HELPING STUDENTS Who Struggle Academically:  
Finding the Right Level of Involvement and  
Living with Our Judgments

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ART OF THE RESPONSIBILITY OF THE NURSE EDUCATOR IS TO OFFER ASSISTANCE TO NURSING STUDENTS WHO STRUGGLE ACADEMICALLY AND ARE AT RISK FOR FAILURE. The multiple roles of the nurse educator can be overwhelming, and faculty may find they are not only short on time and availability, but also lack the expertise necessary to help certain students. This study will illuminate how teachers attend to struggling students and how they understand these encounters.

Teachers are often asked to make judgments regarding students’ progression or lack thereof; therefore, finding the right level of involvement is critical. But teachers may be reluctant to discuss their concerns with colleagues and seek their support as they ask themselves, Should I let this student pass? At what point do we decide that the student is safe? Should I let the student progress to the next level and avoid these questions entirely?

This article will discuss the common experiences of nurse teachers in their journey with struggling students. Although increasing, there is a paucity of research regarding educators’ experiences helping struggling students (Brown, 2010; Calabrese, Hummel, & Martin, 2007; Poorman, Mastorovich, & Webb, 2008; Tanicala, Scheffer, & Roberts, 2011). As the nursing shortage is predicted to get worse over the next decade (Allan & Aldebrön, 2008; Worth, 2008), keeping struggling students viable within the nursing education system is essential.

Struggling students require extra hours and effort on the part of the educator. It is hoped that teachers’ stories about helping students who struggle will lead to dialogue, helping nurse educators as they meet this challenge in all nursing programs.

Method After obtaining human subject approval, the researchers (three nurse educators) visited schools of nursing to briefly explain the study and ask for faculty volunteers. Thirty female nurse educators representing 18 nursing programs in the eastern United States (15 baccalaureate, 10 associate degree, and five diploma) provided informed consent to share their stories. The teaching experience of the volunteers ranged from 5 to 16 years and their ages ranged from 34 to 62 years.

The researchers conducted unstructured interviews that started with the question: “Tell us about a time when you worked with a struggling student. Then reflect on your story and describe what this experience meant to you in either helping or hindering the struggling student.” Interviews were taped and then transcribed. Original tapes were destroyed following verification of transcription accuracy, and participant identifiers were removed from interview texts. The interviews were analyzed using hermeneutics and interpretive phenomenology.

Hermeneutics is a methodology focused on understanding human experience as revealed in texts and interpreted for significance and meaning (Palmer, 1969). All people engage in interpretation, but how one interprets a situation or the context in which one finds oneself is frequently not articulated or conscious but reflects an embodied understanding. The most important part of interpretation is language, which influences how we interpret ourselves and our world.

When interpreting a text, one is apt to notice particular elements of an experience while overlooking others. Therefore, continuing circles of interpretation are used to search out the effects of historical understanding and to understand the experiences anew. Circles of interpretation are a means of interpretive understanding that is not limited to the prejudices of preconception. In the circle is a hidden positive possibility of interpretation that reveals itself through continued reading of the text (Gadamer, 2003).

Patterns express the relationship of themes and occur in all interviews (Diekelmann & Ironside 1998). For this study, the researchers wrote individual interpretations of each interview text, then shared them at research meetings, engaging in circles of understanding that deepened as the texts were read and reread. As
the researchers discussed and challenged ideas, they identified recurrent themes, or common experiences voiced in the narratives. Experienced interpretive researchers were consulted to review and critique the hermeneutical analysis, an important step to broaden the inquiry and ensure that analyses were discernible in the texts (Ironside, 2005).

Aspects of Presencing  Hermeneutical analysis revealed an overall pattern of presencing, recognized by Diekelmann (2001) as one of the concernful practices of schooling, learning, and teaching. These practices were identified in a 12-year study of the lived experiences of nurse teachers and their students; they co-occur and provide students and teachers with a new language that helps them think in new ways about their learning experiences (Andrews et al., 2001). Being a presence means caring for and attending to students in ways that keep open a future of possibilities. Presencing allows teachers to connect with their students and make their concerns about their students visible (Diekelmann & Mendias, 2005).

