

**Belongingness: Essential for
optimising the learning of nursing
students in the clinical environment**

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Outline of presentation

- Definition of 'belongingness'
- An introduction to the research project
- The relationship between belongingness and learning
- Factors that have a positive or negative impact upon students' experience of belongingness.

Belongingness: Definition

A deeply personal and contextually mediated experience that evolves in response to the degree to which an individual feels:

- secure, accepted, included, valued and respected by a defined group
- connected with or integral to the group
- that their professional and/or personal values are in harmony with those of the group.

The experience of belongingness may evolve passively in response to the actions of the group to which one aspires to belong and/or actively through the actions initiated by the individual.

(Levett-Jones, 2008)

Aims of the Study

- To measure and compare the degree to which nursing students from three different universities experience belongingness; *and*
- To explore students' understanding of the factors that impact upon and are consequences of belongingness.

Participants

- ✦ Third year nursing students were recruited from two Australian universities, one in New South Wales and one in Queensland and one university in south of England.
- ✦ Each university provides a three year program as the requisite tertiary preparation for registration as a nurse but differ in terms of the model of clinical supervision, the duration and structure of clinical placements and cohort size.

Mixed Methods: Quantitative Phase

- 362 students completed an online anonymous questionnaire called the 'Belongingness Scale – Clinical Placement Experience' (BES-CPE).

This 34 item self-report instrument allowed for:

- Students' belongingness scores to be measured and compared across the three sites.
- The influence of demographic variables to be explored.

Quantitative data were analysed using SPSS (Version 13)

Mixed Methods: Qualitative Phase

- 18 students participated in semi-structured in-depth interviews that were used to explore the factors that impact upon and the consequences of belongingness.
- Qualitative data were thematically analysed.

Quantitative Results

Demographic variables that did not influence belongingness:

- ✦ Previous or concurrent nursing experience
- ✦ Family members with nursing experience
- ✦ Gender
- ✦ Country of birth
- ✦ Age
- ✦ English as a first language

The mean BES–CPE scores of participants from the university in UK were statistically higher than participants from either of the Australian universities.

This result may explained by differences in the duration of clinical placements and the mentorship models in use at the three universities.

Qualitative Findings: Factors that impact on Belongingness

- ✦ Students from the three sites described placement experiences that spanned a continuum from those that promoted a high degree of belongingness to those that provoked intense feelings of alienation.
- ✦ Belongingness was seen to be both a deeply personal and a contextually mediated experience.
- ✦ **Interpersonal relationships with the registered nurses** that students worked with on a day-to-day basis exerted the single most important influence on their sense of belonging.
- ✦ Students' sense of belonging was also influenced by a range of other individual, interpersonal, contextual and organisational factors.

Qualitative Findings: Consequences of Belongingness

- ✦ Feeling safe, comfortable, satisfied and happy within the clinical environment.
- ✦ Enhanced self-concept, confidence and self-efficacy
- ✦ The extent to which students were willing to question or conform to poor practice
- ✦ Future career decisions

The relationship between belongingness and students' capacity and motivation for learning to nurse emerged as a critical and recurring theme.

Themes Specific to Belongingness

- ✦ **Theme A:** Motivation to learn
- ✦ **Theme B:** Self directed learning
- ✦ **Theme C:** Anxiety – A barrier to learning
- ✦ **Theme D:** Confidence to ask questions
- ✦ **Theme E:** Willingness to adopt the role of unpaid worker

Theme A: Motivation to Learn

- ✦ *“If you feel you are not wanted or they [the nurses] don’t care whether you are there or not, it is disheartening and you are like, “What is the point of me trying to learn; they don’t acknowledge me, they don’t want me here”. But when you feel welcome and as if they really want you there, you try harder and you are more motivated to do well.”*

- Fiona

Theme B: Self Directed Learning

- ✦ *“Belonging makes a huge difference to your attitude towards the staff and to learning as well...It makes the world of difference to whether you want to actually get up and go into work in the morning and how much you learn and want to learn while you’re there. I mean, in theatres I did so much work outside [of the placement] as well—reading up on cases and doing my own revision. When you actually enjoy being somewhere and feel as if you fit in, it spurs you on to want to learn and to actually contribute to your own learning.”*

- Nicole

Theme C: Anxiety – A Barrier to Learning

- ✦ *“I feel more comfortable if I fit in and belong, and then I can learn. Because with my anxiety I get worried if I am in a situation where I am not welcome and I would rather opt out of it. I think it makes it easier on me if I find a place where I belong, because otherwise the anxiety can get in the way of learning.”*

- Lawrence

Theme D: Confidence to Ask Questions

- ✦ *“When someone really supports you and makes you feel welcome, you’re so much more confident and inclined to ask questions and to learn. That’s just the perfect learning environment. If they’re giving you the impression that, “Yeah, you’re welcome and we really want to teach you things”, you just jump at it and you thrive. It definitely makes for a much better learning environment.”*

- Louise

Theme E: Willingness to Adopt the Role of Unpaid Worker

- ✦ *“If you want to build up those relationships and feel accepted you’ve go to be willing to pitch in and show them that you’re not there just to laze around... You have to just get in there and do the work and then they think, “She’s a good worker. I can rely on her”, and you just build up that rapport from there.”*

- Laura

Conclusion: **Belongingness is Crucial to Learning**

- ✦ *“As long as I get on with the nursing staff, as long as I feel like a part of the team, as long as it is friendly, I don’t care what kind of nursing it is. I just can’t learn in an environment where I don’t feel as if I am really wanted.”*
- Elizabeth
- ✦ *“Everybody needs to belong, to feel accepted, especially in the work environment or learning environment. And I want to feel like part of the team, to be involved and included. Then I can focus on the job of learning—and isn’t that what I’m there for?”*
- Monique

Recommendations for Practice

- Students should be helped to recognise the influence they exert over their own clinical learning.
- Students should be taught how to apply the principles of self-directed learning gained in academic settings to their learning in the clinical environment.
- Academic and clinical staff should be aware that learning is impacted by the extent to which students experience belongingness.
- The length of clinical placements should be a subject of dialogue and debate.
- The provision of consistent, designated mentors should be a workplace priority.

References

✦ Books

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