Exploring Empathy Through the Patient Experience in Literature

The study of literature written by local or internationally renowned patients is an effective exercise to prepare nursing students for patient interaction through enhancing their own ability to understand and empathize with a patient’s needs. Through structured classroom discussion, students and instructors can explore the character of a patient beyond their diagnosis and limitations, which is often the only focus in clinical settings. According to Parker and Smith (2015), “an emotional detachment between the nurse and ill person is created when the nurse views the ill person as simply ‘patient,’ rather than as a unique individual with his own understanding of the ill experience” (p. 77). The objective of bringing patient literature into the classroom is to foster empathy by emphasizing the person behind each patient on an analytical case-by-case study provided by individual narratives.

The method involves discussion of a piece of literature written by a previously hospitalized patient and their experience with both themselves and their health care. Focus revolves around the writer’s physical and psychological state, background, and emotional representation throughout text. To encourage active participation, students are led to create a list of possible texts before a vote. Students are provided with what is expected of them throughout the reading and the purpose of including literature in their nursing education. To stimulate discussion, the technique used is the Socratic Seminar, followed by personal reflection. The Socratic Seminar creates a format for students to prepare open-ended questions to report to their peers after everyone has read the same passage or chapter, thus encouraging active participation and the discussion of underlying insights. (Knezic, Wubbels, Elbers, & Hajer, 2010).

The method was conducted as an extracurricular gathering of 11 senior nursing students. After an introduction of the group’s goals and duration, together the students created a list of three memoirs focused around the writer’s experience with their health and health care. The group assessed each memoir using reviews from literary critics and the author’s explanation for the hospitalization. A blind vote was held and on a 9-to-2 vote result, students selected The Diving Bell and the Butterfly, a memoir dictated by Jean-Dominique Bauby, a French editor who experienced a stroke, leaving him only with the functioning of his left eye (Bauby, 1998). Images of Bauby, as well as samples of his work as a writer, before and after his stroke, were provided. For the following gatherings, the nursing students were expected to have prepared open-ended questions or noteworthy selections of text to bring up in a moderated group discussion.

The discussions spanned a total of four gatherings that benefited from the existing camaraderie of the senior students. Many of the discussions revolved around quotations the students had selected from the text and the comparison of text to the students’ previous experience with similar patients in their clinical rotations. Bauby’s memoir and the analytical discussion that ensued allowed for a reflective critique of the students’ current approach to their routinely assigned patients. The text and discussion also reminded the students of the standard of care needed by patients. Through Bauby’s description, students were able to appreciate the impact of health care providers who do and do not meet those standards. After a period of reflection, the eleven students mutually agreed that the discussions allowed for them to better appreciate their previous clinical experiences and better prepare for future clinical interactions regardless of patient condition or background.

References


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