The stories in this study illuminate many ways in which faculty demonstrated presencing with students. For nursing students, school is rarely their only concern. They bring a variety of experiences to their educational ventures that may lead to challenges for their teachers. Andrea’s story reveals the dilemma for student and teacher:

One of my students missed class and then started missing clinical. She asked for an extension to complete a late assignment. So I asked if I could see her. She came but she looked hassled. Her hair was a mess and her whole body looked tense but also tired as if she was saying, “Don’t ask me to do one more thing.” I told her I was concerned about her missing class and now clinical and that her work was late. Tears started coming into her eyes and she said she couldn’t help it. Her mother was sick and she was running between two houses trying to keep her mother and her family happy. She said she was getting depressed and that no one wanted to help her. She asked me what to do. I knew she had the potential to be a good nurse but she had so many other problems that she couldn’t concentrate on nursing. I knew she felt overwhelmed but then I started feeling overwhelmed. I’m a teacher and she’s a student but she needed more help than that…. I gave a few suggestions but it felt like I was giving aspirin to someone with a migraine. When she left I don’t know if she felt any better, but I know I didn’t. I began to wonder, what does it mean to be a teacher of nursing?

Students often experience struggles, both academic and nonacademic in nature, that bring forth additional expectations for faculty. Students may expect faculty to fix academic and nonacademic struggles; faculty may question how much they should be able to fix. Academic struggles threaten the student’s very existence in the nursing education program. Problems happening in nonacademic areas of a student’s life may compete with the time and effort necessary to being a nursing student.

Andrea acknowledged that her student had the potential to be a good nurse, but that other areas of her life were preventing her from working toward her goal. As students reach out to teachers for help by sharing aspects of their personal lives, expectations are revealed that require the teacher to forge into areas perceived to be outside the traditional faculty role. How far along the journey to being a nurse must the teacher accompany the student?

Heidegger (1962) defines this concern as being-alongside and includes in the teacher-student encounter solicitude, being considerate of the student’s needs. Kasey tells how she supported her student.

She [the student] really came from a world that was a very difficult one. She had a lot of strikes against her. But somewhere along the line she wanted to be a nurse. So she came into the program. By the time that girl graduated, she was a totally different person. She had to drop out for a year because of family problems. But when she came back, she said to me, “I want you to know that I’m not failing this time. I’m not even going to get to the point where I need to withdraw…. The reason that I failed last time was because every time I had a big test and it was crucial for me to do well, my family members would do something that would sabotage it.” Her brother and sister ended up in jail for dealing drugs and all. I told her, “You keep telling me that this is your priority. Then you have to make this your priority.” Her way of dealing with this was very interesting. [The student said] “I go to a motel and I don’t tell anybody where I am except my mother. Because, if they really need me, my mother will find me…. Because of what they have done to me, I will never let them do it to me again.” So she got through the program and the day of graduation, she saw me out in the parking lot. She was so upset; her dad had gotten arrested the night before graduation. She said, “You know what, I am here.” And I said, “That’s right. You just go in there and graduate, go through the whole ceremony and graduate because you earned this.”

Kasey attended to this student by finding a way to support her, not by fixing the problem. For Andrea, the prospect of having to solve all of the student’s problems was so overwhelming that she questioned whether she even understood what it really means to be a nurse teacher. Both teachers were with or in the presence of their students. Each listened to what their students had to say about their problems, but what happened next was different. Andrea gave a few suggestions that may or may not have helped, and her experience was one of frustration and confusion. Kasey supported the student’s resolve to be a nurse, despite the obvious obstacles, and was present for and with the student, attending to her experiences and creating a place for her to experience success. Taking over for the student might indicate that the teacher is superior and the student incapable.

When viewed phenomenologically, these teachers both embody presencing. Both experiences might be called being-in-the-world, with the teacher mindful of the student’s dilemma, caring about the student’s goal of being a nurse. However, Andrea worried about actively trying to solve the student’s problem, with “caring for” the student akin to taking over for the student. One interpretation
might be that the student abdicated responsibility for solving the problem, giving it to the teacher to solve. It also can be argued that the student legitimately needed help and called out to the teacher to help her examine her options, support her efforts to address her problems, and find a new way of being in the world. There is also the element of trust the student must have: trust that the teacher will know how to address the problem, will not reveal the problem to others, and will not be prejudiced when grading exams or clinical performance.

