

Mature learners becoming registered nurses: a grounded theory model

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KEY WORDS

Qualitative research, grounded theory, nurse education, mature aged students

ABSTRACT

Objective

This study describes how mature aged people reconstruct themselves as nursing students.

Design

This is a constructivist grounded theory study that used grounded theory methods of concurrent data generation and analysis, coding, developing categories and memoing.

Setting

The study was undertaken at the rural campuses of two major Australian universities. The universities were in two different states of Australia.

Subjects

Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews and focus groups over an eighteen month period between January 2006 and June 2007 with fourteen mature aged undergraduate nursing students. These students were in the second or third year of three year baccalaureate degrees that led to registration as registered nurses (titled Registered Nurse Division 1 in the state of Victoria, Australia). Participants' backgrounds were all slightly different. Two participants were currently employed as enrolled nurses (titled Registered Nurse Division 2 in the state of Victoria, Australia). Three participants were married, two were supporting parents and one participant was in a committed defacto relationship. Only one participant had no children with other participants having between one and seven children aged between one week old and twenty years.

Results

This study found that mature aged students experienced three stages in their trajectory of *Becoming a registered nurse*. These phases were called: *Taking the first step*; *Keeping going*; and finally, *Letting go and moving forward*.

Conclusion

Mature aged undergraduate student have different needs to younger students including academic and pastoral support, on campus subsidised childcare and creative timetabling. During each phase of their university journey mature aged undergraduate nursing students developed different skills and knowledge and identified different needs that resulted in both professional and personal growth.

INTRODUCTION

The traditional path to a university degree, broadly defined as enrolling in university immediately after secondary school and attending full time until graduation, has changed markedly in the last decade in Australia. Flexible modes of entry to university have contributed to a shift in student demographics, with secondary school results no longer offering the only means of gaining a place at university. Flexible admission policies at many universities give a wide range of admission options acknowledging previous educational qualifications and life skills. Acknowledgement of prior learning can also affect the length of study required to complete a course as exemptions may be granted based on previously completed coursework or skills attainment. The combined effects of flexible access policies, recognition of prior learning and flexible delivery courses, have contributed to the increase in mature aged students returning to study.

There is evidence to suggest that globally, mature aged students now account for more than half of all students enrolled in baccalaureate nursing programs (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2008; Malone 2005; Buchan and Seccombe 2003). Little research has been undertaken to examine how mature aged students reconstruct themselves as undergraduate nursing students with much of the literature discussion relating to the old apprenticeship style of education rather than university education (Lamond and London 1976; Mauksch 1963).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Although there is a paucity of literature available explicating the journey undertaken by mature aged students when they undertake a baccalaureate nursing course, there is evidence to suggest that mature aged students are in transition during their undergraduate nursing studies (Birks et al 2006; Tindle and Lincoln 2002; Dalziel and Peat 1997).

Transition is of course an expected part of life. Numerous developmental and transitional theorists, such as Levinson, Havighurst, and Erikson, have explained the developmental tasks that adults need

to achieve to enable them to successfully grow. Whilst these theorists suggest that transition from one developmental stage to the next is dependent upon the positive resolution of a crisis, the developmental crises are also age related (Baum 1997). Sargent and Schlossberg (cited in Kerka 2003) however, suggest that adult behaviour is determined by transition, rather than age. Schlossberg's model of social interaction characterises transition in terms of its type, context and impact, viewing transition as needing to be examined from interacting variables (Schlossberg 1981). Therefore the experience of transition is concerned with dealing with change, which requires the individual to engage in adaptable and flexible behaviours. The mature aged student participating in tertiary study has undergone, and continues to experience transition, resulting in the formation of new behaviours, relationships and self concept (Schlossberg 1981). This transitional period requires not only academic adjustment but also social and psychological adjustment. Previous studies of mature aged students transitioning into university identify common themes of feelings of isolation and alienation, fear of failure and minimal confidence in academic abilities, coupled with high levels of motivation and personal reasons for undertaking the course (Leder and Forgasz 2004; Katanis 2000). Moreover this transitional period is often explained by mature aged students as a 'them (meaning traditional students) and us' situation (Risque et al 2007/2008; Wilson 2002).

