



ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Nursing students' perceptions toward the nursing profession from clinical practicum in a baccalaureate nursing program—A qualitative study

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Abstract The purpose of this study was to explore senior nursing students' perceptions toward the nursing profession and their experiences in clinical practicum in Taiwan. This study used semistructured interview guides and unstructured face-to-face dialogue with the participants based on a qualitative method. A purposive sample with a snowball method from a baccalaureate nursing program in Southern Taiwan was used to recruit participants. A total of 30 senior nursing students participated in this study. Data were collected from February to May 2011. The interviews were transcribed *verbatim*, and data were analyzed based on the phenomenological approach of qualitative methodology. Data were categorized into three major themes: in-depth recognition of nursing, recognition of the meaning and value of life, and decision conflicts for being a nurse. The findings of the study not only help nursing educators further understand the educational effects of clinical practicum, but also provide information for managers of medical organizations to recruit and train newly graduated nurses.

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Introduction

The current and growing shortage of nurses is a global issue, and nursing recruitment and retention are internationally

recognized priorities [1]. It was estimated that 25% of nursing students withdrew from the nursing program before qualifying as a nurse in the United Kingdom [2]. In Taiwan, on average there were 7% of baccalaureate nursing students who withdrew annually before qualifying from 2002 to 2006 [3]. The withdrawal rate of nursing students in Taiwan is lower than that in the UK, which may mean that nursing students were willing to study nursing whether or not they have the potential to be nurses in Taiwan.

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Regarding the intent to be a nurse, this was 85% for nursing students in Taiwan [4]. The passing rate of the National Licensure Examination for Registered Nurses among baccalaureate nursing students in Taiwan is high (82.3–87.2%), but only 59% of licensed nurses entered the workplace [5,6], and 32% of new nurses intended to quit during the first 3 months of their job [7]. The average employment rate of baccalaureate nursing students is declining; for instance, the rate was 83.08% in 2002, 87.41% in 2003, 87.32% in 2004, and 83.37% in 2005 [3]. In the United States, the 1st-year turnover rates ranged from 30% to 47%, and the turnover rate within 2 years was about 25% [8]. Why are there high turnover rates both in Taiwan and in the United States? The reason may consist in the gap between perceptions and experiences for nursing students and new graduate nurses. Moreover, the discrepancy between clinical experiences of nursing practicum and the actual requirements for healthcare employers may influence the new graduate nurses' readiness to practice and remain in the nursing field [9]. Therefore, efforts aimed at encouraging nursing students to complete their training and retaining newly licensed nurses in their jobs in the healthcare delivery system should receive the utmost attention.

In nursing education, clinical practicum of the baccalaureate nursing program is the bridge by which nursing students become a "real nurse" [10]. The transition from academic knowledge to the clinical practicum is widely recognized as a period of stress, challenges, role adjustment, and reality shock [11]. Clinical practicum constitutes over 50% of nursing professional curricula of the baccalaureate nursing program in Taiwan. Learning from clinical practicum is an important developmental process for nursing students. Clinical practice plays an important role in developing professional attitude, and it helps students achieve clinical competence. In addition, nursing students obtain the skills of patient care, professional communication, and the capabilities of problem-solving, psychomotor skills, and critical thinking. They also improve their socialization and professional role confidence [12,13]. Clinical experiences can help the students attain a gradual sense of belonging to the nursing profession [14,15]. In our nursing program, the teaching strategies in clinical practicum are diverse, including hands-on practice, problem-based learning, concept-mapping, reflective journaling, and role modeling.

The gaps between nursing education and clinical environments of healthcare delivery system may lead the nursing students to choose careers outside nursing [16]. How to motivate nursing students' interest in the nursing profession and to further encourage them to choose nursing as a career after graduation are very important in addressing the nursing shortage. Previous studies in Taiwan reported that perceptions of satisfaction and stress from clinical experiences were the main influences on the nursing students to choose nursing as their career [4,17]. The negative experiences from clinical practicum may cause the nursing students to hesitate about entering nursing work. Therefore, changing the perceptions of clinical experiences and decreasing conflicts and stress from clinical situations are critical to retain the nursing students in the healthcare delivery system. The purpose of this study

was to explore the experiences and perceptions of nursing students in clinical practicum toward the nursing profession. It is expected that the results of this study will provide not only information for nursing educators in order to improve student's satisfaction and encourage them to enter nursing work after graduation, but also for managers of medical organizations in their efforts to recruit and train newly graduated nurses.

