The rules of the game in graduate entry nursing: A longitudinal case study

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S U M M A R Y

Background: Graduate Entry Nursing programmes are pre-registration nursing curricula designed for candidates who already have a health related degree. The programmes aim to attract highly motivated individuals who have a commitment to nursing and hold the cognitive abilities associated with studying in higher education including critical thinking styles and capability to study independently. These attributes are termed within the literature as "graduateness". They are viewed by some as advantages to nursing. In contrast, however, there remains widespread scepticism amongst the public and some professionals towards those who are academically educated entering nursing.
Objectives: To explore how GEN students anticipate, experience, explain and respond to attitudes which imply resistance to those who are academically educated.
Design: Longitudinal case study informed by the conventions advocated by Yin (2014).
Settings: School of Health Sciences in a British University.
Participants: Eight GEN students participated over the two year duration of their programme. Twelve clinical assessors with a minimum of four months' experience of supporting GEN students in practice.
Methods: Students took part in individual interviews at six monthly periods which were informed by the content of diaries maintained throughout their clinical placements. Clinical assessors took part in focus group discussions. Practice documentation was accessed to identify the progression of clinical competency along with written feedback received by students from clinical assessors.
Results: Results demonstrate the ways in which GEN students position themselves performatively in order to pre-empt or challenge negative stereotypes relating to their competence, compassion and commitment.
Conclusions: Students employ a number of strategies to navigate the challenges of learning within an environment in which they are viewed with suspicion and distrust.

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Introduction

In recent years, the academic level of pre-registration nurse education in England has received significant attention in the public and professional press. This resulted from the decision to increase the minimum academic entry level from a Diploma in Higher Education to a Degree (NMC, 2010). Commentators supporting this decision viewed it as an essential requirement to adequately prepare new registrants for the demands of their developing role within the modern context of healthcare delivery (Longley et al., 2007). However, critics made reference to arguments that have been applied to academic developments in nurse education since the 1940s. These included the assumption that those who are academically able are less skilled and less interested in the "basic" aspects in the provision of nursing care. The statements "too posh to wash" and "too clever to care" had become familiar themes within the public and the

professional press as a linguistic representation of the polar positioning of the intellectual from the practical (e.g., Chapman and Martin, 2013) A significant proportion of the public, other healthcare professions and nursing itself, maintained that degree level study was not required to fulfil the role of the nurse. Some commentators went as far as to claim that continued attempts to increase the theoretical content of nurse education were the primary reason for decreased standards of care (Miers, 2002). It was asserted that the move to increase the academic entry level to nursing was motivated by a desire to achieve professional and social status for nursing as opposed to improving standards of practice. It was proposed that this development was therefore driven by a professional self-interest, providing a stark contrast to the image of nursing as an altruistic and selfless vocation (Watson, 2011).

The discussions that were taking place within the public and professional media in response to nurse education policy developments created a contested climate amongst practitioners, educationalists and current students. Within this unsettled environment, a British University implemented a pre-registration programme for students

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who already possess a degree to complete their nurse education in two years. The programme is named Graduate Entry Nursing (GEN) and successful completion leads to a Post Graduate Diploma (PG Dip) and also registration with the Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC). GEN courses have been in existence since the 1970s and were first implemented in America and Australia to address the shortage of nurses at this time. Since then it has been acknowledged that these programmes attract highly motivated individuals who combine a commitment to nursing with the cognitive abilities associated with studying in higher education, including critical thinking styles and capability to study independently (Neil, 2012). Within the literature these attributes are termed "graduateness" (Stacey et al, 2014).

The specific GEN programme which is the focus of this study adopted a number of innovative approaches to learning with multiple fora for students to engage in critical dialogue with peers and students from other professions. It was developed in a way that was highly congruent with policy on the future role of the nurse (DH, 2006; Longley et al., 2007; Willis Commission, 2013) and the expectations that this would place on new registrants to be comfortable with leadership positions and willing to challenge the status quo. In light of the positive commentary surrounding the benefits of attracting graduates into the nursing profession, coupled with the design of the programme, it was hoped that students completing this course would aspire to act as change agents within the healthcare system and possess the desire to apply criticality both to their own practice and that of others. The marketing materials produced by the University to attract potential applicants reflected the aspirations of the course and hoped to attract high calibre students who would apply commitment and motivation to their career in nursing

Background

Historical and current debates surrounding nurse education and its development as an academic profession are critical of nursing for attempting to advance its social position at the expense of focusing on the quality of fundamental care delivered to patients. It is suggested that this has influenced the way in which nursing is positioned and perceived by those within and outside of the profession, resulting in an ingrained culture of hostility towards those who obtain higher education qualifications known as anti-intellectualism (Watson, 2011). This view is contested by a pro-intellectualist stance that promotes an image of nurses as autonomous and advanced practitioners. This position maintains that nurses will require the intellectual attributes associated with higher education in order to respond to the changing demands of the healthcare arena and fulfil the leadership roles available to them (Willis Commission, 2013). This presents conflicting messages for those entering and working within the profession.

