Learning through Reflection: Enhancing Nursing Student Experiences of Primary Health Care (PHC) Placement

Lily Y.W. Ho, School of Nursing, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University
Phyllis C.P. Pang, School of Nursing, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University
Jin S.P. Yeung, School of Nursing, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University

1. ABSTRACT AND KEYWORDS

Nursing students' experience in the primary health care (PHC) placement in the community is important but PHC placement in gerontology through the service-learning approach has not been extensively studied. This study aimed to explore students' experiences of the PHC placement and the impacts of the placement on their learning. An exploratory qualitative design was employed. Thirty-three pre-registration nursing students joined this study. Eight themes were identified, including: 1) enhancing knowledge, communication, health assessment and health promotion skills; 2) encountering various challenges in PHC; 3) various strategies to enhance the success of health promotion; 4) students' strategies for better preparation for the PHC; 5) developing a sense of belonging to the nursing profession; 6) developing characteristics of a nurse; 7) broadening students' horizon in community nursing; and 8) suggestions for improving PHC. The PHC placement, which echoed the service-learning approach, provided positive learning experiences for nursing students. This study provides insight how to further improve the PHC placement to facilitate students' learning.

Keywords: Community-dwelling older adults, Gerontology, Nursing students, Primary health care, Service-learning
2. INTRODUCTION

In response to the changing health care needs and the increasing longevity, primary health care (PHC) for older adults worldwide is becoming more and more important (World Health Organization, 2018). Nursing students’ experiences of the learning environment varies in different clinical settings (Bisholt, Ohlsson, Engström, Johansson, & Gustafsson, 2014). Learning in the PHC settings allows students’ perceptions of primary health nursing to be challenged, consolidating learnt skills, acquiring new skills, and viewing the health care delivery in a broader way beyond the acute settings (McKenna, Parry, Kirby, Gilbert, & Griffiths, 2014). In addition, PHC provides students opportunities to interact with older adults, through which positive attitudes can be developed (Yamashita, Kinney, & Lokon, 2011).

PHC placement in gerontology through the service-learning approach has not been extensively studied. Nursing students’ experience in the PHC placement in the community is important, as it: (a) provides insights to further develop the PHC placement; and (b) suggests the possibility of the formal development of the PHC placement as a service-learning subject. This study aimed to explore students’ experiences of the PHC placement, which echoed the service-learning approach and the impacts of the placement on their learning.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK/LITERATURE REVIEW

In term of teaching and learning, service-learning is a powerful pedagogical approach. “Serving to learn and learning to serve” is the motto of service-learning in The Hong Kong Polytechnic University. Service-learning can increase the awareness of social determinants, justice and inequality in resources allocation and facilitate leadership skills in nursing students (Groh, Stallwood, & Daniels, 2011). It can also increase the cultural competence and cultural knowledge (Chen, McAdams-Jones, Tay, & Packer, 2012) and enhance students’ social, academic, and personal development (Basi, 2011). Students’ positive attitudes toward older adults were enhanced after joining the service-learning programme (Yamashita et al., 2011). A study in Australia found that nursing students, having clinical placement in a service-learning programme in the community, gained personal and professional insights with valuable learning, and their understanding of the social determinants of health was increased (Townsend, Gray, & Forber, 2016).
Using home visits as a service-learning opportunity changed students' experiences from feeling overwhelmed to feeling more competent, with increased awareness of cultural and religious factors affecting people in their care, thus strengthening their perception of the roles of health care providers (du Plessis, Koen, & Bester, 2013).

Besides students, both the service-recipients and the community stakeholders gain benefits from the service-learning. Service-recipients experience care and attention from the nursing students and, through this, also receive health education during the home visits (du Plessis et al., 2013). The community stakeholders can help to support the social determinants and facilitate in identifying solutions for sustaining the health of older adults (Sabo et al., 2015).