Methods

Study design and sampling

This study was a qualitative study using a phenomenological approach based on interviews with 30 senior students from a baccalaureate nursing program in southern Taiwan. The baccalaureate nursing program complied with the national guidelines, lasting 4 years. This study used unstructured dialogues to ensure that specific sets of topics were covered by the data collection [18]. This method is used in the phenomenological approach [19,20]. We used a purposive sampling with a snowballing method to recruit participants. Sample enrolment in this study continued until data saturation had been observed. The enrolment criteria included the following: (1) participants were senior nursing students; (2) they had completed all courses of clinical practicum; (3) and they were willing to participate in the study.

Procedure of data collection

Data were recorded through semistructured guidelines as a starting point, after which the open-ended and unstructured interviews were conducted in a quiet classroom [21]. Each interview lasted for approximately 1–1.5 hours. The interviews commenced with general open-ended questions, and the in-depth interview technique was used in this study. Guideline questions included: "What viewpoints of nursing did you recognize from previous experiences of clinical practicum?" and "What influence of nursing did you recognize from previous experiences of clinical practicum?" The interviews were conducted with supplementary inquiries that explored participants' responses regarding the recognition development of nursing. To guarantee that the original statements were preserved and used in the description of the findings, interviews were taped and transcribed text by the first author.

Data analysis

The data of this study were analyzed according to Colaizzi's framework [22]. The interview files were transcribed from recordings to text to form the significant statements as the data for analysis in this study. After deliberate reading of the text, the researcher extracted the meanings of perceptions and experiences of nursing students. Formulated meanings were organized into themes by putting the transcripts with similar contents together. The explicit descriptions were provided afterward. During the deduction process, the inspection of the

text information was carried out back and forth by the researchers to increase the depth and breadth of the theme. This rigorous assessment was based on the four qualitative research criteria put forward by Lincoln and Guba [23]: credibility, transferability, dependability, and conformability.

The researcher received qualitative curriculum training and had clinical practicum teaching experience of 23 years, which would help the individual participant enter the interview situation and build a trustworthy relationship. No prejudices or personal opinions were involved in the interview process, and semistructured guidelines were adopted to guide interviewees to express their thoughts and experiences as far as possible. Interview data were transcribed into texts of detailed and in-depth descriptions and then identified by interviewees. Key points, including interaction during the interview process and nonverbal information of the interviewee, were recorded by the researcher. These provide the researcher with extra data for reflective thinking, auditing process, and depth of the exploration. The researcher avoided commenting on the interviewee's opinions and experiences based on his own perceived notions. Peer debriefing or reviewing of the data and codebooks was conducted with a qualitative research expert. The qualitative research expert conducted an audit following the auditable trail of descriptions of codebooks to assess the consistency between data and findings [24,25].

Two weeks after the reliability assessment by the text analyst, some paragraphs of the analyzed texts were randomly selected to reassess and compare with the original classification by the researcher, demonstrating a consistency of 95%. As for the intercoder reliability assessment by the different text analysts, the researcher and another qualitative expert in data analysis worked together to select a part of the text randomly and analyze it separately, achieving up to 88% consistency for the preliminary analysis results. Peer debriefing achieved final accuracy and consistency of results [25]. Moreover, all the information achieved in the research process, including record, text, and audio files, were saved and collected as a reference for future analysis and interpretation to strengthen the recognition degree of the research results.

Ethical considerations

The research project was approved by the Institutional Review Board (KMUH-IRB-990244). All participants were given information about this study. Participants gave written consent to participate in the research, and a signed research contract confirmed that data would be recorded and stored in secure files. We also assured students that their participation had nothing to do with their course grade. Participants could withdraw during the process of interview. After completing the interviews, we gave the students a gift as a token of appreciation for participating in this study. In addition, all interviewees involved in the research were recorded with code names to protect their privacy, and the interview information was only applied for academic research reference. The audiotapes would be destroyed 3 years after study publication.

