



Original research

Peer support systems and professional identity of student nurses undertaking a UK learning disability nursing programme[☆]Joanne L. Green¹

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ABSTRACT

This practitioner based action research examines the implementation of the peer assisted study scheme (PASS) and individual peer mentoring in a cohort of first year undergraduate nursing students. It arose out of the desire of a small number of students in one UK university to transfer from the learning (intellectual) disabilities nursing field to other fields. The number of learning disabilities nurses is falling in England, and nursing shortages and student nurse retention generally is an international concern. The peer support was evaluated by 21 completed questionnaires. All the students had found the sessions they attended useful. Four themes emerged from the study. Students reported gains in knowledge around academic skills, placements and their chosen field of nursing; students felt more confident as a result of attending the sessions; students felt supported, and the importance of the peer mentor's interpersonal skills was highlighted; and finally students had valued meeting other students in their chosen field. These findings are discussed with reference to relevant literature.

1. Introduction and terms

The study relates to the UK field of Learning Disability Nursing, but is likely to be relevant to student nurse retention on other programmes. The problem of student nurse retention is recognised internationally (Mooring, 2016). There are currently four fields of nursing in the UK: Adult, Child, Mental Health and Learning Disability Nursing. Other countries such as the US, Canada and Australia have more generic nurse education programmes and qualifications, with later specialisation possible. The four UK fields are all registered with the nurses' regulatory body, The Nursing and Midwifery Council, and follow the same Code of Professional Practice (NMC, 2015).

The term 'Learning Disability' in the UK healthcare system is interchangeable with the term 'Intellectual Disability' used internationally (e.g. in the US, Australia and Canada) and is consistent with the definition of intellectual disability in the DSM-5 diagnostic manual (APA, 2013) and the ICD-10 F70-79 diagnosis (WHO, 2016 version). The UK is the only country to use the term learning disability in this way. Learning disability nurses provide specialist healthcare support to adults and children with intellectual disabilities (RCN, 2011) and work in a variety of community, acute general and mental health services. Learning Disability nursing is a small field, and numbers are falling in the UK (Glover and Emerson, 2012; Sprinks, 2014).

This research developed out of an issue with retention on the learning disability nursing programme in a UK university. The year before the study commenced, a small, but significant minority of students on the learning disability programme had tried to transfer to another field of nursing in their first year of study. This suggests dissatisfaction with the choice of learning disability field in this instance, rather than with nursing itself, but the findings are likely to be relevant to other fields of nursing.

2. Background

Poor nursing student retention is an international issue (Mooring, 2016). A number of studies have described attempts to address this, for example in Australia (Cunich and Whelan, 2010) and Canada (Jacobs, 2016). In the UK, improving retention in student nursing cohorts is important given the shortage of nurses from all fields, and the economic burden on the UK taxpayer (Waters, 2010; Cameron et al., 2011). A move to end financial assistance to student nurses was announced in the Chancellor's November 2015 spending review, but this has raised new concerns, for example about recruitment (RCN, 2015a) and recent figures (UCAS, 2017) reveal a 23% reduction in nurse applications for the 2017/2018 academic year. Other changes are also affecting recruitment and retention; figures obtained by the Health Foundation (2017) from

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the NMC reveal a significant reduction in recruitment of nurses from EU countries since the UK Brexit vote in 2016.

Recruitment and retention seems to be a particular problem in learning disability nursing. Despite a UK wide government commitment to the future of learning disability nursing (Scottish Government, 2012; DH, 2014), a study published by Glover and Emerson (2012) found a 23% reduction in the number of learning disability nurses working in the NHS since 2008. Statistics released by the Health and Social Care Information Centre (2015) show that the decline in the number of learning disabilities nurses is continuing, with a fall of 32% in the last 5 years. Learning disability nurses are seen as crucial to modern UK community based intellectual disability services (Glover and Emerson, 2012) particularly in light of the government's ongoing Transforming Care agenda (NHS England, 2015). Recent research has found that people with intellectual disabilities are amongst the most disadvantaged in England (Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2016). The declining numbers may be due to people leaving the profession, perhaps influenced by the perception of cuts to services and pay, and downgrading highlighted by a recent survey of learning disability nurses (RCN, 2015b) Anxiety about the future of the profession can lead to further attrition (Owen and Standen, 2007) and the future of the 4 separate UK fields is being considered by the NMC (2017).

