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Research Article

The Effects of Reflective Training on the Disposition of Critical Thinking for Nursing Students in China: A Controlled Trial

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SUMMARY

Purpose: The aim of this study was to evaluate the effects of reflective trainings for nursing students on their critical thinking disposition.

Methods: A total of 157 senior undergraduate nursing students sampled from Hainan Medical University in China participated in this study in 2014. They were randomly divided into experimental and control groups. The experimental group students were provided the reflective training during their entire 12-month clinical internship, whereas students in the control group were requested to keep their reflective diaries but without a formal training. Before and after the intervention, nursing students' critical thinking disposition was rated using the Chinese version of Critical Thinking Disposition Inventory (CTDI-CV).

Results: Before the start of the intervention, the critical thinking disposition scores of the two groups had no significant differences. At the end of the intervention, it was found that the experimental students performed better in each subscale of CTDI-CV. These include the search for truth, open mind, analytical ability, systematic ability, critical thinking, self-confidence, curiosity, and cognitive maturity. By summing the scores of all categories, the results showed that the experimental group had a significantly higher total score than that of the control group ($p \leq .044$). Evaluating the score difference in each function indicated that there was a range of improvements on the critical thinking disposition because of the reflective training intervention.

Conclusion: Reflective training during the internship period improves nursing students' disposition of critical thinking and promotes their readiness for their clinical practices in the rapidly increasing demands of the healthcare field.

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Introduction

There is an increasing evidence showing that critical thinking is considered as an important part of preregistered nursing students and registered nurses when they are working in the various clinical practice settings [1]. To improve patients' care, the American Association of Colleges of Nursing emphasizes the importance of getting graduating nurses to think critically when they provide nursing care in placement [2]. The American Association of Colleges of Nursing also has identified "critical thinking" as a vital training in a nursing education program. The research by Chang et al [3]

suggests that the registered nurses with high-level critical thinking are more competent and perform better in the increasingly complex clinical settings. Consistent with the above view and measures, the National Council Licensure Examination for Registered Nurses introduced critical thinking as a core competency for registered nurses in the occupational proficiency standards [4].

There are several definitions of critical thinking in the literature, and it has been the subject of discussion in higher education for sometimes. Scriven and Paul [5] have defined that critical thinking is "the intellectually disciplined process of actively and skillfully conceptualizing, applying, synthesizing, and/or evaluating information." Paul and Elder [6] suggested critical thinking as "the art of thinking about your thinking while you are thinking in order to make your thinking better: more clear, more accurate, and more defensible." Although there are some differences among the above

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definitions, they all seem to agree that critical thinking involves reflective and logical thinking skills, and it plays a vital role in the process of decision making and problem solving [7]. However, more and more researchers believe that critical thinking is not just specific thinking skills, but it includes both of cognitive skills and affective disposition. According to Ennis's report [8], disposition is a vital part in critical thinking because if a person who is able to think critically but not willing to use the thinking skills, he or she would not be considered as a critical thinker. Therefore, it appears that in practice by simply providing the content of critical thinking may not necessarily be sufficient to make the students to become critical thinkers [9]. Consequently, more attention of critical thinking disposition has been received by most educators worldwide in higher education, and the ability to effectively apply critical thinking in job performance was used to evaluate college students by many institutions as one of the core learning process [10]. Now, nursing educators have begun to pay more attention to find ways by which preregistered nurses would possess a strong disposition of critical thinking. The goal is to improve their professional confidence and thus excel their occupational performance. However, in practice it may not necessarily make the students critical thinkers [9] simply by providing the content of critical thinking.

Although it is difficult to develop strategies to improve nursing students' critical thinking disposition in the clinic, some studies suggested that reflective practice can be effective for developing and promoting critical thinking [9,11]. Reflection provides nurses with a chance to think about their behavior, analyze their actions, take up alternatives, and implement new ideas. Therefore, if nurses use the reflection effectively, it would be a very useful way to improve their disposition of the critical thinking.