Results

Thirty senior nursing students, aged 21–23 years (mean 21.12 ± 0.59), participated in the study. Prevailing categories from the individual interviews were classified into three themes: in-depth recognition of nursing, recognition of the meaning and value of life, and decision conflicts for being a nurse.

In-depth recognition of nursing

This theme refers to the transformation experiences of understanding nursing from classroom knowledge and previous experiences to the clinical practicum by the observation and practice in the clinical settings. From the experiences of the real clinical situations, nursing students clarified their misconceptions toward nursing and recognized more deeply what is nursing.

Students experienced real clinical situations and had been affected to develop the competencies of cognition, affection, and skills. For students, their original impression and opinions about nursing were acquired from classroom lectures and nursing experiences shared by educators, clinical preceptors, and senior nursing students before clinical practicum. One participant commented, "I excluded nursing for previous impressions that senior staff members bullied novices in medical environments. But I had found them misconceptions; I attentively started to know the work environment and identify to professional nursing (what is nursing?) after the clinical practicum." Some students stated that they had new feelings toward and understanding of nursing work which was different from their previous impressions. Most students found that they had a positive feedback and a sense of achievement from taking care of patients and their families. One participant stated, "I got the positive encouragements and feedback from patients or their families and discovered the value of my own existence from the process of patient care in clinical practicum." Students felt stressed and incompetent about abilities of nursing care from clinical situations, but they could develop more endurance and potential after experiencing their limitations. One student said "I must improve the limitations that I was unable to be competent in patients' care sometimes." "I had got diverse viewpoints about the nursing profession; however, I was willing to treat the patient as to treat the family member after practicing in clinical settings." One participant stated, "During the learning process, I made an effort to learn more nursing knowledge, skills, and nursing core competencies. I strived to improve my nursing abilities so that I could contribute these skills to caring for the patients." Students described that they had learned to think positively and resist the stress of nursing practicum from their clinical experiences. One participant stated, "My endurance of frustrations had been improved and the vision of life was better than before from training and pondering over the available talented nurse."

Students recognized the essence of nursing, the characteristics of nursing work, the responsibilities of nurses, and the prestige of the nursing profession through clinical experiences. Most students stated that, "Nursing work is

tough and hard.” “The nursing occupation is not a career for making money.” “Nursing is a job with respect,” and “Nursing work values conscience.” Several students commented that, “Most of the nurses have the competencies of competent patients care abilities, rich knowledge of science, critical thinking, caring, empathy and the special characteristics of helping other people with enthusiasm.” Furthermore, students had a deeper understanding of the real role of nurses; they reevaluated their choices of the nursing program and remodeled their goals of careers for the graduation. One participant expressed that “...nursing is a work with respect..., I did everything possible to prepare for the role of nursing in order to work in health-care delivery systems. But I planned to work as a nurse for only a period of time, and then study the master’s program of nursing or change jobs because the nursing workload was so heavy that it may disturb a regular life.”

Recognition of the meaning and value of life

This theme refers to realizing the significance of life and health. Students expressed that they experienced the suffering process from taking care of the terminal or seriously disabled patients, and thereby realized the significance of life. In addition, from negative experiences of patient care, students realized the significance of intimate support systems and the meaning of being. They treasured daily life and could face the death issue with greater confidence.

Students expressed that they appreciated having intimate family support systems. One student stated, “Why were the aging and seriously ill patients abandoned by their families?” “I treasured what I had at present and was more concerned about my family members than before.” Several students felt that their families approved and praised their change of life.” Students were more concerned about others and family members than before. They comprehended the meaning and value of life in a profound way and seized the day from the experiences of patients.

Most of the students felt helpless and grieved when they faced dying patients who were not aware of their real illness condition. The students were at a loss for how to take care of terminal or dying patients with physical, psychological, social, and spiritual problems. One participant said, “I observed the dying patient suffering from intense pain and felt empathy, but I could do nothing to relieve his/her suffering and pain,” and “A patient (with a seriously terminal disease) asked me how to end her life because she didn’t know how to live in the real world.” “I (the patient) was not a useful person, but had any significance for life to increase family member’s burden.” Students asked, “Why did the terminal patient lie down on the bed to use the mechanical ventilator for extending life?” “Why were the family members unable to realize the patient’s pain and suffering?” “They (family members) faced medical dilemmas.” The above situations had strong impacts on the students and prompted the students to discuss issues such as signing a living will and Do Not Resuscitate form before death and the influences of culture on death.

