

Original Article

**Creating Space for Reframing Perspectives of Long Term Care:
A Reflective Practice Initiative with First Semester Baccalaureate
Nursing Students**

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Abstract

Background: Research has demonstrated the need to help students cultivate a value for gerontology beginning with development of a positive perspective of this population. The educational implications of these studies support having an early, positive clinical component in the care of the older adult population.

Objective: This study examined the perceived impact of theoretical learning through a literature review exploring functional abilities and quality of life in the older adult, experiential learning through informal interactions with assigned residents, and reflection to confront assumptions regarding the older adult and long term care.

Methods: The study used content analysis to identify themes expressed by students in reflection of their own perceptions and feelings regarding the quality of life of older adult residents in long term care.

Results: Two themes emerged from the thematic analysis: “The Epiphany: Transformation of Assumptions” and “Life is Still Good”. Students’ reflections revealed the realization of the importance of what they had read and what they experienced in their interactions with the residents. Their previous negative assumptions of long term care and the older adult residents were, in essence, shattered by the knowledge and reality of the care environment. Additionally, was the realization that, despite the need for long term care, residents had a positive outlook in regard to both their functional abilities and their quality of life. Students found instead that residents were more apt to frame their day from what they could do rather than what they could not do or needed help to do.

Conclusion: This project’s findings of a shift in attitudes regarding quality of life of the older adult in long term care supports the value of introducing nursing students to geriatric nursing care from a lens of positive capabilities and attributes rather than one focused on self-care deficits.

Keywords: nursing students, older adult, quality of life, functional abilities, reflective practice

Introduction

Nursing students often perceive residents in long term care facilities (LTCF) as merely existing in a vortex of custodial care, disability and absence of a good quality of life. Henderson, Xiao, Siegloff, Kelton, and Paterson’s (2008) research regarding students’ attitudes of the older adult in health care found a negative perception of working with this population and in fact the students described the older adult as having a “loss of mental and physical function, loss of independence and increasing reliance on other to meet self care needs.” (p. 33).

In many baccalaureate programs of nursing, first semester students complete their first clinical practicum in long term care facilities. The initial response to these clinical assignments is frequently not very positive as “negative or neutral attitudes toward the older adult are common in our youth-oriented society” (Heise et al., 2012, p. 156). Many strategies have been implemented to increase both the quantity and quality of older adult contact; service-learning, gerontology courses and clinical practicums (Augustin & Freshman, 2016; Olson, 2011; Gutheil, Chernesky & Sherratt, 2006; Funderburk et al, Damron-

Rodriguez, Storms & Solomon, 2006) and have shown to facilitate positive attitudes towards the older adult. Swanland and Kujath (2008) recommend from their study of baccalaureate nursing students' attitudes toward older adults that strategies are implemented that help students cultivate a value for gerontology beginning with development of a positive perspective of this population. The educational implications of these studies support having an early, positive clinical component in the care of the older adult population. These suggestions are aligned with the guidelines set forth by the American Association of Colleges of Nursing and the Hartford Institute for Geriatric Nursing, NYU College of Nursing (2010), *Recommended Baccalaureate Competencies and Curricular Guidelines for the Nursing Care of Older Adults*, to increase the focus of professional nursing education and practice on the care of healthy and frail older adults.

Background

It is imperative to help nursing students identify their knowledge of and attitudes towards the older adult. It is needed for faculty to facilitate an understanding of students' own perceptions so that their educational experiences can help construct a positive perspective on the care of the older adult across the health care continuum. Anderson and Wiscott (2003) found a positive correlation in their research exploring variables of exposure (work, volunteer opportunities or practicum experiences) to the desire to work with the older adult population. This finding further supports the need to ensure a positive learning experience for students during their first exposure in the care of the older adult in the health care arena. The thrust of this project is grounded in the National League for Nursing's (NLN) *Advancing Care Excellence for Seniors (ACES)* Project. ACES was developed to promote the learning and application of quality care for older adults regardless of practice setting. The ACES framework is an educational tool for the integration of the gerontological aspects of nursing care throughout the nursing curriculum. "Incumbent in the framework is student acquisition of knowledge, skills, and attitudes for quality care of older adults" (Tagliareni et al., 2012, p. 146).