4. METHODS/ANALYSIS

Description of the Primary Health Care Placement
The PHC placement echoed the approach of service-learning and aimed to provide students with learning experiences of PHC in gerontology, while meeting the changing needs of community-dwelling older adults. It allowed students to learn through serving others. It was intended that the placement would inspire nursing students with the core skills and attitudes required as future professional caring nurses. The PHC placement involved four sessions of training workshops, four sessions of community service and submission of a reflective assignment. The training workshops aimed at reinforcing students’ health assessment skills, empowering skills in delivering health promotion on healthy lifestyle, strengthening communication skills with older adults, and deepening their understanding of the normal ageing process. The community service was arranged on four half-day sessions. Two home visits were provided to each service-recipient. In the first home visit, students were required to conduct health assessments and identify problems in the recipients’ lifestyles. Then, under supervision, they developed individualized health promotion plans based on the information concluded from the health assessment on healthy lifestyle. In the second home visit, students were required to deliver health promotion. Debriefings were conducted at the end of each home visit to discuss the students’ feelings and process. Thus, relevant coaching would be given by the supervisors to reinforce their learning experiences. After the community service, students
submitted a written reflective assignment about their service-learning experience.

**Design and Participants**
This study employed an exploratory qualitative design, as students’ experience was important for further development of the PHC placement. It was conducted in three different community centres in various districts in Hong Kong from 2017 to 2018. Convenience sampling was adopted. The inclusive criterion for joining this study was nursing students who had chosen the captured PHC placement. Only 20 out of the 33 pre-registration nursing students who had undertaken the PHC placement were willing to join this study.

**Data Collection**
Data were collected through students’ reflective assignment about their learning experiences upon the completion of the community service. A guideline consisting of open-ended questions relating to the PHC placement was provided to the students to guide their writing of the reflective assignment. Feedback was also collected from the participating centres through a feedback sheet.

**Data Analysis**
All reflective assignments and feedback from participating centres were analysed by content analysis. Two researchers read each of the reflective assignments and feedback line-by-line and independently analysed it. Key phrases and common content of students’ reflection and the feedback were coded and grouped into themes. Themes were then reviewed and further developed to answer the research question.

5. **RESULTS**

Among the participants, seven of them were males and thirteen were females. Ten of them were first year students from the Master of Nursing programme. Nine were second year students from the Bachelor of Science in Nursing programme and one was the first articulation year student from the Bachelor programme. Feedback sheets were returned by all three participating centres. Eight themes were identified, including: 1) enhancing knowledge, communication, health assessment and health promotion skills; 2) encountering
various challenges in PHC; 3) various strategies to enhance the success of health promotion; 4) students' strategies for better preparation for the PHC; 5) developing a sense of belonging to the nursing profession; 6) developing characteristics of a nurse; 7) broadening students' horizon in community nursing; and 8) suggestions for improving PHC.

6. DISCUSSION

Overall, participants of this study gained positive experiences in the PHC placement. As anticipated, the students' knowledge, communication, health assessment and health promotion skills were all enhanced. It has been suggested that whether the students can achieve the desired learning outcomes in the learning environment should be considered (Bisholt et al., 2014). These findings supported the premise that PHC placement had great potential to enhance students’ essential nursing skills. As it was the first clinical placement, and they had not yet learnt all the theories and knowledge, it was not surprising that they encountered challenges during the placement. These challenges are not frequently mentioned in the literature. However, students' reflections showed that they adopted various strategies to enhance the success of the health promotion. The participants also became aware of their own weaknesses and thus they identified strategies to better prepare for the PHC.

Some positive experiences of the participants were out of our expectation. Although the placement was short, the students still developed a sense of belonging to the nursing profession and developed the characteristics of being a caring nurse. It might be because it was the first time for the students to apply the learnt skills and knowledge in the provision of services. Surprisingly, the PHC placement had broadened students' horizons in community nursing. With an ageing population, there will be an increasing demand from the community for nursing in gerontology. The placement supported the learning needs of students in community-based services, and prepared and enhanced their all-round competence to take up the roles of a nurse in community nursing.

The findings of this study are encouraging, as students also provided suggestions for improving the PHC. This study has also concurrently provided insights how to improve the learning experience of nursing students in the future and the quality of care to the community-dwelling older adults.
7. CONCLUSIONS AND CONTRIBUTIONS TO THEORY AND PRACTICE

The PHC placement in the community, which echoed the service-learning approach, has provided positive learning experiences for nursing students. Educators can consider incorporating PHC placement in gerontology in the nursing curricula and promoting community nursing as a future career option in the ageing society. Further research should explore: (a) how the students may benefit from the PHC placement; and (b) the impacts of the placement on older adults and community stakeholders.

References:


