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Effective communication and university progression: reflections of mature aged women nursing students

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Referred article

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Abstract

This article overviews a recent research study which investigated the factors that characterise a university environment for mature aged women nursing students. The study completed in 2000, was located in a critical feminist framework and used interviewing and reflective journalling as the research methods. Five pre-registration nursing students from a rural university in Australia were participants in the study. Following a thematic analysis the results revealed that effective intrapersonal relationships were equally as important as their interpersonal relationships with their lecturers. Recommendations for further research and associated educational implications are also discussed.

Effective Communication and University Progression: Reflections of Mature Aged Women Nursing Students

Introduction

Although it is evident that all university students experience their education in unique and different ways, it could be argued that many academics would assume there is a relationship between student's successful university progression and effective student-academic interactions. However, when one examines the educational literature concerning this issue to date, it is apparent that there appears to be a dearth of available research.

Furthermore, when one narrows the lens to consider the university environment for nursing students it maybe further argued that successful progression in education should be closely linked to effective interactions with caring nursing academics. The literature has already revealed that care, support and nurturing can be, and are part of positive educational practices for many nursing students (Morton-Cooper & Palmer 1995; Glass & Walter 1998; Glass & Walter 2000). Moreover, as nurseries are upheld as environments, which emphasise care, support and nurturing, arguably university nursing should be a nursery for our future registered nurses. As such, nurseries and their associated characteristics should adequately prepare students for their future roles as nursing professionals. With these critical factors in place student nurses could be well prepared for nursing practice in areas which emphasise care, support and nurturing.

As a consequence of the generation of these thoughts the authors questioned are these ideas just rhetoric or in fact reality for contemporary nursing students. As such, a recent research study (Rennie 2000) conducted in a rural university in Australia, explored and investigated to what degree matured aged nursing students' experience the characteristics of a nursery within a university environment.

Research aims

The aims of this research study were to:
❑ explore the unique characteristics of the nursery within the university environment from the experiences of matured aged women (MAW) nursing students,
❑ investigate to what degree MAW experience these characteristics of a nursery within the university environment, and,
❑ identify the perceptions of the university environment for nursing students.
Taking into account the above aims the research question was brought into focus. The question was:

What are the factors that characterise the university environment for mature aged women students in a pre-registration nursing degree?

Research Design
Theoretical decisions

The research was located in critical paradigm using feminist methodology. The decision to work from within this framework was drawn from our own and others epistemological belief that women and nurses are oppressed (Campbell & Bunting1991; Carryer 1995; Speedy 1997; Glass & Davis 1998).

As critical feminist research framing involves potential or actual enlightenment, empowerment and transformation, such a framework was considered appropriate for a project working with women nursing students. Enlightenment is identified as a fundamental concept of critical feminist theory (Glass 2000). By engaging in self and/or group reflective activity this concept concerns a process of seeing oneself in a new transformative way. As such, this process also allows each individual to

identify their socio-political conditions and reality thereby creating opportunities for empowerment (Cheek & Rudge1994; Biley 1996). Furthermore, as empowerment concerns 'movement' from one's present state of awareness to positive personal and professional actions and interactions participants maybe able to release themselves from socio-political inequities for which they have been previously restrained.

Therefore, using a critical feminist framework allows opportunities for consciousness raising by identifying any oppressive experiences, developing emancipatory solutions, and subsequently reaching a position of self-enlightenment. As a consequence, it was aimed for the MAW participants to be involved in a project, which was potentially or actually a transformative emancipatory process.

Methodological decisions
As qualitative research considers questions that involve human consciousness, subjectivity, valuing humans and their experiences (Taylor 1998) a qualitative approach was adopted. Qualitative methods focus on the discovery of knowledge through the disclosure of individuals subjective experience, wherein a range of diverse strategies can be used such as personal experience, interviews and observation thereby validating subjectivity and knowledge (Crowe 1998). Furthermore, when qualitative methods are embedded in feminist framing participants develop a safety with self reflexivity and agency regarding their experiences (Lather 1991).

As well, our central feminist concern was focused on providing women with opportunities to find their voice by offering the women a non-threatening environment in which to tell their own story and also be heard. The methods chosen were oral narrative/interviewing and reflective journalling. The oral narrative technique has been identified as an important method of discovering the social experiences of silenced women (Kelly 1995; Glass & Walter 1998). Therefore, as feminists have strongly asserted women are particularly vulnerable to silencing it was considered critical to use oral narrative as an empowering feminist research method thereby reclaiming the voices of silenced women.

The interviews with the participants were reflexive in approach and used semi-structured open-ended questions. This critical feminist approach afforded many opportunities for researchers to validate participant's feelings. In this research validation was not only part of the process, the authors wanted to ensure the participants were able to tell their story in whatever way they chose. As well, information and knowledge was exchanged from both researcher and each participant with the intent of subsequent emancipation (Cottrell & Letherby 1993; Carryer 1995; Anderson 1998).

