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Research Article

Nurse Educators Dedicated to Teaching: Personal Characteristics Identified as Influencing Long Term Retention

Virginia Tufano*, Barbara G. Covington

St David's School of Nursing, Texas State University, Texas, USA

***Corresponding author:** Virginia Tufano, Barbara G. Covington, Associate Professor, St David's School of Nursing, Texas State University, 1555 University Ave, Round Rock, Texas 78665-8017, USA

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Abstract

Experienced and new nursing faculty numbers in higher education are decreasing in the United States and around the globe. This is leaving fewer faculty available to prepare future nurses. In this new challenging healthcare environment, it is more important than ever to uncover the personal intrinsic characteristics experienced faculty value and identify as influencing elements for their deciding to enter and remain in nursing education as nursing faculty. These answers offer higher education new hope toward reversing the losses and increasing numbers of experienced faculty. The lived experiences of fifteen experienced nurse educators were explored using a qualitative, semi-structured interview method. Curt Lewin Change theory was used as a framework. Multistep analysis of the data identified three overarching concepts (1) Internal Motivators, (2) Social Support, and (3) Work Opportunity. The two most common themes for each personal characteristic are explained. Analysis of concepts and themes contribute to a better understanding of decisions that influence higher education nursing faculty retention decisions. Strategies are offered based on the experienced nurse educators identified themes for concept and use in future to identify and employ specific quantitative instruments to measure the relationship between the concepts and strength of intent to stay.

Keywords: Nursing education; Nursing faculty; Internal motivators; Personal characteristics; Retention; Social support; Work opportunities

Introduction

The growing need for nurses in the U.S. workforce and in workforces around the globe at this time of turmoil and stress from pandemics is quickly outpacing the number of nursing faculty available to prepare them for the nursing profession. As many current nurse educators return to clinical practice, retire or leave academia, nursing education is confronted with the challenge of both recruiting new faculty and retaining the current educators. In the United States Alone The National League for Nursing (NLN) [1] Biennial Survey of Schools of Nursing, reported thousands of qualified nursing school candidates turned away each year due to faculty shortages [1]. Literature supports shortages of qualified faculty as a main obstacle to expanding schools of nursing capacities [2-7]. Nationwide and globally, in higher education the cycle continues as fewer nurses graduate, smaller faculty numbers are reported including especially experienced teaching faculty.

In addition to the increasing number of faculty leaving academics, the nursing shortage sets up a cycle that further increases the nursing faculty shortage. Compounding the problem that many of our current nursing faculty are getting older and retiring or planning to retire soon, many nursing faculties also decide to leave academia and return to the clinical practice settings for other reasons, including the incentives that the practice settings can afford to offer. Practice settings are often able to adjust salaries and workload flexibility in an effort to recruit and retain more nurses. However, academic settings often lack the flexibility to maintain this competitive edge [7-9].

Brady, [10] reported that the shortage of nurses also offers more opportunities and choices to nurses already in the workforce, contributing to fewer nurses choosing an academic career. More recently, a study of perceptions of nursing faculty predicting an intent to leave academics found that one of the top five reasons for returning to the clinical setting were more career development opportunities and more compensation [6]. Strategies to address the cycle of nursing and nurse faculty shortages are critically needed.

In response to the faculty shortage, a national survey of full-time nurse faculty was conducted by Evaluating Innovations in Nursing Education (EIN), a national program of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. The EIN program collected data regarding faculty work life from over 3,000 nurse faculty respondents. Of faculty responding to the survey, 32 percent reported they were likely to leave academic nursing within five years. As expected, the highest percentage of these (67 percent) were planning to retire within the next five years. However, there were also high rates of intent to leave among younger respondents: 31 percent of those aged 51 to 60, and more than 20 percent in those aged 50 and below. Elements of work life associated with intent to leave were dissatisfaction with workload, work schedule, lack of flexibility to balance work and family life, and lack of teaching support [9]. With nursing faculty leaving the academic positions or retiring each year, it is vital that new strategies are identified and adopted specific to retaining experienced faculty. The role transition into academia and its required competencies can be overwhelming.