Holland (1999) asserts that this transitional period has been ill-defined in the past and there is the potential for role conflict for many students working in the health care sector. Greenhaus and Beutell (1985) insist that work and family lives are co-dependent and that conflict arises when there are high demands placed on both roles. Indeed the literature concerning mature aged students in university identifies role conflict as being a significant issue for mature students (Broadbridge and Swanson 2005; Bolam and Dodgson 2003). Life transitions then, are personal, process oriented experiences that are context dependent and which rely on the individual's coping skills to achieve satisfactory

outcomes. For most mature aged students, a university level of study will generate changes that can have significant transitional effects on their lives and the lives of their families.

METHODOLOGY

Grounded theory methods of constant comparison of data, memoing, theoretical sensitivity and theoretical sampling used in this study were based on those described by Charmaz (2006). Constructivist grounded theory (GT) is an interpretive research methodology that uses the constant comparative method to reduce data and develop categories and codes (Mills et al 2006). In this study, data collection and data analysis occurred concurrently but also cyclically. Initially data was compared with data and categories constructed. Data were then compared to categories and further codes and categories were developed. Eventually codes were saturated and their relevance among the other codes became apparent resulting in the construction of theoretical properties. Finally a core category which the other categories connected to was constructed. Memos consisted of theoretical notes about the data and their conceptual connections and were written throughout the research process. Charmaz (2006) contends that memoing provokes analyses and coding early in the research process. Birks et al (2008 p.68) concur, stating “*memoing serves to assist the researcher in making conceptual leaps from raw data to those abstractions that explain research phenomena in the context in which it is examined.*” Memoing is a flexible strategy influenced by the researcher’s abilities as well as the aims and focus of the research (Birks et al 2008). *Becoming a registered nurse* was the core category constructed from the data.

Participants were recruited from the rural campuses of two Australian universities. These universities were in different states but had similar demography. Six participants were initially recruited and interviewed from University A using a process of self-selection against predetermined criteria. The predetermined criteria for participants were that they must be over the age of 21; enrolled in an undergraduate degree

that led to registration as a nurse with a state nursing licensing board; and be in the second or third year of study. Participants from University B were recruited to test the constructed conceptualisations. Two focus groups with four participants were undertaken at University B.

FINDINGS

In this study the core category constructed from the data is *Becoming a registered nurse*. For mature aged undergraduate nursing students *Becoming a registered nurse* involved a transitional journey of three phases. These phases or subcategories were called: *Taking the first step*; *Keeping going*; and finally, *Letting go and moving forward*. At the centre of the constructed grounded theory model was the desire to be a registered nurse. This desire was apparent throughout the mature aged undergraduate students’ journey.

Taking the first step marked the beginning of the students’ university journey. To move through this stage of the journey mature aged students needed to meet the academic criteria for enrolment at university. Once enrolled, mature aged undergraduate students needed to develop skills, for example time management, and organisational, academic and study skills to maintain their enrolment. A stable home environment and supportive academic staff facilitate the development of skills.

Keeping going was the second sub-category of *Becoming a registered nurse* and was characterised by students developing the self, refining existing, and learning new coping strategies. Developing the self concerned personal development and included increasing self esteem and self confidence through positive affirmation from academic staff. At this stage mature aged undergraduate students were found to possess intrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation was described as an inner drive to want to achieve. This motivation was a force in helping mature aged undergraduate students to overcome challenges. Additionally it was important that mature aged undergraduate students were able to maintain a balance between study, work and home

to facilitate achievement and enjoyment in all three aspects of their lives. It was found that mature aged undergraduate students refined previously developed coping strategies and developed new coping strategies at this time to reduce stress and cope with personal crisis. A high level of self awareness and the ability to problem solve were evident as mature aged undergraduate students demonstrated the ability to identify problems, select an appropriate course of action, implement a solution and then evaluate the outcome when dealing with personal crisis.