As indicated above the second method was reflective journalling. Street (1995) has suggested that journalling, as a research method is a means for tracking growth through critical periods. Furthermore, when researcher's journal it is a way of situating themselves directly within a research process and as such, creates further opportunities to reflect on the way researchers are also affected by their research (Walter, Davis & Glass 1999).

In this research the researcher journalled her own experiences of the project and this method was used solely by the researcher. Being a researcher/participant involved maintaining a journal throughout the duration of the project. Furthermore, as the researcher was also a MAW student in another nursing degree, her reflections were connected and intertwined throughout the story telling of the other participants. Therefore, reflective journalling as a researcher/participant offered another deliberate means of becoming directly embedded in this research. As such, the process of

intersubjectivity (Walter et al 1999) was an effective strategy, which allowed a deep understanding of the complexity of issues which the researcher confronted.

Selection of Participants
Following institutional ethical approval participant selection commenced. The participants were selected from a pre-registration Bachelor of Nursing degree programme. The authors deemed it useful to invite students who had been enrolled at university for at least one year to participate in the research. It was considered that these students would have more experiences to draw upon regarding being in a university environment and possibly were more comfortable disclosing their experiences than beginning students. Verbal and written invitations to participate in the research were provided to students. From the invitations nine possible participants demonstrated an interest in the research. When it was time to arrange interviews five women signed the research consent forms and actually participated in the study. All of these participants were MAW and were enrolled in second year of their programme.

Results
The most consistent re-occurring theme in this research was that the participants strongly linked their university progression to the attainment of healthy effective relationships. In particular, the MAW emphasised the importance of two key relationships those being: — an effective intrapersonal relationship and effective interpersonal relationships with their lecturers. Furthermore, it appeared that these women needed a healthy relationship with themselves in order to have positive relationships with their lecturers. These relationships for all of these women were direct, consistent and interwoven. The following discusses these findings more comprehensively by way of pseudonyms.

Intrapersonal relationships—Getting in touch with themselves
As is evidenced in contemporary literature it is clearly apparent that understanding self critically effects and affects the degrees of satisfaction in interpersonal relationships (Glass 1999). In regards to understanding oneself intrapersonally it is evident that self is multi-faceted, constantly changing and strongly affected by relationships with others (Griffiths 1995; Meyers 1997). As such, ones self-awareness is directly linked to the roles that one plays in their own lives (Ulrich 1996).

For the MAW in this research the effectiveness of their interpersonal interactions definitely hinged on their self-concept. If they were handling university, their multiple roles and family responsibilities and interacting well with university lecturers they felt good. However, if the reverse was occurring the women experienced self-doubt, questioned whether they should be enrolled in a degree and often felt considerably overwhelmed.

For example, in relation to their self concept Amber and also Carrie reflected on positive interactions with a lecturer which resulted in them feeling good and boosting their self - concept. Amber said,

> I went to see a lecturer about something last semester and they just said out of the blue - I meant to say congratulations! You got the top mark in the exam, and [I was shocked] and thought oh God [lecturers] actually notice.

Carrie related,

> I went to see a lecturer about something I was having trouble with and it felt really nice that they seemed to have a genuine interest. When I showed them my work I still remember the comment they made – [the lecturer said] "I really looked forward to reading your [essay]". I felt really good.

Conversely, with negative interpersonal interactions Peta said,

> It is stagnant with that lecturer, there is no way in the world when you get negative feedback from them that you can feel good about anything… I have always had low self-esteem and [that particular lecturer] has not done anything for me except make me dislike them.

In addition, it appeared that the women experienced internal pressures related to their sense of self and external pressures primarily from their immediate families. Although internal and external pressures were individual and expressed differently, all of the women simultaneously experienced both types of pressures. In relation to vulnerability/fragility and strength Lee identified internal pressure for her as constant struggle with self-doubt. She commented,

> as a mature age student I have a lot of self-doubt and I wonder whether I am really dumb and shouldn't sound so stupid when [I] ask questions.

It appeared that she was struggling with different yet the same, role expectations and that impacted on her sense of self. She continued,

> the emotional stuff that rotates around your role as a mother and then your responsibilities as a student which are conflicting to a certain extent. [All my roles] merge into one but at the same time [they] are also very different.

In relation to a distinct external pressure, Lee said,

> It wasn't only myself who had to adjust or try to merge a bit more effectively, the children had to change their ways… Coming to [university] has not been a particularly easy task. I also have never had any support from my ex-partner. And two years down the track it still has not been acknowledged that I go to university.