The current decreasing number of nurse faculty creates a need to identify the personal characteristics of existing faculty that could promote a continued dedication to the profession. For many novice nurse educators, their experience in academia has become a revolving door back to the clinician setting. It can be concluded that if increasing numbers of expert faculty leave academia, there will be fewer experienced faculty to serve as mentors for novice faculty. If novice faculty are not satisfied in their roles and leave academia, this will lead to an even larger void among faculty to teach future generations of nurses. Alternative strategies to hire and retain academic faculty are vital to increasing the nursing faculty workforce and, in turn, the nursing workforce capacity. It can be concluded that if increasing numbers of expert faculty leave academia, there will be fewer experienced faculty to serve as mentors for novice faculty. If novice faculty are not satisfied in their academic roles and leave academia, this will lead to an even larger void among faculty to teach future generations of nurses.

The recruitment of new nursing faculty is an important first step in meeting current and future societal needs for more nurse educators. Retention of faculty with teaching experience is a crucial second step and concern shared by academic settings nationwide. The expertise of experienced faculty is valuable to meet the need for mentors and role models who can guide and support novice nursing faculty in their new roles. Specht [11] defined novice nurse faculty as those within the first five years of full-time academic teaching experience. For this study, experienced faculty were defined as those nursing faculty members with five or more years of full-time academic teaching experience.

The literature is somewhat limited regarding the relationship between job satisfaction and intrinsic characteristics common to nursing faculty who have devoted a considerable part of their careers to nursing education. Over the years, the National

League for Nursing (NLN) has asserted that research is needed to reveal why some faculty remain in the educator role and others leave [12]. In an effort to explore and identify the characteristics of current faculty that contribute to a continued dedication to teaching in nursing, a qualitative dissertation study was conducted to determine perceptions of nurse educators that motivate commitment to teaching the nursing profession [13]. Throughout the study, rich narratives from the nurse educators were gathered that suggested common personal motivational factors which influenced their desire to enter and remain in academia. In this qualitative study, semi-structured interviews are used to examine the personal factors and lived experiences of ‘experienced’ nurse educators that contributed both to their desire to enter academia and keep them committed to remaining in this setting”.

Method

The qualitative phenomenological study took place in a midwestern urban area of the United States (US). Following approval by the university’s Institutional Review Board (IRB), nurse educators employed at three accredited private schools of nursing offering BSN, MSN and Doctoral programs in the area were invited to participate in the study. There was no maximum age limits set for participants. A pool of potential participants was recruited utilizing a “Snowball” method of sampling. This method consists of identifying potential participants for the study from personal and professional contacts. Next, as the study progressed, faculty participants were asked to identify other faculty members that qualified for the study and could be interested. Faculty qualified for the study if they held a current Registered Professional Nurse license, had been teaching nursing as a full-time career for a minimum of the past five concurrent years, and were currently employed as a nurse educator in an accredited school of nursing. Suggested nursing faculty members meeting the criteria for inclusion were personally contacted by the researcher and invited to participate in the study. This recruitment continued until the data resulting from interviews allowed the emergence of potential themes relevant to the identification of common characteristics among the nurse educators reached repetition indicating that saturation was met.

The study utilized semi-structured interviews to gather data from participants. This interview method consists of open-ended questions developed, piloted, and revised by the author to solicit key information through in-depth individual interviews from a list of designated topics. Three questions from the interview guide are 1) what personal motivating factors do you believe contribute to your ongoing involvement in nursing education? 2) What external factors keep you going, at this point, as a nurse educator? 3) Describe significant events in your upbringing that you think contributed to your choice in career? As the recorded interviews progressed, follow-up questions were asked to provide further clarification of topics and expansion of thoughts stemming

