Nursing Faculty Experiences Tutoring At-Risk Nursing Students

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ABSTRACT

Attrition rate for undergraduate nursing programs is reported to be 50 percent (Lewis, Milner, & Willingham, 2018). With the current nursing shortage and need for 1.2 million new professional nurses by 2020, retention of qualified nursing students is imperative. It is important for nurse educators to promote student retention and increase the likelihood of National Council Licensure Examination-Registered Nurse (NCLEX-RN®) success. To assist students at risk for academic failure, nursing faculty may provide tutoring. However, literature on what constitutes effective tutoring is limited. In addition, current phenomenological descriptive studies on nursing faculty-tutoring experiences cannot be found. This study explored the stories of six, undergraduate nursing faculty members and gained rich descriptions of their experiences tutoring students at risk. Three major themes emerged: (1) assessing the problem; (2) customizing strategies; and (3) doing more practice questions. The results from this study may increase awareness of identified teaching strategies for academic success of nursing students and may lead to further research by conducting a similar study with interviewing the nursing students who were at risk and identify what strategies they used to become successful academically or by passing the NCLEX-RN®.

Keywords: strategies for success, professor mentoring, program attrition

INTRODUCTION

The attrition rate for undergraduate nursing programs is reported to be 50 percent (Lewis, Milner, & Willingham, 2018). With the current nursing shortage and need for 1.2 million new professional nurses by 2020 (American Association of Colleges of Nurses, 2015) retention of qualified nursing students is imperative. It is important for nurse educators to promote student retention and increase the likelihood of National Council Licensure Examination-Registered Nurse (NCLEX-RN®) success (Robinson, & Niemer, 2010). To assist students at risk for academic failure, nursing faculty may provide tutoring to students. According to McGann & Thompson (2008), faculty tutoring, or mentoring, promotes behavioral changes that enhance the academic success of at-risk nursing students. However, literature on what constitutes effective tutoring is limited. In addition, current phenomenological descriptive studies on nursing faculty-tutoring experiences cannot be found.

In recent years, there has been an increase in the number of non-traditional students enrolling in nursing education programs. Sixty-four percent of nursing students enrolled in a RN-BSN (registered nurse to bachelor degree) program are over the age of 30 years (National League for Nursing, 2014). This generational diversity has led to increased complexity of nursing education and the need for additional support provided to students (Ooms, Fergy, Marks-Maran, Burke, & Sheehy, 2012). Nurse educators must consider using various teaching-learning strategies to provide students with academic support to meet students' specific learning needs for successful matriculation throughout the nursing program. In addition, nursing shortages necessitate the importance of faculty using strategies to prepare students for transition into the workforce upon graduation (Riley & Fearing, 2009). Yet, upon review of the literature, very few studies can be found addressing effective tutoring. Research focusing on nursing faculties' perceptions of best tutoring practices and nursing faculties'

experiences of tutoring students may help identify best practice for effective tutoring. Thus, the aim of this study was to explore nursing faculty perceptions of best tutoring practices in an effort to identify practices that support students' academic and NCLEX-RN® success.

The terms "tutoring" and "mentoring" are used interchangeably in the literature. Mentoring is defined as giving support, assistance, and guidance to promote students' learning. Faculty mentoring is a primary strategy in nursing education (Huybrecht, Loeckx, Quaeyhaegens, De Tobel, & Mistiaen, 2011). However, the roles, responsibilities, and boundaries of personal tutors are poorly defined (Watts, 2010).

There are several benefits of faculty mentoring in nursing education. The benefits extend from the students, faculty, university, and the nursing profession. Benefits include retention of students, reduction of turn-over, reduced costs, and increased learning strategies of students. Benefits of the faculty mentoring extend to faculty and include faculty recognition, increased job satisfaction, and possible career advancement (Huybrecht et al., 2011).

Tutoring by faculty can promote academic success among at-risk students. In addition, faculty tutoring assists students in identifying their individual needs and priorities and also assists them in meeting academic goals. Faculty mentoring has contributed to the academic success of nursing students (McGann & Thompson, 2008). A research study conducted by McGann and Thompson (2008) found that faculty mentoring improved at-risk nursing students' GPA (grade point average) and assisted them in graduating and passing the NCLEX-RN® exam.

