THE TRANSITIONAL JOURNEY OF ENROLLED NURSE TO REGISTERED NURSE: A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

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Abstract
The aim of this critical review is to evaluate the issues of transition from Enrolled Nurse to Registered Nurse. Literature is abundant on the topic of nursing student to Registered Nurse, however there is less written on the topic of Enrolled Nurse to Registered Nurse. Four themes that emerged from the literature include reality shock, feeling unprepared, feeling unsupported and great expectations. Reality shock is discussed in the context of the education – practice gap, while the theme of feeling unprepared brought about issues of self-confidence and competency. Levels of support are poor especially for new graduates with previous Enrolled Nursing experience in the transitional phase. Peer expectations were added pressures for new graduates with previous Enrolled Nursing experience as an assumption exists that they will be able to cope.

Key words: Enrolled Nurse, Nursing Student, Registered Nurse, transition.

Introduction
The assimilation of new Registered Nurses into the workforce has been the topic of considerable research since the education of Registered Nurses became the domain of universities. The worldwide shortage of nurses is well documented: research focusing on retention of new graduates is therefore obviously warranted (Salt, Cummings & Profetto-McGrath, 2008).

There is a paucity of literature that reports on research which specifically explores the issue of transition from Enrolled Nurse to Registered Nurse. While various authors have identified specific characteristics of practice during transition from nursing student to Registered Nurse, little is known about the experiences of newly graduated Registered Nurses who had previously trained as Enrolled Nurses.

These graduates go through the transitional phase facing similar challenges and experiencing equivalent levels of stress as their colleagues who commenced university studies without any prior nursing experience (Paech, 2002). New graduates with previous Enrolled Nursing experience are unique in that they re-enter the workforce in their new role with an expectation that the transition will not be problematic on the premise of their previous familiarity with nursing practice. This peer and self-expectation of optimal performance lead to deficiencies in support, self-confidence and work satisfaction, premising dangerous consequences for workplace retention.

To better understand the challenges that new graduates with previous Enrolled Nursing experience face, a literature review was conducted to explore the issues surrounding the transitional phase.

Enrolled Nurses already have a degree of socialisation to the work environment. They are familiar with the administration of medication, patient care, prioritising care and communicating with work colleagues. However, stressors that will affect both groups include the dramatic increase of responsibility that coincides with more complex decision-making and greater accountability.

Generally, it is accepted that the transitional period of nursing student to Registered Nurse is fraught with challenges, stress and anxiety. The transitional experience of Enrolled Nurse to Registered Nurse is often shadowed by self, peer and managerial expectations of being able to cope (Paech, 2002). These expectations may indeed counter any perceived experience advantage that previously trained Enrolled Nurses may have possessed. Kilstoff & Rochester (2004) found that the transition experience is as stressful for previously trained Enrolled Nurses as it is for newly graduated Registered Nurses with no prior medical experience. Exploration of the experiences of previously trained Enrolled Nurses is useful because it highlights issues pertinent to nursing education and retention of professional nursing staff.

Literature Review

Literature searches related to this topic were conducted on CIAP, GoogleScholar, ScienceDirect, Proquest and Wiley Online Library databases using the search terms of <student nursing transition>, <enrolled nurse to registered nurse> and <transitions in nursing education>. The result of the search was a number of journal articles with publication dates ranging from 2002 to 2012. Journal articles that were not accessible in full text format were omitted from the review.

Existing literature suggests that the transition from nursing student to Registered Nurse is stressful. The limited amount of literature devoted to analysing the experiences of previously trained Enrolled Nurses in their transition phase to Registered Nurse identifies similar issues. Themes of ‘reality shock’, ‘feeling unprepared’ and ‘feeling unsupported’ emerged from the literature included in this review. The additional theme of ‘great expectations’ emerged from the literature that specifically focused on the experiences of newly Registered Nurses who were previously Enrolled Nurses.

Reality Shock and the Professional Sabotage of Ideals

Much of the literature identifies reality shock as a significant issue for new graduates. Universities are blamed by participants in one study (Kilstoff & Rochester, 2004) for not preparing nursing students for the realities of the hospital environment. Many of the articles to be discussed below describe the disappointment felt by new graduates at the realisation that they were unable to spend quality time with patients and utilise the holistic nursing values instilled in them during university studies.