from the various trajectories of answers [14]. Follow-up questions from and details added by the participants allowed them to be sure they understood the question, freely offer their perspectives and added information if remembered after initial setting without the restrictions of limited answer categories and yielded rich narratives regarding their experiences. For example: Can you tell me a little more about that event? Can you give me some examples of important motivators? The information solicited centered around a list of personal and professional topics: familial and educational background, support systems, internal and external motivators that influenced them in their journey toward becoming educators, and self-described personality characteristics were solicited during the interview. Method triangulation was used which included interviews, observation, and field notes [15]. Data were analyzed using a multi-step process. The data was examined using Kurt Lewin’s Three Stage Model of Change as a framework [16].

Audio-taped interviews were transcribed verbatim and each interview was listened to and compared to the written transcription by the author to assure completeness and authenticity. To ensure accuracy of content established a member check was conducted. The researcher reviewing each written transcript that specific participant and time was provided for feedback the interviewee’s edits and additional comments were added to the transcripts. Final transcripts were entered into In Vivo database to be analyzed and coded. This process identified significant statements that formed structural factors. Through the exploration of each educator’s perspectives of personal and professional motivating

characteristics, common themes inherent to this group of nurse educators emerged from the codes. Queries were generated to summarize results for each theme. Data saturation was considered reached when no new sustaining factors were identified from the incoming data. This occurred at the thirteenth participant.

A total of fifteen (15) nursing faculty members participated in the study. All participants were Caucasian females currently working as nursing faculty in three separate private schools of nursing. All faculty participants had either a Masters or Doctoral Degree. Five of the participants were 40 to 50 (33%) years of age. Five were 51 to 60 (33%), and five were 61 to 70 (33%). The youngest faculty member interviewed was 44 and the eldest was 66. The mean age of all participants was 52.

Results

Following comparative data analysis and coding of participant statements, personal factors that were identified as significant in contributing to the desire to enter and remain in academia were grouped into content themes. The identified themes were then consolidated into three broader overarching concepts: Internal Motivators, Social Support, and Work Opportunity. (Table 1) presents the two most frequently referenced themes for each overarching concept in the first column. The name and number of times each theme was referenced in the interviews is listed in the second column. Verbatim statements made by participants are offered as examples of these themes in the third column.

Overarching concepts with most common themes	Total # of times referenced	Participant Statements
Internal Motivators -76		
Teaching Satisfaction	29	“With patients, you do not have a long-term relationship. With students, you can develop a relationship that continues over time”. “Having those light bulbs go off is nice; it gives me a sense of personal satisfaction”. “There is a special time when they get it, and you know they are going to be a good nurse”.
Pursue Advanced Education	18	“I knew that if I wanted to teach nursing, I needed to go back to school...so I went back to school part-time to get my masters”. “I think that it is important to always seek more education. I love to learn”. “A love of learning; the love of passing on what I know. My goals of being a lifelong learner keep me coming back”.
Social Support – 69		

Mentoring (Formal/Informal)	43	<p>“The hospital was affiliated with a nursing program; formal courses on nursing education were taught and mentors were assigned for new faculty”.</p> <p>“It was a lot of floundering because I don’t think we do a good job providing mentors for new educators”.</p> <p>“The reason I was successful in that setting was because of the support I got from other faculty. They took me under their wing and taught me to teach”.</p> <p>“It turned out well, I think, because of the support from other faculty. I don’t think I would have stayed in teaching if I had not had that support”.</p>
Family Influence (Personal Support)	26	<p>“My parents expected that I go to college; there was no question. I think they even influence me to this day as I am trying to finish up my doctorate”.</p> <p>“My dad, without my knowing it, sent my application to the Visiting Nurses Association. That was the beginning of my love for community health nursing”.</p> <p>“I am finishing up my doctorate now. I was just thinking, ‘my dad would be so proud.’ My father was the driving force behind us getting an education”.</p>
Work Opportunity – 47		
Preceptor/teaching role	26	<p>“I had an opportunity with a previous instructor to teach some clinical groups....so I tried it”.</p> <p>“I worked in a teaching hospital where...I always had nursing students assigned to me. I found that I really liked it.”</p> <p>“We always had students on the unit, and for whatever reason, I loved those little baby nurses. I thought I can do this (teach) and I can do it well”.</p> <p>“I went from being a staff nurse to being offered an opportunity to do staff development. I found I really liked the teaching aspect”.</p>
Unexpected Opportunity	13	<p>“While I was getting my Masters, my friend called and asked me if I wanted to do some clinical teaching”.</p> <p>“A friend of mine said there was an opportunity to teach in this nursing school; so, I applied and was accepted to work there”.</p> <p>“After graduate school, I was offered a teaching position immediately”.</p> <p>“One of the motivators that was key was as a nurse; I started being a preceptor in my job working with new nurses”.</p>

