



Guidance from practice teachers - A qualitative study of nursing students in practice studies



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ABSTRACT

A qualitative study conducted at two universities in Norway that examines nursing students' experiences of guidance provided by the practice teacher in practice. Different factors in practice can impact the coping ability of nursing students. Two focus group interviews were conducted, and three different perspectives emerged in the interviews: support in practice for nursing students, guidance in practice for nursing students, and reflection in practice for nursing students. Themes that arose were used to cluster and further analyze the data. The study shows that the ability to create a good relationship based on trust, interest, support and reflection can help to strengthen the practical coping skills of nursing students. Furthermore, it appears that it may not be wise to save on teacher resources in practice. Dissatisfaction and weak knowledge among students can harm society. More research to examine whether the role of the practice teacher is fundamental or whether health institutions can assume that role is recommended.

Introduction

Health institutions want qualified nurses who have good judgement; in fact, the healthcare system depends on this ability of nurses (Ministry of Education, 2008).

On the path to becoming competent decision makers, nursing students often reflect on their own actions. It is very important that they achieve self-efficacy and remain in their profession. On the road to becoming skilled nurses who can cope with the job, these students go through a bachelor's program, which consists of both theory and practice. Fifty percent of the education consists of practice in the primary and specialist health care system, which indicates the importance of gathering more knowledge about both theory and practice. A major part of the bachelor's program involves developing knowledge about the relationship between theory and practice and reflecting on related practices (Ministry of Education, 2008). The *first* year as a nursing student can be very stressful. A study showed that the demands and workload that students face are surprising to them and that the process of being able to cope with certain situations takes longer than they expect (Thorkildsen & Råholm, 2010). In the *second* year of study, students also experience a high level of stress due to unexpected, uncontrolled and uncertain aspects that arise in practice (Vråle, Borge & Nedberg, 2017). *Third-year* students with high levels of stress are more prone to present depression and need

more attention from their educational institution (Moreira & Furegato, 2013).

This article presents a study that examines nursing students' experiences of guidance provided by the practice teacher in practice in Norway.

Background

The resources of people receiving support and guidance are important for their ability to cope. An important area of improvement that has emerged in the research (Bjørndal, 2009) is the strengthening of students target and supporting them with realistic hopes. It has been emphasized that the practice teacher should pay greater attention to how support and guidance can be used to address problems (Bjørndal, 2009). The practice teacher must take into account the most important potential areas for improvement so that students are more reflective when developing their own practice (Bagheri, Taleghani, Abazari & Yousefy, 2019; Bjørndal, 2009). There is a need for a deeper philosophical awareness (Schön, 2001; Søndenå, 2009), and a need to be more reflective about current counselling practices and for more research regarding policies for nursing students. Students who are heard, recognized and supported by their practice teachers have good opportunities to become agents in their own learning processes (Bagheri et al., 2019; Kozier, Snyder, Lake & Harvey, 2008). Research found that the support of the

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practice teacher is essential in the whole study, but especially for first-year students. The connections among social support and perceived stress, coping and joy in life was examined (Coffman & Gilligan, 2002). Another study showed that guidance is important for newly qualified nurses. Newly educated nurses participated in a 3-month introduction program with close follow-up and guidance. This measure was perceived as a form of support for the nurses, which in turn strengthened the nurses' actions and learning competence (Frandsen & Mortensen, 2011).

Nurses must have competence in professional reflection in addition to critical assessment and skills to obtain and use research in their job (Erichsen, Røkholt & Utne, 2016; Nilsen, Røysing & Brynhildsen, 2002). The practice teacher's role in knowledge-based expertise is considered positive, and the reflection groups in which nurses interact stimulate reflection and increase professional engagement in practice (Erichsen et al., 2016). Nursing students in the final year of a bachelor's program experience positive guidance in practice when they feel seen and heard and achieved predictability and coping. They experience such coping positively when they gain competence through reflection on real learning situations. In the opposite cases, they experience guidance negatively on their learning (Haddeland & Söderhamn, 2013; Nilsson et al., 2019). A discrepancy can quickly arise between the content of the education and what happens in practice (Heggen & Damsgaard, 2010; Orvik, 2015; Vasset, 2018), and studies reveal the need for practical guidance for nurses for support and collaboration (Aigeltinger, Hagan & Sørli, 2012; Andreassen & Magnussen, 2016; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Nursing students' experiences of guidance reveal that the learning process is influenced by the relationship between the student and the practice teacher. A good relationship contributes to self-efficacy and trust in the guidance relationship, which is important for learning outcomes (Aigeltinger et al., 2012). One study found that practice teachers' theoretical basis, together with their experience, is important for their guidance abilities (Ulvik & Sunde, 2013).