Decision conflicts for being a nurse

This theme refers to the difficulties of deciding to become a nurse. Concerns over working environment and professional competencies could make nursing students hesitate to become nurses. Nursing students decide to become a nurse through the identification of one’s competence of nursing in the nursing practicum. At the same time, students may decide not to be a nurse due to negative perceptions toward nursing and unsatisfactory nursing work environments.

Identifying oneself as a professional nurse represents more than obtaining knowledge and skills of nursing. Learning, exploring, and examining in the nursing practicum is the process of developing self-identity as a nurse for nursing students. Several students realized that clinical practicum led them to promote professional knowledge, master patient care skills, judge clinical situations logically, and communicate with patients and their families in order to provide individual nursing care. One student stated, “I found myself to be patient, caring, helping people and empathetic to become a nurse competently. “I was respected because I was concerned about the body of patients and consoled them.” One participant said, “I hoped to be a doctor to help the patients treat their health problems. But when I was enrolled in the college of nursing, I could be a nurse that takes responsibility to care for the patients joyfully.” Nursing students comprehended the merit of nursing and looked forward to the nursing work after clinical practicum.

Some students hesitated to enter a nursing career due to the negative viewpoints toward nursing and criticism of unsatisfactory nursing work environments. Students mentioned that the workload/salary ratio is unbalanced and considered nursing a high-risk job. One participant said, “The nursing staffs stand in the forefront of patient care, so there is a high possibility that they may encounter infectious contaminating diseases and injure their physical safety. So, I thought the nursing work didn’t obtain proper reward and cost.” The other student stated, “I could not imagine nursing work was harder than my imagination.” “I thought that I was not a strong person to be a nurse.” “Although I intended to do nursing work I still experienced worry and fear.” “I could decide my nursing career if I had the potential to be a nurse,” and “I was not sure that I really suited the nursing work from the performance of nursing.” The other participant stated, “I held a complicated mood with both love and hate because there were unfair issues in the nursing working environments like salary, taking care of a number of patients, and interactions with interprofessional teams. I always thought that the bad conditions needed to be improved for the nursing work. Although I want to become a nurse, there are still other worries that make me want to escape, such as the unsafe working environment.” Inadequate work force (nurse/patient ratio) was noted by several students. Most of the students realized that nursing was a painstaking job that had poor reward, and was poorly regarded and whose workers were easily exposed to infectious diseases. Nearly all nursing students mentioned that support from family members did affect the choice for baccalaureate nursing program and nursing career. One student stated, “My family

advocated me to choose nursing program to mellow my temper. The other student expressed, "My parents advised me to study abroad after graduation of nursing program, and to be the educator rather than a nurse in the future." Many parents did not want their children to be nurses due to the difficulties, physical burden, and high risk involved in the job.

Discussion

This study explored the students' perceptions toward nursing after the completion of clinical practicum in order to more fully understand the learning effects of their nursing competences. The affected perceptions of the nursing students were categorized into three themes—in-depth recognition of nursing, recognition of the meaning and value of life, and decision conflicts for being a nurse. These three themes represented the cognitive and affective perceptions of the students derived from the experiences of nursing practicum. The findings may provide recommendations for nursing educators and staff nurses to rethink and develop beneficial activities in the practicum.

These results were similar to the findings of previous studies of Callaghan [26] and Cooper et al. [27]. In terms of in-depth recognition of nursing, nursing students could receive skills acquisition and the specialist experience from their perceptions of learning [26]. On the other hand, similar to the theme "recognition of the meaning and value of life," the results obtained by Cooper et al. [27] also indicated that nursing students adjusted their value after the confrontation of ethical issues when facing end-of-life issues and reflection on patient autonomy. Moreover, facing the reality versus expectations related to professional behavior would influence the students' decision of whether to become nurses. On the one hand, the students' reflection on their final clinical experience showed that they felt the weight of RN responsibility from fear of making errors, anxiety about managing a full patient load, struggles with perceived challenges of the RN role, excitement about potential, and contributions as an RN. At the same time, however, the students obtained the feeling of capability, preparedness, and suitability in the nursing field from the clinical experience.