Table 1: Most Frequently Referenced Themes (Top 2) and Sustaining Factors.

Internal Motivators

Participants in this study overwhelmingly referred to Internal Motivators as key contributors to their pursuit of further education and a career choice in nursing education. These were often also important factors in their decisions to remain in academia and constituted the most frequently discussed concept in the interviews with a total of 76 references.

Teaching Satisfaction

Internal Motivators were often described as the satisfaction that participants obtained from teaching. Accounts of a love for teaching, commitment to teach the next generation of nurses, and a sense of service to the profession were factors participants often attributed as Internal Motivators derived from the personal satisfaction they got from teaching.

Participants often spoke of experiences with students that served in maintaining that excitement and motivation for teaching. Seeing that sense of excitement in learning (e.g. “When the lightbulb lights up”) and the gratitude sometimes expressed by current and former students for their learning, were themes frequently mentioned as rewarding experiences that motivated them to remain in their faculty role. Participants often offered accounts of the sense of satisfaction they obtain from being with students, whether in the classroom or clinical setting.

Pursue Advanced Education

The desire to pursue an advanced degree was also a theme often mentioned as an internal motivator that initially brought participants to a career in nursing education. Some participants described how they viewed teaching as an option after obtaining a higher degree, while others said that the desire to teach in nursing was the main reason they went back to school. Five of the nurse educators acknowledged that they have an ongoing and intrinsic desire to continuously learn more. This need to learn more fuels their passion for education.

Social Support

Once in the role of a new nurse educator, a time of confusion and uncertainty began. All participants described the difficulties and challenges they encountered as they transitioned to an unfamiliar academic environment. Descriptors used included: overwhelming, hard, feeling alone, scared, and unprepared. Several participants questioned or regretted their decision to become nurse educators. Social Support was described by study participants as some form of personal and/or professional support that was crucial in their lives as they transitioned from clinical nursing to nursing education.

Mentoring

Informal mentoring was the most frequently described professional support system that was key in choosing or remaining

in nursing academia. It constituted the most frequently discussed theme in any concept category with 43 references made of having been mentored in some way during the interviews (Table 1). Participants often shared accounts of an important mentor or role model that was significant in guiding or influencing them to pursue a career in nursing education. Frequently, participants described their feelings with difficulty in transitioning from nursing practice to nursing education. Fourteen of the 15 participants reminisced of role models (Mainly fellow nursing faculty mentors) who informally encouraged, guided, and supported them early on in their teaching careers. The amount of gratitude for these persons abounded as participants described their transitions into nursing academia. One participant spoke about attending a formal mentoring program which guided her as a novice nurse educator. All other participants described their experience with mentors as an informal relationship (e.g. “She took me under her wing”).

Family Influence

Personal support was referred to most often by family members’ roles in influencing the pursuit of a higher education or pursuing teaching in nursing as a career change. Accounts of family members’ encouragement included emotional support and expectations within the immediate family to further their career. Several participants spoke of a strong person in their family that supported and guided them through their career decisions. Parents were often mentioned as support systems, and spouses were also described by a few participants as having an influence in their decision to become nurse educators. Family members were often described as supportive, either emotionally or financially, while participants pursued an advanced education.