Learning to cope is a cognitive and action-oriented process that reduces challenges and stress and contributes to avoiding a stress reaction (Bégat, Ellefsen & Severinson, 2005; Lazarus, Folkman & Visby, 2006). Nurses who have received guidance in groups perceive their decisions to be safer in relation to the patient and perceive themselves as having better insight. These nurses take on responsibilities more easily and experience personal development (Dillern & Frøysa, 2008). Coping theory (Antonovsky, 1987; Antonovsky & Lev, 2000) is the foundation of this study. Antonovsky (1987) developed the salutogenic theory called sense of coherence (SOC), which he describes as a "global orientation, a pervasive feeling of confidence that life events one faces are comprehensible, that one has the resources to cope with the demands of these events, and that these demands are meaningful and worthy of engagement". This theory has three components: meaningfulness, comprehensibility and manageability. The motivational component of meaningfulness seems to be most crucial, but successful coping depends on the SOC. Meaningfulness refers to the degree to which these demands, are seen as challenges, worthy of investment and engagement. Comprehensibility refers to the degree to which one regards stimuli from both the internal and the external environment as structured, predictable, and explicable. The third component, manageability, refers to the belief that "the resources are available to one to meet the demands posed by these stimuli" (Antonovsky, 1987).

Guidance is described in many ways; the terms counselling, coaching and mentoring are some examples of these descriptions. We will consider guidance as the educational activity in the professional area. Lauvås and Handal (2014) developed the action-reflection model. According to Lauvås and Handal (2014), practice theory is an important term in the action-reflection model. In the guidance process, reflection on action and the development of practice occur. The conversation context and the time following the guidance is important for measuring the quality of this support (Bjørndal, 2011; Skagen, 2011). There are many prescriptions in the literature for guidance, but little research has identified which guidance methods are most effective

Table 1
The respondents in the study.

University	Number in group	Gender	Age
A	2	2 W	20–30
B	9	3 M/ 6 W	20–30

(Anderson, 2015; Bjørndal, 2011; Lauvås & Handal, 2014). Meta communication is the method identified by Bjørndal (2009) and Handal and Lauvås (1999) that has the greatest development potential as it involves discussing the expectations and goals of the guideline. When guidance has ethical reflection as a focus, the student can obtain help in making more conscious choices; this can provide him/her with courage, which can reduce stress (Ulvik & Sunde, 2013).

The research question: What experiences do third-year nursing students have with guidance from practice teachers, and what is the importance of this guidance in practice studies?

Method

Design

This is a qualitative study characterized by a hermeneutical design approach according to Creswell (2014) and Kvale, Brinkmann and Anderssen (2015). It is based on informants' interpretation and construction of meaning. Two focus group interviews were conducted at nursing education in two different universities. The research adopted a retrospective perspective on the experiences of third-year nursing students who were guided by practice teachers. This study adopted an inductive approach and was conducted according to Creswell's (2014) recommendations, which describe a holistic approach that involves reflection and discovery.

Table 1.

Sample and process of informant selection

The respondents were third-year nursing students from two universities in Norway who had participated in guidance both individually and in reflection groups. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained prior to the interviews. A total of 11 informants were divided into two groups with a mix of age/gender. The dean of the universities was notified and gave permission for the study to be completed. The teachers identified students who wanted to participate in the study, and these students signed up for the interviews.