In-depth recognition of nursing

This study showed that the students could distinguish the real situations from misconceptions of nursing by in-depth recognition of nursing. They developed the knowledge and abilities of nursing and underwent a shift in attitudes and the value of nursing profession from classrooms to clinical situations. The original impressions of the nursing profession may alter due to nursing students' positive experiences of clinical practicum. They recognized the real situation by listening to the descriptions of clinical nurses and other healthcare professionals and by observing the behaviors of nursing care that would reinforce their self-identity on nursing [28]. Duchscher's [29] results showed that new nursing graduates would transform into competent nurses through the processes of anticipating, learning, performing, concealing, adjusting, questioning,

revealing, separating, rediscovering, exploring, and engaging. Nursing students had various experiences from clinical situations based on face-to-face and hands-on learning [30]. Students would realize the essence of the nursing profession through their cognition, emotions, behavior, and repeated reflections from the situations of clinical practice. The perceptions of students' lived experiences in clinical situations reveal the essence, meaning, and characteristics of nursing [30]. These studies were similar to the results of our study—that the participants had an in-depth recognition of nursing through the processes of learning, imitating, adjusting, questioning, and exploring the clinical situations.

Clinical practicum did help the nursing students understand the essence and essentials of nursing [29]. Just as Iranian student nurses expressed the caring nature of clinical experiences as patient management, a connected relationship between students and patients, and patient reinforcement and empathy [31], our participants perceived nursing as caring for patients/family. In addition, nursing students realized that nursing was not a job for financial profit but rather a career of conscience and respect for life; and nursing students made accomplishments, and received positive feedback from the patients that they cared for and their families [32]. Participants stated that their endurance of frustration had improved and their vision of life was better than before undergoing clinical experiences. Those perceptions caused the nursing students to reevaluate their perceptions toward the nursing profession and to remold their goals for life [27]. Although nursing students had some negative perceptions such as toughness, difficulties, stress, and frustrations of nursing work during clinical practicum, they could adapt to such perceptions and improve their endurance of frustration. These perceptions did not hinder the nursing students, but led them to "face up to the facts" [4,27].

A research conducted by Hemsley-Brown and Foskett in the UK [33] showed that young people considered nurses to be kind, caring, and well-educated, and "helping people," and "saving lives" were significant factors for young people to choose nursing as a career. Echoing this research, students in our study stated that they possessed the characteristics of nurses, including caring, empathy, helping others, and enthusiasm. Negative perceptions and stereotypes of nurses toward nursing hindered the nursing students and nurses from remaining in the nursing work place. On the other hand, positive perceptions of nursing students motivated them to remain in the nursing profession. Therefore, it is critical for nursing educators to use teaching strategies to enhance positive perceptions and minimize negative perceptions of the professional image in nursing students.

Recognition of the meaning and value of life

The results of the study showed that from negative experiences of patients care, the students improved mentally and realized the value of life. They regarded life as a treasure and were better prepared to face death. For many nursing students, this was the first time to encounter dying, death, serious illness, and disability.

They acknowledged human vulnerability to illness or disabilities and the lack of preparation for facing death, which was similar to the results of Cooper et al. [27]. They would also face the negative feelings through the process of caring for seriously ill, aging, dying, and dead patients. In line with other studies [34,35], nursing students also expressed their grief and worries regarding unexpected behaviors during the process of taking care of dying/terminally ill patients. Students' emotions were strongly affected by the suffering, dying, and death of patients under nursing care. They also encountered difficult decisions involving ethical principles and learned how to help the patients face death [36]. Learning about end-of-life care and palliative care could decrease students' anxiety to care for dying patients and help them face the death issue. Therefore, they learned positively to adapt to the suffering and anxiety-provoking situations [34,37]. This stressed the importance of end-of-life care and palliative care education, and revealed the challenges for both nursing educators and students [38].