As university students, values and ideals are learned and upheld. However the fantasy of instilling these into professional practice is soon to be shattered by a world of values dissonance and political disharmony (Kilstoff & Rochester, 2004; Maben, Latter & Macleod, 2005). Paech (2002) reports that many new graduates who had previously trained as Enrolled Nurses and remained working in the same ward, felt that their newly acquired knowledge and skills were not readily accepted by former superiors or peers. In the same qualitative study, one participant reported having lost a friendship apparently due to the participant’s changing personality that paralleled her changing workplace role (Paech, 2002). Most participants in this study grieved for the loss of their old, familiar role of Enrolled Nurse. Reasons for this are anecdotally described as the pain of letting go of old familiar ways and being a novice again.
A nursing student may have become accustomed to managing two to three patients under the direct guidance of a Registered Nurse during clinical placements. However the transition of having to manage five to six on the first paid shift is shocking, even overwhelming and for some, is reason enough to warrant leaving the profession (Christmas, 2008). Although previously-trained Enrolled Nurses may have had extensive experience in caring for five to six patients, the differentiating factors are increased responsibility and further reliance on advanced clinical decision-making skills. The reality of being accountable for clinical decision-making is especially difficult for all newly Registered Nurses (Kelly & Ahern, 2008).

Feeling Unprepared

There is a widely-held opinion that education for practice falls short of actually providing the graduate with the necessary skills for practice (Maben, Latter & Macleod Clark, 2005; Fero, Witsreger, Wesmiller, Zullo & Hoffman, 2009). These inadequacies derive from the comparative ways in which skills are practised: under direct supervision as a student in a controlled academic setting; and then often with little or no guidance as a Registered Nurse in a dynamic, workplace environment (Burns & Poster, 2008). When more senior or experienced nurses complain that new graduates are inadequately prepared for the realities of the ward (Butler & Hardin-Pierce, 2005), the graduate nurse can only feel inadequate and disheartened, irrespective of the validity of the claim.

Interestingly, Newton & McKenna (2006) imply that nursing students are more prepared than they think they are for their impending role of Registered Nurse, and that this perceived under-estimation of skills and knowledge could impede their performance in their graduate position. Perhaps then, nurturing and confidence-boosting strategies should be employed by more senior nursing staff to facilitate a smoother transitional journey?

Sources of stress for the new graduate include having to cope with the challenges that their new role presents, not being sure of what is expected of them, a lack of confidence in their ability to perform safe nursing care, a lack of support from the workplace and senior nursing staff, the difficulty adjusting to shift work and the sudden increase in responsibility and accountability (Chang & Hancock, 2003). A new graduate Registered Nurse who had previously been an Enrolled Nurse might have an advantage in that they are likely to be familiar with the demands of shift work; however the other stressors listed may affect all new graduates equally.

Kelly & Ahern (2007), in a phenomenological study of 13 new graduates, found a significant number of participants held feelings of unpreparedness. They concluded that the participants were mostly unprepared for the fragmented socialisation processes, with the frequent ward rotations involved in new graduate programs providing fuel for further turmoil as new graduates repeatedly experienced ‘the first day of work all over again’ (Kelly & Ahern, 2007). These findings indicate the anxiety that is felt as new endeavours are attempted, and may also be attributed to the feelings experienced by new graduates previously trained as Enrolled Nurses in their quest to familiarise themselves with a new role.

Feeling Unsupported and Nurses ‘Eating Their Young’

Horizontal violence, interpersonal conflict and the metaphor of nurses ‘eating their young’ are common themes emerging from the literature. Cowin & Hengstberger-Sims (2006), in a longitudinal survey of new graduate self-concept concluded that new graduates are continually experiencing negativity from more experienced nurses regarding their tertiary education. New graduates perceived that their more experienced colleagues were displaying negative attitudes about the new graduates’ level of knowledge, whereas new graduates were more concerned with their levels of competence and experience (Cowin & Hengstberger-Sims, 2006).

In their Canadian study of the transitional phase of new graduates, Ellerton & Gregor (2003, p. 104) identify the pressure placed on new graduates ‘to hit the ground running’, which implied the need for further amendments to nursing education and workplace support. This finding parallels Australian research, as the same expectation is identified as applying a greater pressure on new graduates than previously trained as Enrolled Nurses (Paech, 2002). Kelly & Ahern (2008) acknowledge that new graduates are not always well supported and suggest that the more experienced nurses interact with new graduates in much the same way that they themselves were treated when they were beginning Registered Nurses.