The framework includes three components: the learning environment, essential knowledge

domains and essential nursing actions. For beginning nursing students, the aspects of the learning environment (long term care facilities), the essential knowledge domain of individualized aging and the essential nursing action of assessing function and expectations were the foundation of their introduction to the care of the older adult. The facilities for the project provided a spectrum of care from assisted living through high level care for older adults. It was an introduction to one aspect of how the spectrum of health care system is structured. Using the milieu of long term care, an environment where the essence of optimal functioning can be understood, the second aspect was exploring the concept of individualized aging. This concept recognizes that each person interprets aging differently and that it differs in its behavioral and physiological entities from one person to another. Coupled with this is the charge to nursing to assess each older adult to ascertain their strengths, needs and expectations as each can impact their quality of life. This brings the focus to the uniqueness of the lived experience which provides the foundation for planning care in all setting of health care, not just long term care environments. Addressing the uniqueness is done through assessment of function and expectations. This aspect of client data helps to "recognize, respond to, and respect an older adult's wishes and expectations and has the potential to significantly improve quality of life" (Tagliareni et al., 2012, p. 147).

For students, these entities are often lost in their own exposure or assumptions of "getting old and useless" and "being in a nursing home." It is imperative that these perceptions are remodeled through structured learning processes coupled with an opportunity to reflect on learned knowledge and the clinical experience. Reflective practice is a "medium through which we are able to learn from our educational experiences" (Ghaye, 2011, p. 42). Roberts (2012) found that "reflection leads to a deeper learning and awareness of attitudes held or changed" (p. 33).

As this is a population that students will interact with frequently in a multitude of health care settings, it is imperative that programs of nursing "set the stage" of initial interactions to enhance positive perceptions of care and outcomes for older adult clients. A combination of content relevant to

the functional abilities, rather than disabilities, of older adults coupled with relevant practice experiences can have a positive influence on students' attitudes towards working with older adults (Baumbusch, Dahlke & Phinney, 2012).

Project Methodology

The purpose of this project was to explore the perceptions of nursing students concerning the older adult through analysis of their written reflections. The reflection papers addressed their knowledge gained through a literature review, their initial interaction with a resident in a long term care facility and reflection on their feelings/expectations of the older adult in residential care from a framework of functional abilities and quality of life.

In this qualitative study, two cohorts of students in a Fundamentals of Nursing course completed the reading/interaction/reflection assignment as part of their clinical learning experience in long term care facilities. The purposive sample of 46 nursing students ranged in age from 19 to 53 years of age (mean of 29), predominantly female (87%) and varied by ethnicity (Caucasian 39%, African Americans 30%, Asian 11%, Hispanic 9%, Native American 4%, and Other 7%).

There were three components of the assignment. Phase I was a literature review to learn about the concepts of long term care, functional abilities and quality of life as it pertained to older adult clients. Phase II occurred on the first day of the clinical rotation when students were introduced to their assigned resident with whom they would be working for the clinical rotation. Students spent the day talking with their resident regarding daily routines, life in a long term care facility, perceptions of their abilities and how the resident rated their quality of life as it was now in the facility. These were very informal interactions and not meant to be any more than a "getting to know you" within the framework of what they had learned through their readings. The cue given for their initial interaction was to "explore the resident's perspective on their capabilities/functional abilities that have provided them a good quality of life in light of their need for residential care". Phase III of the project was the completion of the reflection paper. Students were directed to consider what they had learned

theoretically along with what they had learned experientially and to reflect on the following: "what did I learn vicariously through the literature review and through the interaction that has changed my way of knowing in regard to the older adult in long term care facilities". This last phase, the reflection exercise was based on Johns (1995) Model of Structured Reflection. The intent of reflection is "to help identify, confront and resolve contradictions, and in doing so, help to make sense of them within the frame of the experience" (p. 230).

Following institutional review board approval, students were recruited to participate in the project. Participation involved allowing the reflection component of their paper to be used in an analysis to identify themes expressed by students in reflection of their own perceptions and feelings regarding the quality of life of older adult residents in long term care. A thematic analysis was utilized because its overall aim and concentration is in analyzing narrative materials of life stories to identify and report patterns (Vaismoradi, Turunen & Bondas, 2013). An inductive approach was employed because there were not set studies dealing with the exact phenomenon being explored in this project (Hsieh & Shannon, 2006).