The final subcategory of *Becoming a registered nurse* is *Letting go and moving forward*. There are two aspects of *Letting go and moving forward*: finding employment; and creating distance and becoming autonomous. Finding graduate employment occurred just prior to the student completing their course and applying for licensure as a registered nurse. At this stage students identified potential employers and submitted applications. It was a time of significant anxiety for the mature aged student and family support was important to provide emotional support and help with home commitments. The flexibility of the family unit to relocate geographically provided employment options. Finding graduate employment allowed students to move forward into their new role of registered nurses and led students to create distance between themselves and their university cohort while becoming more autonomous in their thinking about nursing as their chosen profession. Creating distance occurred as students began disconnecting from university, focusing on future goals and spending less time with university friends. Creating distance was a purposeful act rather than a natural process and participants spoke of reflecting about how they would do this and the impact it would have for them. Students needed confidence to create distance as they were leaving a safe known environment to enter an unknown environment. Autonomy developed as students took control of their futures. Creating distance for some students meant creating distance from the friends they made at university. Students who knew they would be leaving the area and going to an environment where others from their cohort would

not be going began to disengage from their friends prior to completing university. This need to create distance from friends for these students was related to their belief that they needed to find other support mechanisms in their new environments rather than rely on former supports used at university.

The grounded theory model constructed from the data and illustrated in figure 1 shows that wanting to be a nurse is at the core of *Becoming a registered nurse*. Wanting to be a nurse precipitates taking the first step toward becoming a registered nurse. An arrow leading from the core into the spiral traces the three phases required of the mature aged student to achieve this process. Stepping through each one of these phases results in the core category of the grounded theory which is *Becoming a registered nurse* which provides an end point for the spiral.

DISCUSSION

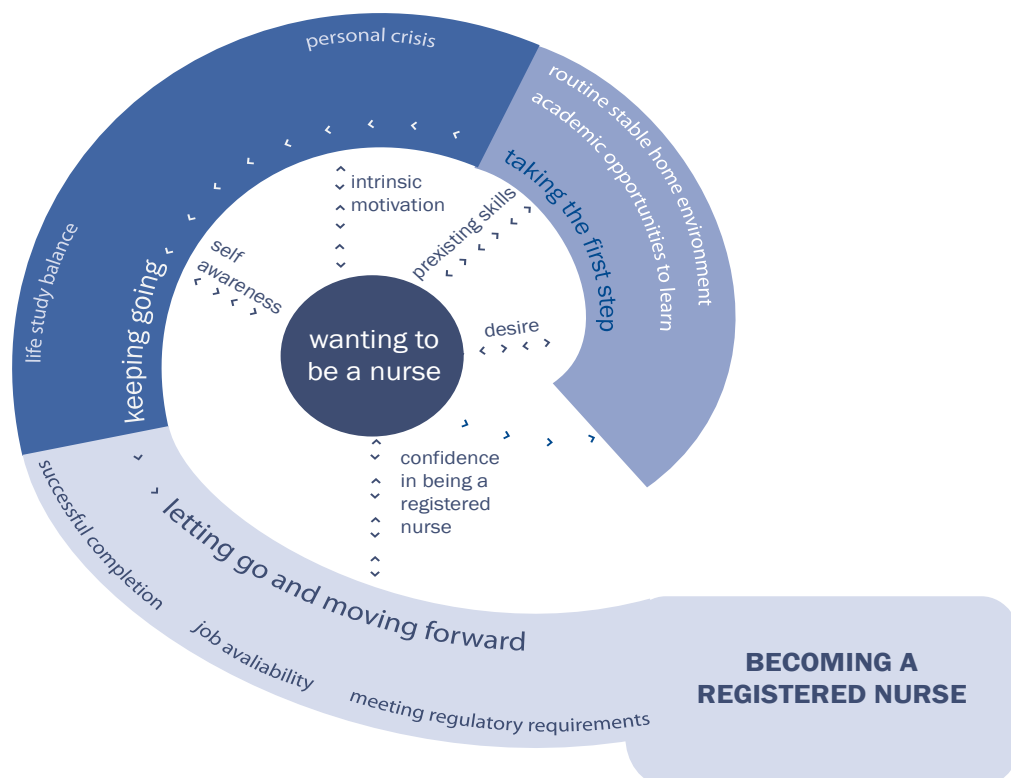
Schlossberg et al (1995) promulgate that transition consists of a series of three phases they termed: *moving-in, moving-through and moving-out*, and that a person's ability to cope with transition is influenced by four major sets of factors. They termed these factors: *situation, self, support, and strategies*. Applying this to mature aged undergraduate students it can be seen that the outcome of the mature aged undergraduate students' return to study and how the period of study is managed will be affected by their support, resources, problem solving, coping mechanisms and their personal strengths and weaknesses. Managing transition is a process that occurs over time. Schlossberg et al (1981 p.27) define transition as "any event or non event that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions and roles". While transition generally leads to growth in individuals, transition can also have a negative outcome. The mature aged undergraduate students in this study all experienced personal growth and change across all aspects of their lives so accordingly it can be seen they have been in a transitional period in their lives.