Mentoring has been used by various disciplines such as nursing, anthropology, business, education, psychology, and social work. It has improved confidence levels, increased retention rates, and promoted learning. In addition, mentoring has contributed to personal and professional growth. However, additional research is needed to determine the most effective methods of mentoring to promote positive outcomes (Mijares, Baxley, & Bond, 2013). This study aimed to explore nursing faculty experiences of tutoring and to identify perceived best practice.

METHODS

After approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB), purposive sampling of fulltime nurse educators from various undergraduate programs in Pennsylvania occurred. Email invites recruited six participants; five females and one male with age ranges from 40-60. One participant had a PhD in Nursing, two had Doctor of Nursing Practice and three had master's degrees in Nursing. Participants taught in associate degree and bachelor's degree nursing programs and had between 4-25 years of experience.

After informed consent, interviews were scheduled. Face to face or phone audiotaped interviews took place in a confidential area of the participant's choice and averaged 15-30 minutes. Participants were informed that he/she may cease participation in the interview at any time. Participants were encouraged to share their stories about tutoring nursing students who were at risk for academic or NCLEX-RN® failure. They were prompted with the use of guided questions. The researcher did not participate in the discussion or offer any comments or reactions during the interview. The study questions included:

1. Tell me about a time when you tutored a nursing student who may have been at-risk for academic or NCLEX-RN® failure.
2. Tell me about strategies that you used that you felt were effective or ineffective while tutoring.
3. Tell me about strategies that students told you were effective or ineffective while tutoring.

After each interview, the audiotaped dialogue was transcribed by the researcher. Pseudonyms were assigned to each participant to maintain confidentiality. Thematic analysis of transcribed dialogue following the interviews was conducted by the researcher and confirmed with the co-investigator. The process was repeated over and over to increase the rigor of the findings. Interviews ceased when common themes emerged. A chart was created that reviewed all the strategies to identify common themes. The three top common themes were chosen based on their frequency used and evidence to support the strategies used.

RESULTS

The dialogue from the six participants helped to gain understanding of nurse educator experiences tutoring students at risk for academic or NLCEX-RN failure. The dialogue illuminated three major themes: (1) assessing the problem; (2) customizing strategies; and (3) doing more practice questions.

Assessing the Problem

Assessing is the first step of the Nursing Process and dialogue from study participants highlights that it is also the first step in successful tutoring of students. When nurse educators become aware of an academic problem, the first strategy is to assess the student's study skills/habits, knowledge, and other possible underlying problems. According to one study participant, "Henry":

> "After the first exam, any student who gets below an 80, I reach out and talk with them, and certainly identify some patterns that are consistent with not performing well…Like waiting until the couple of days before the test to start studying, not doing/practicing practice questions, just kinda not preparing for class in advance, there are certain kinds of behaviors that will predict people that will struggle, so really I think a lot of it is trying to get

students to change their study habits, their approach to analyzing the material, and certainly I will explain any concepts they don't understand, or things that they need help on learning, but a lot of times it is really more, a lot of times it's about the approach to studying, rather than like content specific issues per se."

"Samantha" supports this by analyzing test results and doing a review of questions missed,

> "they finished that (Practice NCLEX test) and based on those results, I knew how to pinpoint what they needed. So, I was able to drill down on where they were weak. And once I did that I figured out where their weaknesses were and we just focused on those weaknesses."

According to "Alice", this identification is imperative to success. "I think strategies that don't work are not guiding the student, not assessing them initially to figure out what area their problem is (can be a deterrent to learning)." Many of the participants mentioned and identified that test anxiety is a major issue for nursing students. Knowing that this is the problem, allows the faculty to focus on how to reduce anxiety and prepare students for exams. Since graduates of pre-licensure nursing programs are required to successfully pass the NLCEX-RN® to practice nursing, identification of test anxiety and an individual plan to counteract this problem is very important in the overall success of nursing students. Alice sums up what most participants also discussed, "People may know the content, they may be okay with test taking skills, but they just get totally freaked out and then they freeze and can't answer the questions". This leads to the second major theme identified by this study, Customizing Strategies for academic success.

