Project FNP: Socializing Expert Nurses to Advanced Practice Roles

One of the biggest challenges in nursing education is socializing a seasoned RN to an advanced practice role. Many theoretical models of professional development exist in nursing. One of the most notable is the novice-to-expert model by Patricia Benner (1984). Benner’s model proposes that professional socialization and professional identity are achieved by progressing through a five-stage process that is hallmarked by acquisition of knowledge and skill through nursing experience.

Graduate nursing students are in a unique position in Benner’s model (1984). They are generally members of both the expert nurse and novice advanced nurse practitioner stages. Dual membership often creates role confusion and serves as a barrier to the development of a professional identity as an advance practice nurse; however, recent research suggests that role confusion can be avoided through successful mentoring and support of graduate students by faculty and clinical preceptors (Faulk, Parker, & Morris, 2010).

Project Family Nurse Practitioner

Project Family Nurse Practitioner (Project FNP) is an introductory course assignment designed to orient graduate nursing students to the role of the FNP. Initially, students identify their individual and collective beliefs about the role of the FNP based on their past experiences and knowledge as RNs. Then, in groups, students collectively discuss their beliefs and come to a group consensus of the roles and attributes of the FNP. Group decisions are then recorded on a white board in the classroom. The result is a collective class belief of their future role as an FNP.

Project FNP acknowledges graduate student expertise as a RN, while at the same time increases collegiality and begins identity formation for a future role as an advanced practice nurse. Project FNP is congruent with the literature that suggests nursing programs include preparatory theory on role transition for students prior to graduation in an effort to increase socialization to the advanced practice role and reduce inconsistencies between classroom learning and the professional world reality (Duchscher, 2009). Project FNP serves as the beginning point for role transformation for seasoned RNs returning to graduate study for advanced practice.

Transformation of the Expert Nurse to the Novice Family Nurse Practitioner

On the final day of class, students repeat the Project FNP activity. They then compare the thematic analyses of the first activity and the last. This repetition serves three main functions. First, it provides evidence of student learning of the material that was presented throughout the course. Students articulate a solid foundation of what it means to be an FNP and how that role is situated within the current health care environment. Second, it illuminates the progression of students along the continuum of novice to expert by documenting evidence of formation of new collective beliefs about the FNP role. Finally, it provides evidence of the beginning of professional identity formation and socialization as students move through the course and begin to identify with their new advanced practice nursing roles.

According to Mezirow (1997), one does not make transformative changes in the way one learns, as long as the new material is congruent with existing ways of knowing. For graduate nursing students, Project FNP exposes them to new ideas and beliefs and opens the door to challenging their assumptions about the role of the FNP. The process of transformation begins through individual reflection and group collective analysis, where students generate a visual display of where their individual beliefs join together, and they build new ideologies of how they will fit into the world of health care as an FNP.

Transformational learning is evident in the subtle differences in themes that emerge from the first assignment to the last. For example, in the first assignment, time management is collectively identified as a major theme attribute of an FNP. In discussion of this theme, students determine that as an FNP they must manage their time wisely, ensuring they complete their daily tasks and see patients in a timely manner. In the second assignment, students identify resource management as a key theme attribute. Through discussion, students commented on the role, encompassing more than just time management. The role included skills, such as knowing your resources and how to best use them, and prioritizing patient care through the use of the most cost-efficient resources. The change from a time management focus to a resource management focus demonstrates movement from a novice-level FNP student to the advanced beginner. According to Benner (1984):

Advanced beginners are ones who can demonstrate marginally acceptable performance and ones who have coped with enough real situations to note [or to have pointed out to them by a mentor] the recurring meaningful situational components that are termed aspects of the situation. (p. 22)

Through the comparison of the two thematic analyses (beginning and end of semester), a qualitative measure of the progression of students from novice to advanced beginner FNPs was made. As described, students moved from the identification of a key skill to the incorporation of a key aspect of advance practice nursing.

Summary

Successful professional socialization and role transition are key to the development of strong professional identities in graduate nursing students pursuing advanced practitioner nursing degrees. This article discusses an innovative class assignment—Project FNP—to graduate nursing students in their first clinical course in a Master of Science in Nursing Family Nurse Practitioner program. The purpose of the assignment was to begin to facilitate role transition of the expert RN to the novice and to the eventual advanced beginner FNP as theorized by...
Patricia Benner’s (1984) novice-to-expert model. Project FNP challenges graduate nursing students to examine their individual beliefs about the role of the FNP and, through collective thematic analysis, begin to develop new ideologies about their future roles as FNPs in a dynamic health care environment. This activity helps to develop a secure foundation for graduate students as they transition into advanced practice roles.

References
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