Focus-group interviews

A semi-structured interview approach was used and developed by the authors. This method is considered justifiable because of time limitations. Only the first author was the moderator of the interviews and guided the focus-group discussion according to a written set of topics. The main themes to discussion in the interviews were 1) support, 2) guidance and 3) reflection in practice for nursing students. The themes had several sub-questions. The questions were asked of both groups by the same interviewer over a 90-minute period. There was no deviation from these set questions, the interviewer monitored the conversation and interjected only to repeat a question if necessary or move on to the next. The precise wording used to lead into each question being changed a little to reflect the previous conversation. At the end, general, open-ended questions were asked to gather information that had not been previously addressed. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. These transcriptions were looked at several times to determine whether there were new perspectives and to look for bias in the material (Fangen, 2010). A pragmatic validity test revealed that the findings of this study could be used to develop the field of supervision (Fangen, 2010; Grønmo, 2016; Krueger & Casey, 2015; Malterud, 2012).

Ethical considerations

The study was approved by the Norwegian centre for Research Data (NSD), Project no. 52,518, with no additional approval required for ethical clearance. All phases of the study were conducted according to the [Declaration of Helsinki \(2001\)](#). Data were transcribed and anonymized accordingly. It was emphasized that participation was voluntary and that the informants could withdraw at any time without giving reasons.

Data analysis process

We used a Dictaphone for recording purposes, and the first author transcribed the interviews immediately afterwards. All data were erased at the end of the project. We made use of an interview guide with the following different open-ended questions about Support in practice, guidance in practice and reflection in practice. All with sub-questions. The data were analysed with [Malterud's \(2012\)](#) model of text condensation in four steps. The method of data analysis was decided upon before the interviews started, and transcription was the beginning of the analysis process ([Kvale et al., 2015](#)).

- 1 In the first step, all authors read the interview transcripts several times to obtain an overall impression and to look for topics related to guidance.
- 2 In the second step, all authors identified meaningful entities (MEs) using text pieces that addressed the topics from the first step. The MEs were then coded with a tag for categorization into code groups based on common themes.
- 3 In the third analysis step, the MEs in each code group were sorted into subgroups under each theme. MEs were moved back and forth between subgroups until we felt that all MEs were placed under the right theme. All authors worked on the subgroups one by one and summarized the content of each subgroup in a coherent and condensed text that recounted and summarized the content of the subgroup in question.
- 4 In the fourth analysis step, the authors designed an analytical text for each main code group based on the summarized texts from the previous step. Then, the authors quote that were well suited to illustrate our points.

The MEs in the interviews were compared and considered part of a whole to gain a deeper understanding of their essence. In this phase, connections among meaningful entities, codes and topics were identified. At the fourth level of the analysis, meaningful connections in various topics were discussed. Then, the overall impression of the data material was assessed. The study started with support which was the most prominent finding. A few quotes showed the meaning of this term in this context. Direct quotes from students are presented in italics and are from university A or B.

Results

Support in practice for nursing students

Received some support in practice

The informants said that students were guided by a new practice teacher every new period of practice, and many of the teachers gave the impression that they had not worked in health institutions for a long time or did not know the types of challenges the students were facing in such placement. A student said, "*There was a large difference among practice teachers; they had different abilities to build students' confidence*" (A). Some topics that were mentioned were what the practice teacher was like as a person. There were large differences between practice teachers; thus, coordination in their guidance was also different. The informants said that some practice teachers from the school guided them, but nurses from the outside were also hired for this specific guidance purpose.

Received no practical support from practice teacher

These quotes are from different students, some of whom underlined that they had expectations that the practice teacher would act as their "lawyer" (A) if they needed such support. A significant number of students did not experience support from their practice teacher: "*I felt that we did not have anyone to support us if we needed it*" (A). The students expected their practice teachers to tell them exactly what they would face in practice. In particular, the first year was difficult for many students, and only a few meetings were held. These students said that there was a gap between the school's expectations of what they would deal with in practice and what happened in practice. As one student noted, "*When it came to terms where we actually needed them, they did not do anything to help*" (A). Another student stated, "*I spoke with my practice teacher, but she was not listening to me*" (B).

Guidance in practice for nursing students

Useful guidance in practice

The students reported that when the practice teacher acted supportive and when it was possible to talk openly, trust was established in the relationship between the practice teacher and the student: "*The guidance was characterized as useful, especially when they dared to bring up difficult issues for discussion*" (B). Another main feature that characterized good guidance when the practice teacher gave good feedback and specific advice. One participant said, "*We are not perfect. I really appreciate guidance that conveys that you are not finished and can ask the stupid questions and then will receive good advice*" (B).