Customizing Strategies

Study participants revealed that teaching strategies for the at-risk student must be customized to each individual to be successful. "Alice" clearly identified the need for customizing strategies for success. She stated, "See if they have problems actually taking and analyzing a test question. I would say an effective strategy is reviewing test taking techniques with them and frameworks." Every student thinks and performs tests differently. Multiple strategies and options might have to be presented for the student to find what works best for preparing and taking tests.

"Tara" highlighted another potential problem for students with test anxiety and a solution that worked in the past.

> "Don't change answer on best guess. So, if you aren't 90% sure of the answer, give it your best guess and don't change it, unless you read the question over again and realize that it was wrong and you know the right answer. [Students] can be distracted by answers. What we did there was take that piece of paper we give and cover the answers so that she needed to read the whole question before she went to the answers. What is this question asking me, then maybe come up with the answer you thought it might be, before you reveal the questions [answer options]."

> "Alice" further elaborated on test taking anxiety and a successful strategy used in the past. "See if they have problems actually taking and analyzing a test question. I would say an effective strategy is reviewing test taking techniques with them and frameworks. ABC framework, prioritization framework, delegation framework, all of the Maslow's Hierarchy of needs. All of the frameworks that you need to understand in nursing in order to be able to answer questions."

"Henry" illuminated that getting the students to understand the problem is the key to success. "So, trying to get them to understand where their patterns of difficulty are coming in" is key to motivation. This is an important element in getting at-risk students to do more high-level practice questions, which leads to the third identified theme from this study.

Doing Practice Questions

Once the students' problem has been assessed and identified, a plan for success can be implemented. All participants stated that practicing NCLEX-RN® style questions help in doing well on course exams and better prepare them for the NCLEX-RN®. Tara highlighted this the best by saying "if you can answer those questions [NCLEX-RN®], you mastered that material… [and] help prepare for course exams and the NCLEX®".

"Kathy's" dialogue further supports the need for practice questions.

> "Times where students have been more successful it has been that they just have been really looking at NCLEX® style questions so they can understand the breakdown of the question better. That is something that always seems work very well and has been successful. Students think this is effective." "Henry" also believes that questions are beneficial. "I use a questioning tool…where they can do practice questions on each chapter and you know they can have opportunities to apply the material and if they miss the question, then we can look at, alright, why you are missing the questions."

DISCUSSION

The themes found through interview transcriptions are important because they can provide a foundation of interventions for nurse educators to apply while tutoring nursing students who are academically at risk or at risk for not passing the NCLEX-RN®. The study can provide guidance for nurse educators new

to tutoring students. There is a limitation with the study because the strategies cannot be used by every nurse educator and cannot be applied to every student. Nurse educators need to find strategies that work for their students. The success of the student is the focus and the strategies that will help promote academic achievement, along with passing the NCLEX-RN®.

Nursing students need to be willing to make changes to their study habits and preparing for tests. An instructor can provide many strategies that the student can personally benefit from, but if the student does not make effort to change, then the strategies can be considered ineffective. Test anxiety was mentioned by a large majority of the interviewed party as evidenced from above. It is important to identify that early in a nursing students' career and work with the student to overcome the test anxiety.

The study could be conducted further by interviewing nursing students who were at risk academic or NCLEX-RN® failure and what strategies benefitted he/she to succeed in the career of nursing. The study would be conducted like this one and could provide more information on other possible strategies that could be effective for future students or provide more evidence to support the common themes already found. In this study, there is very limited background information given on the students that were tutored. Having more information about the situation of the student could allow the nurse educator to customize strategies even more for the student.

CONCLUSION

Nurse educators in this study revealed that key strategies to success with tutoring students at-risk for academic or NCLEX-RN® failure includes a process similar to that of the nursing process. This entails assessing the problem, individualizing a plan for remediation, and the importance of completing NCLEX-RN® style questions on required

content for courses. Nurse educators want students to prosper academically and use what knowledge and skills they gained in their clinical practice. Nurse educators believe that tutoring students who are academically at risk for failing the NCLEX-RN® can be challenging due to the willingness of student wanting to succeed. The nursing student must understand and apply nursing theories, concepts, and current practices to their own nursing practice and not only memorize course materials. More information can be obtained from further research from nurses who were at risk for academic or NCLEX-RN® failure.

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