Kasey displays caring when she supports the student’s resolve to be a nurse. The student maintains an active role in the relationship and finds her own unique ways of dealing with her problems (Heidegger, 1962). But is one type of caring wrong and the other right? There are times when caring for may be the correct approach, as in a crisis situation, just as there are situations where caring about is the truer path; the student knows what is to be accomplished but needs encouragement and direction. Perhaps how the teacher becomes involved in the student’s world matters more that the question of right or wrong. Perhaps we need to change the question, from what should the teacher do to how should the teacher be present to the student?

**Finding the Right Level of Involvement** Being a supportive presence for the struggling student often presents a quandary for nurse teachers who wonder if they are helping or hindering their students. Student and faculty expectations for supportive presence will often differ, and teachers worry that students expect them to be much more than educators.

In an article on tips for new educators, Mann (2004) recommends that new teachers set boundaries to keep their primary role as educator from getting lost among the many expectations students have. Yet many teachers find that it is difficult to set boundaries that apply to all students. Tessa’s story shows this dilemma.

_I had a student that was often late and missed class with some frequency. She did poorly on the first quiz. I scheduled a meeting with her and discovered some very pertinent personal problems that she was dealing with. Her husband was very unsupportive with her decision to be a nurse. She decided to begin the program and kept it a secret from her husband. She would put the kids on the bus and run out of the door with her clothes and books in the trunk. She struggled to find time to study and meet the demands of home. I encouraged her to be honest with her husband but felt very unprepared to give her the help she needed. I feared the reaction from her husband if he found out she was in the program. I made an appointment with my director to meet with us and discuss her issues. I recommended referral to a counselor and asked my director for a few names. I had a busy schedule with teaching and clinical and had very little time to help this student. The student dropped out after her husband was told the truth. She came back the next year and made it through the program. I felt I did not spend enough time helping her._

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_You know, we are not their counselors. When that happens, I think we enable them. When we become their primary source of support, and we are not supposed to be, I think we should hold them to certain standards regardless of what is going on in their personal lives. We have to maintain a professional relationship with the students. I think we cannot be socially involved with the students as a friend until after they graduate. I think it interferes with our objectivity and it crosses the line._

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In the current study, faculty found the mismatch of expectations between students and faculty a hindrance in helping the struggling student. Several teachers spoke about having questions regarding their role when assisting students and fearing that their role as educator was becoming blurred. Kasey describes difficulties that can occur when expectations collide:

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and it is overwhelming. The expectations of higher education, university involvement, service, further education, and all of the demands on you to be able to get tenure, to stay tenured, go for promotion, to be a contributing faculty member, teaching is lost.

Elements from Linda’s story were evident in many of the stories from teachers in this study. Along with their responsibilities as educators, they are expected to maintain clinical competence, supervise students who are learning to care for seriously ill patients, and keep up with a health care environment that is changing rapidly (American Association of Colleges of Nursing, 2005; Kaufman, 2007). When asked, “What is the most important thing for you to do as teachers?” they responded, spend time with students, be a presence with students. Yet, presencing came with consequences.

Teachers in this study searched for the right level of involvement. They believed that paying attention, truly listening to, and advocating for students was helpful in identifying students’ learning needs. But they struggled with finding a balance between involvement with students and their other responsibilities. Teacher busyness (Diekelmann, 2004) has been shown to have multiple detrimental effects on teacher-friendly and student-friendly environments. Most teachers in this study told of being busy and trying to find the time for all their responsibilities. They believed that when they had the opportunity to give time to their struggling students it was helpful, but quickly added how hard it was to find that time.

Nurse teachers described themselves as conflicted. Which struggling students merit their time and energy? Should a teacher help one student at the expense of others? How do we decide whom to help? If one student asks for help, is that the student we assist? But should the student determine the teacher’s level of involvement? What about the student who struggles silently and does not ask for help? Determining level of involvement with a student cannot easily be reduced to a list of rules or strategies.

Teachers must engender community with students, working together to discover ways for students to be free to reach their own potential. Part of engendering community is the ability of students and teachers to be able to communicate with each other (Poorman et al., 2008). Students are learning the language of nursing, and teachers strive to meet them on common ground, joining in conversation. Gadamer (2003) asserts that without a common language, students and teachers would fail to make any headway toward understanding.

**Living with Our Judgments** Teachers in this study spent painful hours trying to determine whether judgments they made helped or hindered student success. How do teachers live with the knowledge that their judgment may have been wrong? How do they go forward? How are they changed?