Whereas, internal pressure for Jazz, was about experiences of being silenced prior to commencing university and subsequently as a student attempting to maintain her inner strength to speak out. Before university she said she would,

> hand over my voice and power. I just went into a slump … but then there was a rage inside of me and I just had to scream … [I] had isolated [myself] from people … bottled up a lot of feelings and not talked about them….

However, as a consequence of 'finding' her voice, she then spoke of strategies to maintain her strength when she experienced internal pressures. She reflected,

> [I] now use [other ways] to work stuff out in my life. I am constantly reflective on my life so when things come up, I [deal] with them right then and there. It might mean that I just drop out of the world for a day … but I just won't let [the pressures] snowball anymore.

Interpersonal relationships — Getting in touch with lecturers
The ability of the MAW to move in and out of their roles effectively also equally hinged on the development of positive interpersonal relationships at the university. The MAW indicated a need to identify which university lecturers were able to support them in their quest to gain their degree. Consistently for these women university survival and success meant getting along with their lecturers.

When they spoke of their university experiences they were expressed as either positive or negative interactions and were sustained as that, over the eighteen months since their enrolment. Therefore, for each individual woman they always had fulfilling or non-fulfilling interactions with specific lecturers, it was never positive one day and negative the next. To that end, they always were drawn to the lecturers who they believed supported them and at all costs avoided the ones with whom they had negative interactions.

For all of the MAW they identified successful progression was intricately linked to their experiences with enthusiastic lecturers who treated them in an equal manner and validated them as students and also MAW. When all these factors came into 'play' they felt empowered. In regard to enthusiasm, Lee said,

> certain lecturers were so available and just so incredibly supportive and enthusiastic. They are great teachers and they want to share their knowledge and really impart what they know.

Conversely non-fulfilling interactions were reflected by Lee like this,

> with some lecturers who have the knowledge but they own it and they don't want to share it. So therefore the difficulty is that when you don't understand it and you make approaches to them and [you] are told to go and read a text book.

Being treated equally was expressed by Amber when she said,

> [Lecturers] don't mind you asking questions, they don't make you feel like an idiot if you don't understand something, They make you feel more at ease to ask questions, more motivated to go and learn yourself.

Whereas the flipside for Amber was reflected as this,

> [A particular lecturer] makes you feel like an idiot if you don't understand something. That makes you feel more at uneasy about asking questions.

In regard to validation Jazz reflected,

> I had to speak to a [specific lecturer] about a [subject matter], I was really nervous and apprehensive about approaching them. [This lecturer] was incredibly supportive about [my] position of being a woman, a mother, and as a person. They understood and were supportive of me and that was great. It was so nice to have that from an unexpected [source].

In contrast, Jazz's interactions concerning invalidation were focused on lack of care for her as a student. She remembered,

> The [lecturer] constantly puts out to me that they don't care. [The lecturer] doesn't care about me as a student or about me in any context really. There is absolutely no personal level of caring as a teacher.

In regard to Lee her interpersonal interactions which resulted in empowerment concerned her feeling able to speak and 'finally' feeling heard. She remembered one of those interactions like this,

> [it was about] actually having a voice for the first time. I really don't feel I have had that opportunity [before] and yet here, [at the university] the support has been such that I have been … able to have a voice and be able to be heard and to move away from being afraid to speak. [This] is empowering in itself. So it's a belief in me too. It's so nice when [lecturers] care enough and believe in you as a person, it's a great feeling , it makes you stronger.

Unfortunately for Lee there was also interactions which were disempowering. What is apparent in the next statement is her associated disillusionment with this interpersonal interaction. She recalled,

> it is very frustrating [and] intimidating] as a student to try, to approach a lecturer who you hold in a higher sense, because they have the knowledge and the ability, and you are just the student and trying to learn . And you come up against a brick wall.

Conclusion

When reflecting back on this research project what became clearly evident was that the university environment revealed a complexity of intrapersonal and interpersonal relationships for MAW. It was consistently apparent that these university students needed effective interpersonal relationships and a healthy self-concept for their survival. This in its own right is most significant for university students and for those working in university environments.

In regard to educational implications the authors would argue that this research provides the necessary motivation and stimulation for other researchers to extend these ideas into related projects. With that said, we would recommend that further qualitative research is necessary in the following areas.

- ❑ An exploration of the lived experiences of MAW nursing students across each year of a programme to enable identification of whether positive strategies put in place early into a programme maybe enhanced in latter years.
- ❑ An exploration of student/faculty interactions regarding teaching/learning strategies that result in the promotion of self-esteem.
- ❑ An investigation of curriculum designs and associated teaching/learning strategies that include mentoring and caring as integral components of classroom teaching.
- ❑ An investigation of flexibility within Bachelor of Nursing programmes that strongly support the specific needs of MAW in nursing education.
- ❑ An exploration of the degree to which positive interpersonal communication in educational settings affects and effects future nursing practice.

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