There are numerous factors influencing nursing attrition rates generally (Eick et al., 2012; Orton, 2012). Professional identity is a strong basis for commitment (Clements et al., 2015), and students with a strong desire to be a nurse (a vocation) are most likely to stay (Wray et al., 2014; Williamson et al., 2013). Authors such as Morris-Thompson et al. (2011) identify negative views of nursing in general as a factor in recruitment and retention, with many seeing it as a low status career and of less importance than medicine (Neilson and Lauder, 2008). Genders and Brian (2014) highlight the importance of public perceptions of learning disability nursing specifically, suggesting that a more assertive approach to improving the public image of learning disability nursing would be beneficial.

The importance of support is also highlighted by numerous studies. Nursing students in a study by Owen and Standen (2007) worried about a lack of support from tutors and the university. Bowden (2008) found that a key factor in making students stay was social support. It is the act of being supported itself that makes them stay, not the support they get (Castles, 2004). The most influential figure in university on this group was the personal tutor (Bowden, 2008), however, peers were also very influential with 5 of the 8 students citing them as influential in their decision to stay. A study by Kevern and Webb (2004) found that having other students with similar characteristics who know what they were going through was the single most important factor for mature students. Colalillo (2007) found that those who attended mentoring and orientation sessions in the first year were less likely to drop out of nursing. Wray et al. (2014) in a study of 195 (32.8% of those surveyed) students in a north of England university found that one of the strongest pull factors helping nursing students to stay was support structures (peer, family, academic). Push factors were academic, financial, personal and placement issues. The need for HEI's to strengthen their support mechanisms is a key recommendation to improve retention in this study. Similarly, an action research study by Williamson et al. (2013) with adult nurse students in a UK university found that friendship is important in retention and universities should foster "belongingness".

3. Aim

The aim of the study was to find out whether peer support systems would increase a sense of professional identity and pride for first year students on the BSc Learning Disabilities Nursing degree course.

4. Method

The study was conducted using action research as described by

McNiff (2002) Carr and Kemmis (1986) and others. In order to better understand the reasons for attrition in the learning disability field within the university, further information was gained from quantitative data relating to student transfers, qualitative discussion with current student representatives in the second year of their course, and a review of the literature.

Information obtained from the university's data management department (Student data and System Management, University of Cumbria) revealed that in the last five years (2010–2015), 9 students on the degree programme had transferred from the learning disability to the adult or child field. The statistics also revealed that 8 students had successfully transferred from the mental health field to the adult or child fields. There was very little movement the other way, with one adult student transferring to the mental health field in the last 5 years, and no transfers into learning disability nursing. It was not possible to collect data on field transfers in the old diploma programme due to how the data was entered. The data collected relates to successful transfers only and does not capture those students who considered changing field but either changed their minds or were not accepted onto their chosen field.

Discussion with two student representatives, and a literature review highlighted possible reasons for this pattern. The second year students had volunteered to share their experiences, having had their own doubts about their choice of field in the first year, but having ultimately decided to stay. A number of issues emerged from the discussion, many of which can be related to the themes of professional identity and communities of practice. The student representatives suggested that there was a mismatch between their pre-course expectations and the reality. The students had not been clear about the role of the learning disability nurse when they started the course, having expected it to be more like adult (general) nursing. Neither of them had prior experience in the intellectual disability field and could not explain what learning disability nurses actually did to students in other fields. The two student representatives felt the course was geared towards adult nursing, contributing to a sense of professional isolation and lack of identity. They also felt isolated because they were not together as a distinct group until late in the second term, due to how the course was organised. They did not know each other as individuals and did not know the learning disabilities teachers. This compounded their lack of knowledge about the role of the learning disability nurse. The student representatives also worried that learning disability nursing was not valued by students in other fields, was perceived as second best, and was not 'proper nursing'. They highlighted negative views of the profession from placement mentors in practice, including other learning disability nurses.

Peer support was implemented to see if this had an impact on these themes for the new cohort of first year students. Peer study sessions were arranged using the Peer Assisted Study Sessions (PASS) scheme as this was already well established on other courses within the university. Second and third year students on the learning disability nursing programme were invited by the researcher to volunteer to lead the sessions. The two students chosen from those who volunteered were both academically successful, and were involved in a number of wider voluntary activities related to nursing, both in the university and in the local community. Before the sessions started they attended initial training arranged by the University's Learning, Information and Student Support (LISS) services. Once trained in facilitating peer study sessions, the students chose the topics for the sessions, based on their own experiences as first year students. Topics included: assignments and essay writing; academic referencing; career related voluntary activities and groups to get involved with at university; social media; the role of the learning disability nurse and finally placements.

Support was given by the researcher who acted as academic co-ordinator, booking the rooms and setting up an initial meeting with the first years during their first week at university to launch the study sessions. The researcher also contacted the first year students to remind

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