According to Kolb's experiential learning theory [12], adult higher education is a learner-centered, self-motivated, and self-instructed learning progress. To fulfill job expectations and improve professional capabilities, learners usually acquire and update their knowledge and skills through experiential learning. The educators' responsibility is to understand the problems that learners face and their needs and then advice ways their problems may be solved and as mentors, help achieve their learning goals. Therefore, during the process of self-learning and accumulating experience in the clinic, constant reflection by nursing students become key factors promoting the life-long learning of a nursing professional. In this regard, a professional portfolio, as a type of records, becomes the proof of reflection process and an instrument for professional ability evaluation [13]. So, the term "Portfolio" is used as a goal-driven and organized collection of items, the records of which can be used to evaluate a learner's expansion of knowledge and skills over time [14]. Here the meanings of "reflection" include reflection of learning in the clinic [15] and self-assessment of work performance [16]; therefore, professional portfolios were regarded as the vital documents during the practice of reflection in some previous researches [14,15].

In China, reflective practice in the placement has increasingly become a focus in the area of nursing education. Some researchers suggested that it can effectively facilitate the critical thinking ability of nursing students [17]. However, they mainly used the reflective diary as the mean of the reflective practice. It is only a recording document of each nursing student for experiences and the feeling in classes or clinical leaning, and possibly job-related questions of the student [11]. Intuitively, the possible drawbacks of the recording diary without further training for students may not enable them to take criticism well during their placement practice, and not be aware of where they need to develop to overcome shortcomings in their future learning. While most Chinese studies also show that mentors usually did not give enough feedback to their students because reflective training for mentors has been

largely neglected before [11]. Therefore, to improve the reflective teaching method in China, mentors' training should be further strengthened. Consequently, we have implemented a reflective training program for the mentors involved in this study. In summary, to achieve the goal of our present study, we have designed a teaching curriculum in which the disposition of reflective training in two groups of nursing students was evaluated. The study may shed light on whether or not a closely monitoring and training program by qualified mentors on the reflective training of nursing students would make a significant improvement of critical thinking disposition in their clinical performance.

Methods

Study design

This was a randomized controlled study, which was designed and conducted to evaluate the effects of the new reflective training program as a practice teaching method on undergraduate nursing students' critical thinking disposition in China.

Samples and setting

According to the sample size determination methods [18] and results of a previous study [19], the sample size calculated for the experimental group or control group was 54. Considering a possible 20.0% dropout rate, the sample size was increased to 80 for each group. In 2014, the entire senior students of baccalaureate nursing programs in Hainan Medical University were sent to eight internship hospitals. Using the random number table, two of eight internship hospitals were chosen as experimental and control hospitals randomly. The two internship hospitals were selected in the different areas in China; they are all tertiary hospitals of China. There are 1465 beds and 1030 nursing staffs in one hospital, and the other hospital has 1450 beds and 1022 nursing staffs. The regions, size, and nursing levels of these two hospitals were considered comparative. Teaching competence of the mentors in two hospitals

Table 1 Demographic Characteristics of Participants in Experimental and Control Groups (N = 157).

Characteristics	Experimental group (n = 78), n (%)	Control group (n = 79), n (%)	χ^2/t	p
Gender			<0.01	.985
Female	74 (94.9)	75 (94.9)		
Male	4 (5.1)	4 (5.1)		
Race			<0.01	.987
Han	75 (96.1)	76 (96.2)		
Others	3 (3.9)	3 (3.8)		
Age (yr), M \pm SD	23.44 \pm 0.82	23.34 \pm 0.80	0.73	.466
Native place			0.45	.931
East	14 (18.0)	13 (16.5)		
West	20 (25.6)	24 (30.4)		
South	29 (37.2)	28 (35.4)		
North	15 (19.2)	14 (17.7)		
Residence place			0.17	.685
Country	43 (55.1)	41 (51.9)		
City or town	35 (44.9)	38 (48.1)		
School activities participating			0.19	.912
Never	40 (51.3)	38 (48.1)		
Sometimes	16 (20.5)	18 (22.8)		
Often	22 (28.2)	23 (29.1)		
Attitude toward nursing			0.16	.922
Dislike	32 (41.0)	34 (43.0)		
Sometimes like	24 (30.8)	22 (27.9)		
Often like	22 (28.2)	23 (29.1)		

Note. M = mean; SD = standard deviation.

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