Undergraduate nursing student mentors' experiences of peer mentoring in Korea: A qualitative analysis☆

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ABSTRACT

Background: Although mentoring involves the achievement of a mutual relationship between mentors and mentees, most studies have focused on the effects of mentoring on the mentees rather than that on the mentors, which necessitates the need to identify mentors' experiences to provide original resources for mentoring.
Objectives: The purpose of this study was to explore the mentoring experience of nursing students who participated as mentors in a mentoring learning program, to offer evidence-based resources for nursing educators to develop mentoring programs and to use mentorship as an educational method.
Design: A qualitative content analysis of transcribed focus groups was conducted to describe and explore the undergraduate nursing students' mentoring experiences.
Setting: This study was conducted in two nursing schools in South Korea.
Participants: Fifteen student mentors from the peer mentoring program participated in the present study. They were aged between 21 and 24 years, and 87% of the participants were female.
Methods: The experiences of the mentors were explored through focus groups, and the collected data were analyzed by content analysis.
Results: The mentors' experiences could be summarized by the core theme, "*Self-growth as a leader*," consisting of the following themes: *taking pride, guiding mentees, coping with conflicts, and building leadership*.
Conclusion: The themes and codes derived from mentors' experiences would provide evidence-based guidelines and resources for nursing educators and professionals in related disciplines regarding successful peer mentoring, which could facilitate self-growth and foster the development of leadership skills in undergraduate students.

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1. Introduction

University life is one of the stages in human development. It is another period of transition where adjustment to many changes such as diverse human relationships, education, and employment are necessary. These factors may affect the potential stressors experienced by university students (Coffman and Gillian, 2002). Specifically, as compared to students of other majors, nursing students need to engage in more intensive studying, which is a characteristic of nursing education (Seyedfatemi et al., 2007). Not only do these stressors affect their physical and mental health, but they often lead to falling grades and bring about maladjustment to school life (Magnussen and Amundson, 2003), which seem to negatively affect their university life and academic achievement. Therefore, many universities have implemented mentoring programs as a preventive measure against these stressors (Hall and Jaugietis, 2011).

Mentoring is widely used and broadly involves a symbiotic nurturing and trusting relationship between two people (Hawkins and Fontenot, 2010). However, the extent of the specific interpretation and application of mentoring programs varies considerably. Some programs are social (Gilmour et al., 2007), some occur in skills laboratory settings (Hunt and Ellison, 2010), and others occur in patient care settings (Giordana and Wedin, 2010; Harmer et al., 2011). In the Korean undergraduate nursing education system (Yoon and Suk, 2012), programs that use mentoring of lower-level students by higher-level students, called peer mentoring, have been developed within schools of nursing to support the lower-level students (Gilmour et al., 2007). In peer mentoring, the mentor and mentee are of similar age and status (Hunt and Ellison, 2010).

Benefits of a peer mentoring program are that less experienced students may find peer mentors more accessible than instructors or faculty members. In addition, a student may be more comfortable approaching a peer than a faculty member or instructor (Bulut, Hisar, and Demir,

2010). Sometimes, the term "peer teaching" is used along with peer mentoring in undergraduate nursing education (Secomb, 2008). The similarity between peer teaching and peer mentoring is that the students are of similar age and status; however, they differ in that peer teaching generally focuses on the collaborative learning (Secomb, 2008), whereas peer mentoring additionally involves a mutual relationship (Gregoric and Wilson, 2015) where mentors, through experience and knowledge, support mentees with psychological and social help provided through a positive relationship (Eby et al., 2008; Frei et al., 2010; Garmel, 2004; Gilmour et al., 2007).

Mentoring programs have been described to lead to improvement in grades and have a motivational effect on learning (Benigni and Petrosky, 2011; Frei et al., 2010). In the field of education, development of the specialty, motivation, and support for studies, and personal growth have often been the goals of mentoring programs (Frei et al., 2010). Thus, mentoring programs are not only considered to help with progress in studies, but are also considered to help students experience teamwork and naturally improve human relations, and as a result, improve their skills and academic achievement (Benigni and Petrosky, 2011). By fostering ties in mutual relationships, it may be possible to develop a safe relationship while simultaneously developing consensus and confidence (Shawn and Otis, 2003). Furthermore, the mentors can experience personal growth by reflecting on their interactions with their mentees (Lennox-Terroin and Leonard, 2007).

