being valued, needed or accepted by the group (Hagerty and Patusky, 1995). Levett-Jones and Lathlean (2009) explored the concept of belongingness and how it relates to nursing students' experiences as they learn to become nurses in their clinical placements. Further research on belongingness (Levett-Jones et al., 2009b) led to the development of the measurement tool, Belongingness-Scale Clinical Placement Experience (BES–CPE) which was used for this study.

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Stress researcher Hans Selye pioneered and defined stress as producing non-specific responses in the body when there are any demands for change (Smith and Selye, 1979). Selye focused on the psychological and physiological responses of stress which included having positive and negative effects on an individual's motivation and performance. Many studies have associated stress with negative and energy draining aspects (Jan and Popescu, 2014; Jimenez et al., 2009). Individuals, such as nursing students, would evaluate their situations and respond to stress whether it is real or perceived as a threat and whether it is physical, psychological or social (Varcariolis et al., 2006; Lazarus and Folkman, 1984).

Previous research studies have included the relationships between “a sense of belonging and nursing students”, and “perceived stress and nursing students”; however there is no published data measuring the relationship of a sense of belonging and perceived stress among baccalaureate nursing students in their clinical placements. The hypothesis for this study suggests that there should be an inverse relationship between a sense of belonging and perceived stress on nursing students in their clinical placements. Data will be collected using the measurement instruments Perceived Stress Scale (PSS-10) and Belongingness-Scale Clinical Placement Experience (BES-CPE) measurement instruments. The Perceived Stress Scale (PSS-10) is a global psychological measurement instrument which has been used extensively to evaluate an individual's stress. The Belongingness-Scale Clinical Placement Experience (BES-CPE) measurement instrument has not been used in a national study in the United States and will add to the body of knowledge on an international level using sense of belonging among nursing students.

Background

Belonging is an essential concept for mental health, which includes the involvement of feeling needed, accepted and fitting in; thus when a person does not have a sense of belonging, they will feel loneliness and rejected (Hagerty et al., 1992; Baumeister and Leary, 1995). Students experiencing a sense of belonging are noted to have a healthier well-being and cognitive development which decreases stress and anxiety as well as promote self-confidence (Hagerty and Patusky, 1995; Levett-Jones et al., 2009a). Stress contributes to students' nervousness and anxiety, and they are overwhelmed by the sights, smells, and sounds they are experiencing for the first time (Jimenez et al., 2009; Levett-Jones et al., 2009a, 2009b). Many clinical placements are very busy and the students' initial responses are uncertainty and apprehension (Pullen et al., 2001). In addition, there is a decrease number in faculty, clinical sites, preceptors, and available nursing staff at the clinical placements. This overcrowding in clinical placements subjects students to “uncivil, if not hostile, behavior from the staff nurses” (Benner et al., p. 226).

Unfortunately, nurses who were not supportive or helpful made the students “feel nervous and incompetent” with an obvious strain between the relationships. Consequently, nursing students who are not confident and competent may have a more difficult time fitting in with the nurses (AACN, 2014; Ulrich et al., 2010). Wieland et al. (2007) found nursing students who were supported by the staff nurses, experienced a higher level of adaptation and socialization which influenced the students' confidence. As the students' confidence in caring for patients increased, the nurses trusted the students and allowed them to become more independent.

Literature Review

A sense of belonging has been considered a key element of social attachments (Baumeister and Leary, 1995) and social connectedness (Walton and Cohen, 2011) in supporting the students' academic motivation and achievements (Goodenow, 1993; Levett-Jones and Lathlean, 2008). The growing research on a sense of belonging for nursing

students in their clinical placements continues to validate the importance of this universal concept. Researchers Levett-Jones and Lathlean (2009) studies on belongingness and undergraduate nursing students from Australia and the United Kingdom in clinical placements revealed a diminished sense of belonging delays students' motivation and learning in the clinical placements. The researchers propose a sense of belonging is strongly related to the students' learning and motivation and allowed students to be self-directed in their learning.

In a rural hospital-based student nurse preceptorship, 12 nursing students participated in a study to explore the events and meanings of events which influenced the students' sense of belonging (Sedgwick and Rougeau, 2010). According to the students, they spent more time interacting with registered nurses, which had a significant influence making the students feel like they belonged or did not belong. Students having opportunities to meet their learning needs and be a contributing member of the nursing team, fostered a sense of belonging or connectedness and self-esteem. Students not having opportunities to create supportive relationships with the nursing teams may have difficulty fitting in. Sedgwick (2013) continued research on a sense of belonging comparing second-degree and traditional undergraduate nursing students in their clinical placements from a small urban university in southern Alberta, Canada. Using the BES-CPE questionnaire, these two groups of students were examined for their experience with belonging during their clinical placements. The belongingness subscales efficacy, connectedness and esteem, revealed the second degree students were found to have a lesser degree of efficacy ($p = 0.001$) than the traditional students. It was suggested combining the student groups to create opportunities for the second degree students to engage in sharing their life experiences and traditional students to reciprocate by sharing their familiarity with the culture of nursing practice in clinical placements.

Kim and Jung's (2012) research in nursing education recognized the importance of Korean nursing students' sense of belonging in their clinical placements. To address this issue, the researchers needed to develop a standardized Korean BES-CPE survey by translating and back-translating (for cultural concerns) the instruments' questions. The study used a cross-sectional survey of 335 self-reported nursing students' from 6 educational institutes (3 Seoul-based and 3 local schools). The researchers analyzed and found the translated BES-CPE Korean version was reliable and valid instrument in measuring a sense of belonging with Korean nursing students. Translated BES-CPE measurement tool from English into Korean revealed Cronbach's alpha score .90 (range: .71–.84) with the subscales of self-esteem, efficacy, and connectedness as .84, .81, and .74, respectfully. Clinical placements vary from schools, regions and countries. The relevance of this study supports BES-CPE as a valid and reliable tool to use for nursing students in another culture and country.

At the multidisciplinary higher education institute (HEI), Finnish Helsinki Metropolia Universities of Applied Science (UAS), a pilot study was conducted by researchers Metsala, Heiskanen and Kortelaninen (Metsala et al., 2012) using Levett-Jones' BES-CPE survey. As part of a larger university study to promote student wellbeing, these researchers were charged with finding an appropriate instrument to measure the students' belongingness. The BES-CPE survey was identified as appropriate because it was multidimensional and meeting the higher education institute standards. Four questions which were not used because they were specific for clinical placements and replaced with 5 questions about cooperation and meeting places. These replacement questions met the focus of the larger study's qualitative portion because cooperation and meeting places were important to students to feel like they belong. Approximately 16,000 students in 67 programs were initially sent a web-based questionnaire. Although the questionnaire was available for all 16,000 students, only 57 responses were returned, but these responses represented all the programs of the UAS. The response rate was the weakest part of the study but the researchers felt there were enough responses to have validity and

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