Taking the first step marked the beginning of the students' university journey. The process of

commencing university meant that the mature aged undergraduate students had entered a new phase of their lives; they had left behind their known 'worlds' and entered the university sphere. This moving-in began a process of transition where the mature aged undergraduate students adopted new responsibilities, roles and formed

new relationships. During the moving-in process mature aged undergraduate students needed to learn how to be students. Furthermore, they had to develop academic skills such as note taking and writing assignments as well as learn the routines and procedures of university.

Figure 1: A grounded theory model of Becoming a Registered Nurse



Following the moving-in process a period of adjustment to university ensued. This period of adjustment was followed by the moving-through process. *Keeping going* aptly described the moving-through phase; moving through involved participants *keeping going* despite challenges and problems. There were numerous tasks that needed to be completed during the moving through phase, for example students needed to become adept time managers, sharpen academic skills, manage personal crisis and challenges and find their place within the university. At the same time students had to manage changing roles within the family, balance study, work and leisure and quite often work in paid employment as well.

Letting go and moving forward is synonymous with Schlossberg et al's stage of moving-out. In this study moving out focused on students examining what they would do next. Moving out entails disengagement from university but there was also a sense they would begin a new phase and therefore start a new transitional process as part of moving in to their new jobs. Indeed one student actually confirmed being in a transitional period on completing university. Champagne and Pepitas (1989) suggest periods of transition are interspersed with periods of anxiety as adjustment to change occurs. Again anxiety concerning disengagement and lack of confidence is consistent with what students in this study articulated and is evident in the case of the two students who were working part-time on graduation.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRACTICE

The findings from this study identify the need for mentoring programs whereby senior mature aged undergraduate students mentor junior mature aged undergraduate students. It is recommended that student support programs and or information packages are developed that include information concerning finances, academic matters, personal counselling and childcare. Professional career services should be available to students particularly in the final transitional stage of completing university and beginning employment; *letting go and moving forward*. Implementing strategies to support mature aged students appropriately during their university journey may lead to increased retention of this cohort and improve the mature aged undergraduate nursing students' experience of university.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

This is a qualitative constructed grounded theory study; therefore findings are not generalisable. A further limitation of the study is the relationship that the researcher had with both universities. At University A the researcher was a staff member and at University B the researcher was a higher degree student. The study was carried out in geographical disparate sites, which place an additional limitation on the study. Data may have been different if collected at universities in the same state. Furthermore, a limitation is that the initial sampling all occurred at one site with the second site being used to test out the constructed conceptualisation. The data may have been different if sampling and focus groups had been carried out across both sites.

CONCLUSION

It is important to understand and generate knowledge about the complexity of being a mature aged undergraduate nursing student in a rural Australian university since this cohort now makes up over 50% of all enrolled students. Although universities have made many changes in the last few years they still continue to be organised and timetabled based in the belief that most students are school leavers.

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