Most studies (Benigni and Petrosky, 2011; Eby et al., 2008; Frei et al., 2010; Garmel, 2004) have focused on the positive effects of mentoring on mentees rather than on mentors. However, mentoring practice involves development of a mutual relationship between mentors and mentees (Gregoric and Wilson, 2015), therefore it may possibly lead to a positive impact on mentors as well. Studies (Campbell and Dardis, 2004; Foster et al., 2015; Smith et al., 2005) have reported improvements in mentors' abilities such as assisting the mentee in building one's own career, offering psychological support, and being a role model. Furthermore, Ragins and Kram (2009) found that mentors who participated in mentoring and meeting mentees gained positive outcomes such as practice in forming close relationships, increased interest in and understanding of others, increased sense of responsibility, and improved understanding of oneself.

Previous studies (Campbell and Dardis, 2004; Foster et al., 2015; Smith et al., 2005) have analyzed the quantitative aspects of mentoring programs, which is possibly limited to explaining the qualitative progress the mentors experience through mentoring activities. Therefore, an inductive and qualitative study on the mentors is needed to examine what they experience during their mentoring activities and how they interpret their experiences as mentors. In the present study, we explored the mentoring experiences of nursing students who participated in a mentoring program. The purpose of this study was to use the findings to offer evidence-based resources for nursing educators to help them develop mentoring programs and use mentorship as an educational method. Results of this study will offer basic resources to support the development of mentoring programs for training mentors in various fields.

2. Methods

2.1. Design

This study was designed using inductive, interpretative, and constructionist methods based on qualitative research, which aims to provide new knowledge and understanding on student mentors' experiences of mentoring. This approach guided the research process to explore the subjective experiences, examine meanings of the experiences, compare these meanings, and construct concepts illustrating the unique experiences of the participants (Graneheim and Lundman, 2004; Morgan, 1998).

2.2. Sample

Student mentors who participated in the peer-mentoring program from two nursing schools were recruited for this study. Fifteen mentors participated in the present study and attended the focus groups. All the participants' grade was above 3.0 (B+), they were aged between 21 and 24 years, and 87% of the participants were female students. The mentors received an orientation regarding the concept of mentoring, roles of a mentor, interpersonal relationships and communication skills, and mentoring process based by the GROW mentoring model illustrated in Fig. 1 (Whitmore, 2009).

The peer-mentoring program of the schools involved teaching basic nursing skills to students with a low grade by peers with a high grade. The mentor and mentee were expected to meet for 2 h per week for a semester (3 months). On the completion of the mentoring program, the mentors were invited to the focus group to share their qualitative experiences of the program. The objectives of the study and the process were explained to the mentors, and students who agreed to participate in the study were included in the focus groups.

2.3. Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the Institution Review Board at the University in Korea. The researchers explained to the participants the purpose, method, process of recording of the focus group, need for the study, and anonymity and confidentiality in handling all data. Participants could withdraw from the study at any time without any disadvantage. Compensation for participation in the study was provided in the form of school supplies valued around $30. To protect the anonymity and confidentiality of the participants, the collected data was coded and stored separately and only the researchers had access to the data.

2.4. Data Collection

Data were collected using the focus group method proposed by Morgan (1998). Focus groups have been used as a qualitative data collection method in nursing research (Jayasekara, 2012). Through focus groups, the experiences of mentors who participated in a peer-mentoring program were explored. The focus groups started with an open-ended question about the experience of participating in the mentoring program: "What comes to your mind when you think of mentoring?" Discussions were followed by the role, definition, and qualifications of the mentor. Furthermore, debates regarding the problems, conflict, advantage, expectations, and personal changes during the mentoring were also conducted in the focus groups.

The participants were invited for the focus groups four times, until the data was saturated, and the duration of each focus group was between 60 and 90 min. For the focus groups, a question checklist was

Fig. 1. GROW model.