Voices of Experience: Reflections of Nurse Educators

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abstract

Background: Recent data reported by the American Association of Colleges of Nursing suggest that nursing education is experiencing a continued increase in applicants. However, because of a faculty shortage, many qualified students are denied enrollment. Strategies that would encourage individuals to consider a career in nursing education would somewhat alleviate applicant restrictions.

Methods: A descriptive phenomenological study was conducted exploring experienced baccalaureate educators’ perspectives. Questions were posed about their role experiences. Analysis was conducted with van Manen’s procedural steps for examination.

Results: Emergent themes were identified. These themes, reflective of the educators’ experience, offer insight and guidance to novice educators striving for success.

Conclusion: To alleviate the nursing shortage, increased efforts should be directed toward encouraging qualified individuals to pursue a career as a nurse educator and mentoring those who are novices. The wisdom gleaned from experienced nurse educators may help achieve these goals.


The American Association of Colleges of Nursing (AACN) published a report in 2006 about the alarming number of qualified applicants who were denied admission into baccalaureate and graduate programs of nursing nationwide. The primary reason cited for enrollment restriction was a dire shortage of nursing faculty. Most professional schools and colleges of nursing continue to have multiple faculty vacancies from one academic year to the next. The shortage is exacerbated by the increasing number of nursing faculty who are near retirement and the decreased number of doctorally prepared nurses who seek employment within academia. As described in the AACN report on enrollment and graduation in baccalaureate and graduate programs in nursing (AACN, 2006), graduations from master’s programs in nursing increased by only 10.5%. The increase was only 1.5% in doctoral programs.

The future of nursing education is, in part, reliant on how effectively experienced faculty can encourage new professionals to consider nursing education as a viable career option. Nurse educators must accept some responsibility for increasing the dwindling numbers of qualified nursing faculty. A collective wisdom exists among experienced nurse educators that may encourage individuals to join the ranks and guide less experienced colleagues in their academic life. Exploring role perceptions, along with a reflective assessment of veteran educators’ lived experience, may provide useful insights. These reflections could expand into practical strategies for faculty recruitment and retention.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The nation’s health care system is in trouble. The combined effects of retiring Baby Boomers, the increase in the number of chronic illnesses, the increase in life expectancy for both genders, and the graying of the profession-
The focus of the study was to explore faculty role perceptions about lived experience. Lessons learned and best practices are the outcomes of familiarity with the role responsibilities and expectations of nurse educators. In addition, nurse educators view mentorship of others as an inherent function of their position. As in a family history, those individuals who have devoted years to a career as a nurse educator have much practical wisdom to pass on to the next generation. A less formal guideline, based on lived experience, may make a stronger impression on prospective and novice faculty than textbook instruction.

A descriptive phenomenological study explored experienced baccalaureate nurse educators’ views about their professional position. Insights about the educator role may increase interest in the profession and serve as a format for mentorship.

METHODS

Phenomenology is a philosophy and research methodology that seeks to illuminate and describe experiences as lived (Brewer & Dattilo, 2002). The essence of a particular phenomenon is identified and described. The lived experience is the basis and meaning of knowledge. Researcher assumptions, biases, or a priori knowledge about the studied phenomenon must be identified.

The authors’ assumptions are as follows:

1. An individual is the best person to describe an experience as it is lived.
2. Faculty have gained insight and wisdom through their experience as nurse educators.
3. Nurse educators are willing to share their experiences and lessons learned with novices.

This study focused on the role perceptions of experienced baccalaureate nurse educators. Before the study was begun, institutional review board approval was received from the researchers’ parent institution. A convenience sample of participants was recruited from both public and private colleges and universities in the Midwest and the Southeastern United States. Criteria for inclusion in this study were a minimum of 10 years of baccalaureate teaching experience, in both the classroom and the clinical area; ability to converse and write in English; and willingness to participate in an audiotaped interview.

An e-mail invitation was sent by the research team to prospective participants. Once the interested faculty member responded, the purpose and scope of the research project were more fully explained. If the faculty member agreed to participate, then a time and a private location were established to conduct the interview. After informed consent was obtained, the taped interview commenced. Participants were asked to respond to four open-ended statements.

1. Describe the best lesson you have learned about being a nurse educator.
2. Describe the biggest mistake you think you have made as a nurse educator.
made as a nurse educator, and explain what you would do differently.