Work Opportunity

Preceptor/Teaching Role

Participants frequently shared descriptions of opportunities which led them from nursing practice to nursing academia. Some of these opportunities were found when they worked as nurses in the clinical setting. They often reminisced of experiences, as nurses, which had exposed them to teaching. Several participants were chosen as mentors or preceptors for nursing students or newly licensed nurses. Two participants worked as patient educators, and three others were offered part-time clinical adjunct positions. This allowed them to ‘test the waters’ and determine if they liked teaching. From these experiences, participants discovered they enjoyed teaching and began to think of it as a possible career option. It is interesting to note that 80% of the participants in this study described the opportunity to teach while working in their clinical nursing careers as significant in forging their paths toward nursing education.

Unexpected Opportunity

Participants also described opportunities through workplace

benefits and scholarships which enabled them to obtain a higher degree that would permit them to teach nursing. Most of these work incentives were unexpected but were pivotal in providing these nurses the ability to further their education and consider an academic path. Flexibility from the workplace in scheduling their shifts as nurses was an important benefit to those educators who continued to work while pursuing an advanced education.

Discussion

A wealth of literature exists offering reasons for nursing faculty attrition [17-21]. Strategies to recruit new faculty and retain current faculty are also found in abundance in the literature [3,7,22-25]. This case study mirrors the existing information found in the body of faculty recruitment and retention literature. The findings also add new insight regarding the most significant factors that may influence choosing nursing education as a long-term career, and those factors that promote longevity in the profession. Kurt Lewin's Three-Stage Model of Change [16], suggests that there are personal driving and restraining forces that can both hinder and promote change. Four driving forces were identified when faculty participants in this study described their motivation to remain in the nurse educator profession: personal and professional support, opportunity, a love for teaching, and a desire to give back to the profession.

While most participants in this study indicated having a strong social support system, professional support from peers was reported to be the most influential factor for supporting them as they navigated through an unfamiliar academic environment. All of the participants spoke about some type of positive peer support, through mentoring and role-modeling, that helped them to overcome the difficulties experienced during the transition to new full-time nurse educators, and helped them adjust to the new role. During this time, participants adapted to the challenges experienced in their new role more readily as they sought guidance from experienced educators who would mentor them through teaching, supporting, and role-modeling. The literature notes that novice faculty who had positive relationships with mentors during their first year of teaching experienced greater job satisfaction and decreased work-related stress in their new faculty roles [17].

Participants in the study acknowledged that having a peer nurse educator to turn to for knowledge and support was crucial in preparing them to embrace their role as nurse educators. Some participants considered themselves fortunate to have more than one mentor during this transition period. The need for support from peers emerged as a common need that all new nurse educators have and should be met to enable long-term retention in academia. This need for mentoring is consistent with the literature on nurse faculty mentoring [11,17,25-27]. The literature stresses that a good mentoring relationship is based on developing interpersonal relationships that match personality traits, thrive

on open communication, and facilitate opportunities for new faculty members to ask questions, observe, and seek support from experienced educators [27]. With the knowledge that peer support and mentoring is a vital resource to facilitate transition and foster retention in the full-time teaching role, initiatives may be developed that reflect the importance of peer mentoring and support during this process. The understanding of the value of mentoring may provide impetus for administrators to develop new faculty orientation strategies that have strong mentoring components.

The second overarching concept, Internal Motivation, was described by participants as experiencing personal satisfaction from teaching and from pursuing advanced education. Participants spoke about their clinical expertise and their confidence in teaching the nursing profession. They were often passionate in describing their personal commitment to the academic nursing profession. While the majority of participants in this study spoke of a strong determination to succeed in their life goals; as in other studies [3,7,20] a common characteristic mentioned by all participants was a specific self-motivation to persist in their goals often beginning with the desire to pursue an advanced degree that would provide them with the option to teach in academia. This career-specific motivation can be harnessed as a powerful recruitment and retention mechanism to promote interest in teaching nursing.