Results

Two themes emerged from the thematic analysis of students' perspectives: "The Epiphany: Transformation of Assumptions" and "Life is Still Good".

The Epiphany

Students presented many descriptors of those moments when they suddenly realized the importance of what they had read and what they experienced in their interactions with the residents. Their previous negative assumptions of long term care, the older adult residents as well as the role of nursing were, in essence shattered, by the knowledge and reality of the care environment:

"I have a new perspective on long term care. I was reluctant to work with older adult patients, or those so close to the end of their life. However, after working with my resident my viewpoint has changed. I had an incredible experience and now I can envision a career in long term care."

“I realized that these facilities want to provide the utmost care for the patient based on their individualized needs and I would like to work with this.”

“I was one of those people that believed LTC facilities failed to meet the patient’s needs. After speaking with someone that experiences quality care within a LTC facility firsthand, it made me change my perception.”

“In the past when I think of long term care, I think of tube feedings, people in diapers, people who spend significant amounts of time in bed and/or wheelchairs sleeping. My experience clearly proved me wrong.”

“I thought nursing homes were sad places full of sad older adult people. Contrary to my expectation, they are happy and content being in the nursing home.”

“It was enlightening to receive a resident’s perspective on their experience in long term care. Before this clinical day I assumed that most residents were miserable and unhappy but after this day I found that assumption to be inaccurate.”

Life is Still Good

Students consistently wrote of their realization that, despite the need for long term care, residents had a positive outlook in regard to both their functional abilities and their quality of life. Prior to the experience, students tended to categorize residents based on deficits and needed care. They found instead that residents were more apt to frame their day from what they could do rather than what they could not do or needed help to do. The students realized the importance of this link between functional ability and quality of life:

“Having a positive attitude about your living situation seemed to tie into a better quality of life.”

“The functional abilities of a resident in long term care will complement their quality of life.”

“All the resident’s statements about his life were focused on what he could do and what he liked.”

“The most important thing I realized is that the resident’s positive perspective of their functional abilities and quality of life is important and can make them happy despite what I would have seen as limitations and absences of the things that they used to have and could do.”

“The residential care facility is not terrifying like what others think. The facility focuses on the needs of the residents by supporting individuals to maximize abilities to function at the highest level possible; the residents enjoyed being there.”

“A focus on functional abilities showed support for the patient’s self-worth.”

“It enlightened my own perception of what is meant to have a good quality of life even in a situation such as this.”

In summary, this project revealed several key learning moments for nursing students in their introduction of the provision of care for the older adult in long term care facilities inclusive of the realization of erroneous assumptions about the older adult and the importance of “being able to do” within a framework of functional abilities and the impact on residents’ quality of life.

Discussion

This project’s findings of a shift in attitudes regarding quality of life of the older adult in long term care supports the value of introducing nursing students to geriatric nursing care from a lens of positive capabilities and attributes rather than one focused on self-care deficits.

This project’s findings contributes to the research literature supporting the need for and value of providing clinical experiences that foster a positive view of this population through self reflection on aging and active participation with older adults (Ozdemir & Bilgili, 2016; Gallagher & Carey, 2012; Henry & Ozier, 2011; Cozart, 2008; McKinlay & Cowan, 2003; Chen et al. 2002). Establishing a focus on each individual’s abilities during care for the older adult should be the foundational concept for any care situation within the health care delivery system.

Conclusion

Implications for nursing education include the integration of these concepts in each course that addresses the care of older adult clients regardless of practice setting; from intensive care to acute care to residential care. Facilitating a positive regard and respect for the older adult within the aspects of a nursing curriculum is important in sustaining “an appreciation and ability to apply the emerging body of knowledge associated with care of older adults” (Tagliareni et al., 2012, p. 149). Understanding functional abilities and quality of life is essential in the development of plans of care that enhance each client’s optimal level of functioning throughout any and all transitions confronting the older adult and the nurses who care for them.

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