3. Explain why you think someone should consider being a nurse educator.

4. Name three qualities that you believe are necessary to be a successful nurse educator.

Eleven female nurse educators were interviewed when saturation of data was reached. Among study participants, the number of years of baccalaureate teaching experience in the classroom and the clinical area ranged from 10 to 30 years. All traditional areas of expertise—adult health, pediatrics, obstetrics, mental health, and community health—were represented.

RESULTS
The individual audiotaped interviews were reviewed by each member of the research team. Thematic analysis was conducted with van Manen’s procedural steps for managing and interpreting qualitative data. Themes emerged when responses from participants began to repeat one another, regardless of the faculty members’ area of expertise or career longevity beyond the 10-year study inclusion criteria. The following themes emerged from the data: being passionate about what you do; being harmonious; being invested in relationships; and believing in oneself and others.

Being Passionate About What You Do
When viewed collectively, all 11 participants’ responses exuded enthusiasm for teaching. One faculty member shared:

I have the best job in the world. It is a brand new job every semester with each new group of students. A brand new challenge every semester . . . I never get bored. It lets me role-model with students. There has never been even one day when I woke up thinking, “Oh gosh, I wish I didn’t have to do this.” . . . Not one day.

Another commented:

It is the best of both worlds being a nurse and a teacher. It gives you a chance to form individuals who want to go into the profession. It just feeds your soul.

Subthemes described the role of a nurse educator as someone who makes a difference and feels committed to passing the torch to the next generation.

Being Harmonious
Some participants spoke about the importance of organizational fit:

The biggest mistake I made was working at a place that did not share my philosophy. It was not a match for me . . . did not value what I valued. I was totally removed from what I valued most—teaching—to mostly doing research and grants.

Being Invested in Relationships
Subthemes that emerged included keeping boundaries, saying “no,” and respecting and appreciating the student. As one faculty member assessed:

Picking up faculty roles that are not a good fit for me was a mistake. I was chair of a self-study committee that I had no experience with, but I could not say, “No!” I was a novice, just learning my job. I knew right away that I was in a mess. It created incredible stress. . . . I have since learned to say “no” to what others call “opportunities.”

Another explained:

You have to realize that nursing school is just one piece of students’ lives. . . . They have other pieces of their lives. . . . See them as people first. . . . You will get the best out of them.

Believing in Oneself and Others
Faculty felt strongly about having confidence in themselves and their ability to make the right decisions. One participant expressed:

Have confidence in your own abilities . . . be flexible . . . stick to your guns . . . trust your ability to make tough decisions.

Believing in students also was valued. According to one study participant:

Go into each relationship believing in the student. They can be successful. . . . Believe in students rather than thinking they can’t be successful and making them prove to you they can do it. I choose to go in with a belief in the students, and they have to prove me wrong.

CONCLUSION
The findings of this study offer wisdom that is acquired through experience. The applicant’s suitability to the organizational culture and the nurse educator profession could possibly be assessed during the initial interview. Requesting applicants to list their organizational expectations and describe their personal motivation to become a nurse educator may help to determine whether the individual reflects your school’s ideal. Have applicants describe the qualities of their most and least favorite nurse educators during their own educational journey. Listen to the descriptions. These remarks will
give insight into what the applicant sees as both positive and negative faculty attributes. Ask interviewees to describe their philosophy of nursing education. Do the concepts correspond to your program? Detecting a passion for teaching is critical. Does the applicant exude enthusiasm when discussing nursing, nursing education, and students? The applicants’ verbal and nonverbal communication during the interview will provide important information.

Another theme that emerged was that novice educators need a dedicated mentor. The formal and informal knowledge that one needs to be successful in an academic environment is overwhelming at first. Novice educators need concrete guidelines about the management of students and expectations in the workplace. Often, a new faculty member does something or says something that is judged as unacceptable or inappropriate. In many cases, the peer group knows about the mishap, but the novice educator remains clueless until a situation escalates. Another helpful strategy for experienced educators and administrators is differentiating between orienting and mentoring. Novice faculty need intense orientation to their assigned course and clinical responsibilities, with frequent feedback. Later, after new faculty have gained experience and confidence in the teaching role, a mentor can guide them toward achieving scholarly pursuits and possibly tenure. Ultimately, a planned and consistent approach toward professional development of newer educators may alleviate the faculty shortage, allowing more qualified students to enroll in nursing programs.

REFERENCES