In a ground-breaking study of transitional experiences in rural settings for new graduates previously trained as Enrolled Nurses, Nayda & Cheri (2008) found participants suggest that they were inadequately supported in their new role as Registered Nurses. Participants in the study reportedly received extremely limited educational benefits such as mentoring or constructive feedback.

A dichotomy exists between the roles of the Registered Nurse in a rural setting to that of the metropolitan-based Registered Nurse. Rural nursing practice elicits expectations of specific characteristics: adaptability: an ability to provide a diverse range of clinical care; and an ability to cope with budgetary constraints, among others (Lea & Cruikshank, 2007; Nayda & Cheri, 2008). Although this 2008 study is limited by sample size, it suggests that the fragility of graduates that previously trained as Enrolled Nurses is further compounded when that new graduate commences their new role within a rural setting. This provides scope for further research in the area.

Great Expectations

Specific literature relating to Registered Nurses who had previously been Enrolled Nurses suggests that these new graduates with previous Enrolled Nursing experience have unrealistic expectations of themselves (Paech, 2002).

Additionally, a substantial extrinsic source of stress for this group is the peer and managerial expectation that the transition of the new graduate with Enrolled Nursing experience will not be problematic (Nayda & Cheri, 2008; Paech, 2002). This expectation is likely to lead to a lack of support, resulting in increased anxiety and decreased confidence in the new graduate. Research validates that adequate support is vital for all nursing graduates making their transition if these nursing graduates are to be retained in a profession. The limited literature available shows that the support that nursing graduates with previous Enrolled Nursing experience is receiving is inadequate.

In Paech’s (2002) article on the transition from Enrolled Nurse to Registered Nurse, numerous expectations are explored. New graduates with previous Enrolled Nursing experience had gained knowledge and skills throughout their university training and were expecting to be able to put these to use in their postgraduate employment. However it was found that former work colleagues were not readily accepting of these newly acquired assets (Paech 2002). Therefore, an issue emerging from the literature is between the opinion of more experienced nurses that new graduates are deficient in the necessary knowledge for practice, and the negativity from seasoned nurses directed towards new graduates who are keen to use newly acquired knowledge and skills.
Implications for Practice

The study by Kilstoff & Rochester (2004) demonstrated that reality shock is a significant issue for new graduates. The conclusions of Maben, Latter & Macleod (2005) concurred with Kilstoff & Rochester (2004). However they also described the cognitive dissonance felt by new graduates in their new roles. Kelly & Ahern (2008) acknowledged that the reality of being responsible for clinical decision-making is a difficult confrontation for new graduates, including those with previous training as an Enrolled Nurse. University educators need to focus on strategies addressing this dichotomy between the comfortable, safe educational institution and the reality of the workplace if the highly confronting issue of reality shock is to be addressed.

Research reporting differences in self-perception implies that new graduates lack confidence (Newton & McKenna, 2006), undoubtedly fuelled by negative staff attitudes (Butler & Hardin-Pierce, 2005). Despite the metaphorical theme of nurses ‘eating their young’ being widely identified, it seems that as a professional body, nursing has failed to address the issue for new nurses. This is dangerous for employment retention rates as new graduates may potentially re-evaluate their choice of career (Cowin & Hengstberger-Sims, 2006). It is an untried hypothesis that the root of the problem lies in the older generation of experienced nurses and there is scope here for further research to test this theory.

Conclusion

It is widely accepted that the transition from nursing student to Registered Nurse presents many challenges. The studies examined suggest that generally the challenges of transition exist for newly graduated Registered Nurses that had previously trained as Enrolled Nurses. Reality shock remains a distinct part of the transition, even for those graduates with previous training as an Enrolled Nurse, as expectations are shattered, values challenged and self-perceptions questioned. New graduates with previous Enrolled Nursing experience possess a unique peer and self-inflicted pressure of the expectation of ‘being able to cope’.

This review has demonstrated equivalence in difficulties experienced by new graduates in the transitional phase, and should draw attention to the needs of new graduates with previous Enrolled Nursing training. Pedagogical practice, aimed at nursing students, new graduates and nursing staff, must consider increased support for all new graduates, including those with previous Enrolled Nursing experience.

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References


