

Category: Nursing education

Study type: Qualitative, longitudinal study

Author's declarative title: Nurse educators must demonstrate care, competence and integrity to enhance students' trust in them

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Commentary on: Varagona, LM., Hold, JL. Nursing students' perceptions of faculty trustworthiness: Thematic analysis of a longitudinal study. *Nurse Education Today*. 2018 Oct 25;72:27-31. doi: 10.1016/j.nedt.2018.10.008.

Commentary

Implications for practice

- Student nurses' trust of nurse educators is dependent on faculty demonstration of care, commitment, competence and professionalism.
- Larger-scale studies of factors influencing student nurses' trust in Faculty members – and the impact of trust on outcomes - are required, with utilization of both qualitative and quantitative approaches.

Context

The professional relationship between nurse educators and nursing students is an important factor in enhancing the academic and clinical development of learners. As a result, researchers have sought to understand the relationship more fully, including factors such as power dynamics¹ and the importance of effective relationships in promoting a sense of 'belonging' among students². The study by Varagona and Hold³ extends this evidence base by focusing on trustworthiness of academic staff. Though this has been explored in other areas of higher education, little work has been done specifically on trustworthiness as perceived by nursing students.

Methods

The researchers used a focus group approach to gather data from two cohorts of nursing students from a University in the Southeastern United States. Data were collected longitudinally, with focus groups held at three stages over a two-year period, allowing the researchers to identify changes in student perceptions as they moved through the curriculum. Transcripts from focus groups were read and coded manually, with researchers independently generating codes before comparing and corroborating findings.

Findings

Student nurses' trust in their faculty developed as they progressed through their curriculum. Initial perceptions sometimes stemmed from students' pre-conceived ideas, shaped by feedback from peers regarding staff members. As students progressed through the nursing programme, trust in

academic staff was gained or lost as a result of specific characteristics or behaviours displayed by the faculty.

The researchers identified three core themes that supported the development of nursing students' trust in their educators. 'Giving of oneself' encompassed nurse educators being caring, responsive and approachable; 'Being competent' related to educators being knowledgeable, engaging and prepared for lectures; 'Having integrity' linked to the demonstration, by faculty members, of open-mindedness, respect and fairness.

Commentary

This is an innovative study focusing on student perception of trustworthiness of nurse academics – an area which has been somewhat overlooked in previous research. The work does have some limitations, notably that the focus group facilitators knew the students (which may have influenced responses) and that the sample was taken from a single nursing programme in one American University, which may impact on the generalizability of findings.

Nonetheless, Varagona and Hold have provided a useful perspective on the evidence-base surrounding faculty characteristics valued by student nurses. Much of the previous literature in this area focuses on specific academic characteristics. For example, there has been much debate surrounding the concept of clinical credibility in nurse educators, with some authors arguing that this is a critical prerequisite for teaching student nurses, whilst others suggesting that teaching competence can be more valued and valuable than recent exposure to clinical practice.⁴ In other papers, functional factors such as consistency in academic supervision are viewed as critical⁵, whilst other papers identify the importance of specific characteristics in nurse educators, such as empathy⁶.

Varagona and Hold have identified that students want their academics to be more than just effective and efficient. Though some of their themes align with those already extant in the literature (e.g. 'being competent' could be seen as having close links to clinical credibility), their findings are much broader. They recognise that effective student-lecturer relationships are about more than completion of a teaching and supervision role – they require the development of student trust in, and respect of, the nursing faculty, through academics demonstrating integrity, competence, fairness and compassion. In short, Varagona and Hold show us that the professional behaviours inherent in nurses working in clinical practice are just as important in those dedicated to teaching the workforce of tomorrow.

References

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Competing interests of commentary

DB is an Associate Editor of Evidence-Based Nursing Journal.