Inexpedient guidance in practice

Situations where students struggled in practice and needed guidance that they did not receive were the most negative experiences for students. Some of the informants said that this was most difficult in the first year as they were *thrown* into practice, and the practice teacher was only engaged during scheduled meetings. Many of the students had expectations that the teachers would have more knowledge than they had about what nursing students experience in practice. This was related to what students thought about the practice teachers' recent practice experiences: "*I spoke with the practice teacher and wasn't listened to*" (A). Inexpedient guidance was mainly characterized by a lack of trust in the relationship with the practice teacher. In these cases, students did not bring up questions. Inexpedient guidance was also characterized by the practice teachers not showing interest in the students and the students' stories: "*We feel we must be perfect all the time*" (B).

Reflection in practice for nursing students

Reflection about connection between theory and practice

The students mentioned that many of the practice teachers had not worked clinically at health institutions for several years and that they were more theoretically oriented. Much has changed in health institutions in recent years. Many of the students also agreed that there were several occasions when they did not bring up theories and subjects for discussion in the reflection groups because they were afraid to be judged by their practice teacher. Thus, it is up to the individual practice teacher to appear interested. "*Practice teachers who are very good and ask critical questions about theory and practice are the best ones*" (A). "*To make good decisions, we must reflect on both our alternatives and the situation we are in, and that is probably the idea behind support and guidance*" (B). This indicates that students are aware of their own reflections. One student thought she had no reflections on the practice teacher's support and guidance: "*I have reflected more on what teachers are trying to trivialize, what they do not want to talk about. I have reflected much more on this*" (A).

Reflection on the relationships between students and practice teachers

The quality of the relationship between the student and the practice teacher is important; when the relationship is good, students find it

meaningful to bring up certain subjects to reflect on with the group. Students reflect in cases in which the practice teacher is open with them. A strong argument that emerged through the data was that such reflection requires open and good communication between parties. Nevertheless, one student said: “*You are afraid they will not pass you in practice if you tell the truth, and then you do not ask, but some teachers are very open*” (A).

When students were comfortable, trust was established, and the relationship between students and the practice teacher was good. Students said it was meaningful to them to have a practice teacher from the school who came to visit. The informants stated that they felt safe having a familiar face visit them. Nevertheless, several students agreed that there were cases where they felt that they could not bring up matters that were important to them. It depended on whether they felt safe being open, which may be due to the balance of power that exists in practice teacher-student relationships.

Discussion

This study identified some important factors in the coping ability of nursing students when they are guided in practice studies. The data were based solely on the students’ opinions of how they experienced their guidance. Furthermore, this study investigated what support, guidance and reflection is needed to cope in practice and prevent stress. Antonovsky (1987) and Antonovsky and Lev’s (2000) theory about coping related to manageability has been validated; support from practice teachers is one of the main components in such manageability. The opposite of coping is a stress reaction due to a lack of support from practice teachers and a lack of manageability (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Lazarus et al., 2006). Thus, students’ self-efficacy is important in regard to their opinions about the support they receive and their perceptions of such support (Bandura, 1997; Lazarus et al., 2006).

Support in practice for nursing students

Most of the students in this study had expectations that their practice teacher would provide support, but many of them reported that they experienced the opposite. They commented that several practice teachers had not worked in clinics for many years. They reported a gap between the school’s expectations of what they would deal with in practice and what happened in practice. Hired nurses, who worked in hospitals or municipalities, were also used as practice teachers and mentioned in the interviews. However, it was not clear whether they provided more or less support to the students in practice. This may be a factor that contributes to the large differences between the practice teachers.

We know that support is a key factor in coping (Antonovsky, 1987; Antonovsky & Lev, 2000). Therefore, it is crucial to examine whether students experience support in practice, especially from the practice teacher. Indications that they perceived the relationship between the student and the practice teacher is necessarily. Trust and symmetry in the power relationship were important elements. In particular, the first year was difficult for many students, and they had few guidance meetings. The way that each student utilizes available teacher support is a key factor, in line with previous research (Antonovsky & Lev, 2000; Bégat et al., 2005; Kozier et al., 2008). This may indicate that these students need more support than the school is aware of, which can be demonstrated by the fact that nursing students feel the greatest work pressure and are often least satisfied with their education (Heggen & Damsgaard, 2010). Support is one of the main aspects of good guidance; it is important for coping with and reducing stress, and practice and education should emphasize good support.