Most relevant to this paper is the impact this contested climate has had on the way in which established practitioners regard those entering the profession who are perceived to be more academically qualified than most of the current workforce. In the context of our study this refers to Graduate Entry Nursing students. Drawing on the literature relating to traditional undergraduate nursing students, it is possible to identify that a set of stereotypes exists, which relate to the view that students educated within the higher education setting will be "too posh to wash", overconfident, too critical of practice, lack clinical competence and hold elevated career aspirations. The literature suggests that the perceived threat that these students pose creates an environment of resistance and the potential for negative attitudes and hostility amongst qualified staff (McKenna, 2003; Stacey et al, 2010).

Models of professional socialisation developed within nursing propose that students respond to these attitudes towards and stereotypes about the 'academic nurse' through a process of unconscious adaptation, during which they begin to conform to the expectations of the established profession and rationalise or justify encounters which

cause them moral distress (Maben et al, 2007). Spouse (1998) identified the significant influence of role modelling within the student/mentor relationship which can offer opportunity for collaborating, reflecting whilst in practice and coaching. However, Murray and Main (2005) suggest that where mentor competence is limited students are excluded from decision making processes, made to feel that learning is secondary to clinical practice and demonstrated clinical procedures in a manner which displays a lack of respect for the patient and other staff. In these circumstances role modelling can be detrimental to the learning process as students are expected to adopt an approach to learning in clinical practice which discourages reflection, questioning and feedback. These findings were reinforced by Mamchur and Myrick (2003) who explored the conflict present within the student/ mentor relationship and found that students were often encouraged to "grin and bear it" despite the impact that this has on the students wellbeing. This literature suggests that the nursing profession acts as a powerful constraining force, seriously affecting the opportunity for self-development and progress. The arguments presented in this paper attempt to offer a more critical perspective of the interpersonal processes at play within the socialisation of nursing students. These may appear to portray conformity but actually constitute a series of transient performances which involve temporary compliance depending on the context, the nature of the relationship, the interpretation of perceived stereotypes and the outcome that is desired by both the student and their mentor (Clouder, 2003). This stance demonstrates how actors interpret external influences and engage in a complex range of performance and positioning strategies to navigate through the interpersonal processes in play (Goffman, 1959).

Method

The objective of this study was to explore how GEN students anticipate, experience, explain and respond to attitudes which imply resistance to those who are academically educated. This research adopted a longitudinal case study design whereby the experiences of eight GEN students were explored over the two year duration of their programme. This approach is defined as 'the exploration of a contemporary phenomenon in a real-life context when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident' (Yin, 2014, p23). It is amenable to the study of phenomena where there are many variables that are of interest and there is no potential or desire to control variables for the purpose of research. It is particularly relevant to the study of identity, perception and presentation of self in GEN students due to the lack of clarity and widespread debate within theory and research over the interplay between contextual conditions and the phenomenon. Therefore, alternative methods that seek to divorce the phenomenon from its environment in an attempt to control predefined variables would not deal appropriately with the entangled nature of the subject and its context.

The case was explored using a variety of approaches in order to consider the issues at hand from a range of perspectives and presentations. This included participant diaries which were utilised to inform the prompts for individual interviews. This encouraged participants to reflect on their positions towards significant events, as opposed to describing them or searching their memory to recall the details (Zimmerman and Wieder, 1977). The student practice documentation was accessed to consider how clinical competency was assessed over time and how students and clinical assessors presented their written appraisal of the practice learning experience. This offered an alternative lens and often demonstrated the inconsistency of accounts arising from the different sources (Yin, 2014). Finally, focus groups were conducted with 12 clinical assessors who had experience of supporting GEN students in practice for a minimum of 4 months. A topic guide was utilised to guide the discussion, aid parity across the groups and maintain focus on the research objectives. However, provided that all areas were