Nursing students would become more mature after coping with the suffering process. Nursing students realized that they should try to assist the patients and their families to face the dying process. Learning from experiences of caring for terminally ill or disabled patients is considered a core ethical competency in Taiwan's nursing education. Educators consider the issues of life and death, and bring up several issues related to ethics, the law, social policies, and palliative care. Then, students realize the importance of cherishing the present, valuing their own lives, and paying more attention to their families. Clinical practicum facilitates baccalaureate nursing students' mental growth and professional knowledge. It is suggested that through a self-reflection learning strategy, nursing students could learn emotional reactions and overcome their fear of death [35]. The experience of caring for dying patients was also beneficial and helpful to prepare nursing students for the future [34].

Decision conflicts for being a nurse

Nursing students hesitated to decide to be nurses after experiencing and learning nursing care in the nursing practicum. The results showed that students will decide to become nurses if they identify their nursing competence through the nursing practicum, but, simultaneously, may also decide not to become nurses because of the negative perceptions toward nursing and the unsatisfactory nursing work environments. In other words, decision conflicts resulted from students' readiness and factors relating to environments or organizations. The students stated that they realized nursing was a meaningful career due to the respect and gratitude of patients and their families. They recognized their own professional competencies and possessed the nursing characteristics. The factors influencing students to choose nursing as a career include the friendly working environment, professional competence, respect from the society, meaningful work, greater autonomy at work, and stable income in the past decade [39]. Provided that the self-identity on nursing is strengthened through clinical practicum, nursing students

will be more likely to remain in the nursing program and make commitments to nursing [40,41]. Our results were similar to the study conducted in Australia which found that nursing students decided to become nurses during the process of developing confidence, acknowledging nursing practices, and assimilating theoretical and clinical knowledge through reflections on their clinical experiences [42].

When realizing the realistic situation of working environment and professional competence of nurses, nursing students would hesitate to become nurses. Our results echoed earlier studies stating that there were some factors making the nursing students hesitate to become full-fledged nurses; these included individual factors—interest, choices of occupation, and the experience of clinical practicum; workplace environment factors—stress from nursing work, shift work, and medical legal problems; and organizational factors—insufficient workforce, work overload, poor welfare, and inadequate salary [8,40,41]. Low pay cannot reflect the level of responsibility and professional skills [4,40], so the heavy workload and unsatisfactory salary deeply affected the nursing students' choices to become a nurse. In addition, family opinions and their emotional and instrumental support also affected the nursing students to choose nursing as a career [2,43]. Through clinical training, nursing students may become more confident and make commitments to nursing. However, they also feel overwhelmed by the stressful situations and unique challenges in their clinical experiences, and by their sense of increased nursing accountability [44]. In sum, as well as personal and family member's factors, workplace environment and organizational factors were also involved in the difficulties for nursing students when deciding whether to pursue nursing as a career. Accordingly, government policies and workplace environment should be improved to address problems such as low pay and heavy workload.

Conclusion

In our study, nursing students' perceptions toward nursing profession were categorized into three themes: in-depth recognition of nursing, recognition of the meaning and value of life, and decision conflicts for being a nurse. This result indicated that nursing students can distinguish the previous misconceptions and impressions of nursing, perceive the essence of nursing from real clinical situations, recognize the significance of what they valued at present and the value of living, and so decide whether or not to become a nurse. Clinical practicum is a simulation process for students to choose nursing as a career. Experiencing clinical situations can assist students to develop positive attitudes and professional values of nursing in order to establish the foundation for a future nursing career. As the results demonstrated, the experiences of clinical practicum, such as interactions with nurses, patients, patients' family members, and healthcare professionals, would affect students' experiences and self-identity on nursing. A curriculum related to preparation for facing death can help nursing students lessen the thought of escape. Thus, it could reduce the anxiety and fear to care for terminal or dying patients, and confirm the value of

life. Previous experiences of caring for seriously ill patients will help prepare students to become nurses in the future. The degree of family support may have an effect on their identification with nursing and the motivation to learn, which may encourage or discourage them to take up a nursing career. A critical link between theoretical knowledge, technical skills, clinical competencies, and situational knowledge is determined by the student nurse's clinical experiences [26]. Providing quality clinical experiences for nursing students is vital to the development of commitment and competent professional nurses [45]. These findings would not only help nursing educators fully understand the educational effects of the clinical practicum, but also provide recommendations for managers of medical organizations in their efforts to recruit and train newly graduated nurses.

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