Each participant described a point in their nursing career when they decided to transition to the role of nurse educator. Several of them described an opportunity to teach that they had encountered as clinical nurses. A love for teaching, a sense of commitment to teaching the next generation, and a sense of service to the profession were reported as the strongest motivators to contemplating teaching in nursing as well as remaining in the role of nurse educators over the years. As in other studies, a love for teaching in nursing and belief in its importance were driving forces that motivated educators to remain in academia [28,29]. Other internal motivating factors to remain in academia included an innate ability to teach, satisfaction from teaching, and encouragement/support from colleagues.

The finding that several participants became interested in nursing education through having the opportunity to teach in some capacity while they worked as clinical nurses is the third overarching concept most common to participants in the study. It is yet another factor that can be tapped for recruitment of future nurse educators. As nurses experience the opportunity to teach in the clinical setting, often an innate love for teaching is sparked which may have gone unnoticed otherwise. Strategies to tie clinical practice to teaching are consistent with other research [20,30,31] and could be an excellent strategy to allow nurses to 'feel the waters' of nursing education and may serve to spark enthusiasm for teaching and sustain persistence once they become nurse

educators. Nursing schools could recruit nurses more purposefully to be clinical adjunct faculty while still working in their clinical jobs. Full-time experienced clinical faculty are often in an excellent position to observe nurses that are excellent clinicians and enjoy working with nursing students. This could also be a good avenue for recruitment.

Limitations

Although this qualitative study provided participants the opportunity to be interviewed in person and reflect on their thoughts, thus enriching the data, only 15 nurse educators from one midwestern area of the country participated. Moreover, the lack of variation in demographic data (Caucasian females, median age of 52) demonstrated a lack of diversity of participants. This may affect the ability to generalize the findings. Finally, it could be argued that not all the themes featured in this case study are specific to nurse educators and could be experienced by any clinical nurse.

Conclusion

Current literature concurs that countering the nursing shortage requires additional numbers of nursing faculty. Common barriers to meeting these needs include the difficulty that teaching institutions have in recruiting and retaining nursing faculty. This study provides valuable information regarding retention initiatives solicited directly from the lived experiences of nursing faculty. The findings give context to the various difficulties common to novice faculty, as well as the factors that not only helped them to overcome the initial hardships of orienting to the role, but also kept them devoted to teaching the nursing profession.

The findings underscore that there are commonalities found in the experiences of expert nurse educators that contribute not only to their initial transition into teaching, but also to their decision to stay in academics. Three overarching concepts emerged from the lived experiences of nurse educators: (1) Internal Motivators, (2) Social Support, and (3) Work Opportunity. Two consistent themes within the concepts identified were noted among all participants in this study: self-motivation as a part of their characters, and the value of informal mentoring from peers, especially during their transition into the unfamiliar academic environment. An intrinsic motivation to persist coupled with mentoring and support from others appear to be two powerful intrinsic characteristics found in experienced nursing faculty that lend new insights into further exploration. This career-specific motivation and mentoring support may prove to be powerful recruitment and retention mechanisms that can be harnessed to promote interest in nursing academics and success in increasing retention of faculty.

With the knowledge that peer support and mentoring is a vital resource to facilitate transition and foster retention in the full-time teaching role, initiatives may be developed that reflect

the importance of peer mentoring and support during this process. The understanding of the value of mentoring may provide impetus for administrators to develop new faculty orientation strategies that have strong mentoring components. Understanding the lived experiences of experienced nursing faculty informs the development of comprehensive recruitment and retention strategies for increasing the number of needed nursing faculty. Implementing the intrinsic factors into the interview techniques and employee policies of teaching institutions may attract more nurses to the teaching profession, increase job satisfaction in academia, and promote faculty retention. This will, in turn, help achieve the goal of increasing the nursing faculty workforce to meet the needs for an increased nursing population.

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