For teachers, making decisions regarding whether certain students should continue in the nursing program took time and energy. They spoke of the sadness, guilt, and anger they felt when students failed, and they told of wondering how decisions they made would affect the student’s life. Indeed, were the decisions they made truly correct?

Some teachers described the realization that at times, caring about a student means letting go. Is the teacher meeting her own needs when she avoids making the painful decision to fail a student? Is it caring to let a failing student pass, hoping that the student will eventually catch up or that another teacher will make the difficult decision that is needed? Does a failing student mean that the faculty has failed? Beth regrets a decision she made about a student:

> She loved what she was doing, she was happy, but she was kind of backward and didn’t see the seriousness of it. But I think if we would have let her go on she would have made a good nurse….She had done really well and then personal problems would come in and she would become a borderline student. I think we could have worked with her and she would have made a good nurse. I think we did her a disservice. We took the easy way out. She never came back.

Tessa tells of a struggle that she and a colleague experienced when they added points to an exam so a student would pass.

> I regret the decision I made about a student during his senior year. This student was dedicated and worked at the hospital where this school of nursing program was based. He never missed a class and attended every review session available. He struggled to get passing grades. His clinical performance was satisfactory. After giving the final exam, my teaching partner and I discovered that this student was two points from a passing grade. After a great deal of discussion, we both decided to throw out one question to make his grade a passing one. At the time, I felt very good about my decision. This student went on to barely pass his last course and then failed the NCLEX. He was very angry and blamed the school for his failed attempt. I began to feel guilty about the decision I made earlier.

Tessa and Beth’s stories are alike and yet different. Although they tell of making different decisions, their stories illuminate how teachers struggle when they work with certain students. Beth believes she should have done more, while Tessa is concerned that she did too much. Heidegger (1962) states that there is more to an object than its scientific definition. Gadamer (2003) states that an object being studied from a scientific standpoint is examined, free of mitigating circumstances. But people are not free of mitigating circumstances. Much as a nurse teacher’s evaluation is objective, it is never free from other elements, including one’s own experiences. Teachers who believe they can transcend their own histories are not being true to themselves (Gadamer).

Desta tells of the anger and confusion she experienced when a student she worked hard to help failed in the senior year. This story illuminates how personal experiences influence one’s judgment, including the belief that seniors should not fail.

> “I remember losing sleep over it. It was absolutely horrible...
because I couldn’t believe that I was going to have to do this to a sen-
ior. I was very angry because I didn’t feel like she should have made
it that far because it really was not fair to her and you know it was
a really difficult time for her and for me. I felt very bad.”

The implication of Desta’s story is that other faculty should have
intervened at lower levels of the nursing program. But perhaps the
student was able to perform satisfactorily, before the senior year.
Desta’s concern raises the issue of the importance of talking to
other teachers about our expectations and the judgments we make.

Interestingly, in the authors’ earlier article (Poorman et al.,
2002), students shared how teachers’ judgments were not always
helpful. Jenny told how her teacher gave her extra points to pass a
final exam so that she could graduate and then swore her to secre-
cy. Preparing to retake the NCLEX after an initial failure, Jenny
spoke with the teacher who told her she had doubts about her own
judgment, saying, “I should never have passed you.” Jenny wanted
to tell this painful story because she hoped that teachers might
learn something from her experience. She advised teachers to be
careful: “Don’t pass students if they don’t deserve to pass” (p. 31).

These narratives bring to light the power that teachers have in
the judgments they make and the lasting impact that they can have
on teacher and student. They also demonstrate how painful it can
be for teachers who struggle to make the right decision. But must
we always speak of right or wrong when it comes to making deci-
sions? Perhaps, instead of whether or not a student should gradu-
ate, we might ask if the student needs more time or help before
graduation. What does the student need from the teacher to help
her prepare for graduation, the NCLEX, and the real world of nurs-
ing practice?

Kelly talks about drawing the line between caring and holding
students responsible:

That is one thing I’ve learned over time, people need a lot of
positive reinforcement….So I consciously try to put a “that a
boy” on somebody every week or a nice touch of my hand on their
shoulder or ‘good job’ or ‘nice question.’ More of a coaching
approach instead of a guard approach. You know, let’s go, we’ve
got to get this done. So it’s less sergeant and more coach, I guess,
and I think that came from, believe it or not, student evalua-
tions. They found that perhaps I was belittling and that would
never be if you know me as a person — that would never be my
goal to belittle. I do have a presence. I happen to be 5’10.” I
can’t take that away….But I did recognize through that, that
somewhere I have to communicate the message that I do care
about them. Caring doesn’t mean that you can make the mistake
of understanding all of their problems that they come with
because they do need to perform.”

In Kelly’s experience, she was able to make a judgment and
respond to what students were telling her and change her
approach without compromising her expectations. It was impor-
tant that she expect students to practice nursing safely. It was also
important that students knew that she listened to them and cared
about them.

Implications for Nursing Education Supportive presencing,
the overall pattern found through this research, can be seen in each
theme. Whether helping students learn to develop priorities, giving
them extra time, or just listening to their concerns, the teachers
believed that providing a presence with the struggling student was
helpful. But finding the right level of involvement to support stu-
dents was easier said than done. Teachers wanted to be a support-
ive presence, but, at times, were somewhat unsure of their role in
creating a sense of support. How can we support students in per-
sonal ways without crossing the line and interfering with our abil-
ity to evaluate them effectively? How do we make visible our con-
cern for students and still maintain our role as educators? How do
we know what is the right level of involvement? These stories show
the conflict that teachers wrestle with daily in their attempt to con-
nect with students and create a supportive environment.

Teachers also discussed the problems they had in managing their
time, having to decide which students needed their help the most.
Nurse faculty are increasingly faced with more responsibilities and
academic demands (Oermann, 2004). The teachers in this study
worried that the struggling student might get lost amidst the
demands of committee work, service, and scholarship.

Teachers courageously told stories about living with the judgments
they made, how, at times, they regretted decisions and lived with guilt
and uncertainty. It is apparent that the judgments teachers make
become part of them and, as such, influence future evaluations of and
relationships with students. These teachers’ stories reflect
Heidegger’s (1971) belief that “our past is always in front of us.”

Although teachers talk about evaluation and measurement the-
ory and psychometrics, their stories show that they consider much
more when they make judgments about students. Often they may not
be fully aware of the power of their experiences as teachers and how
these experiences influence their decisions. Tessa’s story about
removing questions from an exam to allow a hard-working student to
pass illustrates a common teacher experience. When we educate
new nurse teachers about evaluation, we lecture on evaluation the-
ory, but do we teach them how to understand their own experiences
of judging and evaluating students? Do we examine the possibility
that past judgments become part of present and future judgments?

The stories recounted in this article suggest that nurse teachers
could benefit from having time set aside to share personal stories.
We could learn from others’ experiences and support one another in
our work. We might, for example, conduct a faculty development
workshop where teachers, seasoned and novice, share not only their
best practices but their not so best practices as well. Questions that
could be addressed are: When is it appropriate to help a student
with a personal problem? How do we decide how to know when our
level of involvement is helpful or hindering to the student’s growth?
As educators, we should ask ourselves about the nature of the time we spend with students. What do students really need from us?

If teachers share their stories, perhaps their evaluations of students would become more accurate, more authentic, and less regrettable. Sharing stories would increase teacher awareness and lead to a number of helpful questions, for example: Why are evaluations of students so inconsistent? What leads me to be lenient with one student and less so with another? Was my judgment of this student fair? Did I make the right decision?

We will continue to struggle with uncertainty, but, as nurse teachers, we must keep the dialogue open. If teachers share their stories and provide a supportive presence for one another, finding the right level of involvement, and living with decisions could become less painful, less hindering to students. We need to encourage our colleagues to share stories at faculty meetings and informal gatherings. Perhaps we should encourage our national nursing organizations to offer faculty development programs for nurse teachers where stories are shared. We should be asking why we do not already spend some of our faculty development time in this way. Do we as nurse teachers fail to see the value and educational benefit of our stories and experiences?

Creating a nursing education community that provides presence and a voice not only for students but for teachers can help overcome our conventional ways of thinking about nursing education.

Andrews et al. (2001) assert that reform in nursing education will occur when schools of nursing focus on improving the community of students and teachers. The use of narrative pedagogy and the careful practices of teaching and learning provide us with research to improve the relationships among teachers and students who struggle. Continuing to examine important issues of this type will build on the existing literature that moves us toward the development of a science of nursing education.

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