Guidance in practice for nursing students

The practice teacher evaluates the student, which gives a certain power to the practice teacher. Some students feel that they must be perfect all the time and admit that they are not perfect. Additionally, the

finding that the students censored themselves when trust was missing in the relationship is important. The quality of guidance and the aftermath of meta communication (Bjørndal, 2011; Høihilder, 2011; Lauvås & Handal, 2014) may be measures to ensure the equal understanding of expectations about such guidance and the potential for developing practice. Practice teachers must guide students in such a way that the students perceive themselves as heard, recognized and supported in a relationship of trust (Bjørndal, 2011; Kozier et al., 2008). The students emphasized that this experience was more pressing the first year, and other studies (Coffman & Gilligan, 2002; Frandsen & Mortensen, 2011) have demonstrated the importance of guidance and the connection between practice and theory (Andreassen & Magnussen, 2016; Bagheri et al., 2019; Heggen & Damsgaard, 2010; Vasset, 2018). The students also noted that there were large differences between practice teachers, which may be an indication that an increase in the overall quality of guidance is needed to avoid major differences. However, this study did not identify what background or competence the individual practice teachers had.

Reflection in practice for nursing students

It is crucial that students feel free to bring up topics for reflection with reflection partners and that they experience a climate in which they can develop. The relationship between the student and the practice teacher is important, and this study indicates that practice teachers who were good at asking critical questions about theory and practice were the best. In this study, the respondents said that they were afraid of not getting their practice approved and thus did not always tell the truth. Nursing students need to feel safe; research has reported that this will help nursing students reflect and learn more (Andreassen & Magnussen, 2016; Bagheri et al., 2019; Erichsen et al., 2016; Haddeland & Söderhamn, 2013; Nilsen et al., 2002) and be more secure practitioners in the future (Bégat et al., 2005). It is necessary to become more reflective about guidance practice (Bjørndal, 2009; Schön, 2001; Søndenå, 2009).

Students felt *thrown into practice* and felt stressed about unexpected situations and their workload (Thorkildsen & Råholm, 2010; Vråle et al., 2017). Studies have described the importance of knowledge-based skilled nurses who use their own judgement and are trained in reflection (Bandura, 1997; Haddeland & Söderhamn, 2013). Furthermore, we know that ethical reflection as a focus can reduce stress (Ulvik & Sunde, 2013). This study revealed that when practice teachers were open and trusted, their guidance led to reflection, communication and interaction. Reflection is the core of developing nursing knowledge (Frandsen & Mortensen, 2010; Handal & Lauvås, 1999). The challenges of producing good reflections can be related to time pressure, a lack of guidance training for the practice teacher or a lack of joint peer interaction.

Method criticism

There were two focus group interviews of nursing students in this study. At one of the educational institutions, many of the intended informants were absent. Thus, that group was small. However, the remaining informants had lively discussions.

Conclusion

Some nursing students were not satisfied with the support, guidance and reflection that they received from practice teachers. The ability to create a good relationship based on trust, interest, support and reflection can help to strengthen the practical coping skills of nursing students. When the students were given specific advice and tips and when they were able to gain theoretical knowledge, their satisfaction increased. This finding is corroborated by previous research. It is useful to examine this issue from the students’ perspective.

There is a need for dialog and a good interpersonal climate and inter-agency cooperation to develop the nursing students in the field of practice. Students must be able to ask stupid questions and get good advice, without being offended. The best competence training of nurses in matters concerning the right communication technique will also enable them to respond adequately and humanely to the patient's expectations in the future. The study shows that it may not be wise to save on teacher resources in practice. Approximately 50% of the study that takes place in the field of practice is mentioned. Dissatisfaction and weak knowledge among students can harm society.

Limitations and further research

Practice support and guidance provided by educational institutions is characterized by a lack of research in general. The role of the practice teacher in the field was assessed, but little research has been conducted before. More research to examine whether the role of the practice teacher is fundamental or whether health institutions can assume that role is recommended. Mastering practice should be a further focus as the benefits can be of great importance for nurses in remaining in their profession.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Supplementary materials

Supplementary material associated with this article can be found, in the online version, at doi:10.1016/j.ijedro.2020.100026.

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