Reflective Practice on Nursing Students: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

Introduction: The gap between theory and practice in clinical education settings is still common. Reflective practice in students of a profession program emphasizes the theoretical knowledge that has been acquired and the clinical experience. The purpose of this research was to explore the experience of reflective practice among the students of the Nursing Profession Program.
Methods: A qualitative study design was undertaken. Focus group discussions were conducted with 16 participants divided into two groups using Zoom virtual meeting application. Instrument used semi-structured interview guidelines and data analysis used thematic analysis.
Results: This research resulted in four themes, namely the gap between theory and practice; the benefits of reflective learning; experiences and expectations; and some barriers and challenges to reflective practice.
Conclusion: Based on the existing results, it can be concluded that, although there are still some barriers in its implementation, the implication of this study can facilitate students of profession programs in overcoming the gaps between theories and practical experience during professional education.

Keywords

barriers; clinical education; nursing students; reflective practice

INTRODUCTION

The gap between theory and practice in clinical educational settings is still common. It remains a central concern in both nursing education and practice, despite several efforts by nursing faculty and practitioners to resolve the theory-practice gap, with the nuanced nature of the theory-operation gap not entirely unknown (Shoghi *et al.*, 2019). The difference between theoretical understanding and the practical practice of nursing, most frequently expressed as a negative entity, has adverse effects (Greenway, Butt and Walthall, 2019). Theoretical knowledge provided in class also decreases during internships and much more so during the actual practice of a nurse. This means that the definition of the theory-practice distance as an organizational term is frequently vague and has different meanings (Bouchlaghem and Mansouri, 2018). Addressing the gap between theoretical and practical knowledge is not easy (Cherkis and Rosciano, 2018), especially for students.

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Educational factors and motivation from the preceptors greatly influence the practice of reflection carried out by students (Karimi *et al.*, 2017a).

Reflective practice, which is one of the *middle range* nursing theories, is an important component in the professional practice of nurses and one of the learning strategies in practice (Miraglia and Asselin, 2015). Reflective practice has been used to bridge the gap between nursing philosophy and practice and to express and improve nursing skills (Chong, 2009). Reflective practice has been described as a method of "learning through and from experience to gain new insights into self and/or practice," often through "examining the assumptions of everyday practice" (Knight, 2015). The ability to examine one's actions and experiences is reflective practice with the result of developing their practice and improving clinical knowledge (Caldwell and Grobbel, 2013). Reflective practice is a complex process that involves a cyclical approach. The Gibbs (1988) model illustrates the paradigm for experiential learning and guides the student through a series of questions that provide a framework for reflective experience (Gibbs, 1988; Chong, 2009; Knight, 2015). Reflective practice for students provides many benefits (Chong, 2009) because this activity integrates between theoretical knowledge obtained and clinical experience. This practice of reflection enables students to develop empirical, ethical, aesthetic, personal and emancipatory knowledge (Caldwell and Grobbel, 2013), add new insights, change clinical practice (Miraglia and Asselin, 2015), develop skills in independent learning, increase motivation, and improve the quality of care provided. The purpose of this reflective practice is to minimize the gap between the theory obtained at the academic stage and the process of undergoing practice at the professional stage (Cherkis and Rosciano, 2018).

Reflective practice in clinical education and simulation can be a supportive strategy for the transformation of student knowledge. Reflection enables students to realize their abilities and enhance critical thinking (Cherkis and Rosciano, 2018). Another benefit of reflective practice is that it is a valuable tool to assist nursing students in learning from practice (Jootun and McGarry, 2014). The benefits of reflection are clear even though the initial stages of implementation are usually difficult. The students of a profession program can do exercises to become better learners to develop this ability. The practice of reflection, if carried out thoroughly, can help to bridge this gap.

Clinical rotation at the professional education stage of nursing can facilitate the theoretical connection of didactic learning, experience real life situations, and assist students in socializing with nursing. Nurses function in an atmosphere that reveals human suffering in a striking manner and includes experiencing pain, illness and suffering on a regular basis. Nurses are continually exposed to human fragility that could easily be related to themselves or those close to them (Knight, 2015). Reflective practice provides nursing students with opportunities to analyze their actions and develop sound decision-making skills. The students who use reflective practice can assess their actions or decisions, and answer questions that may not have been answered (Cherkis and Rosciano, 2018). Reflective practice is not only the responsibility of the students, but also the responsibility of educators and preceptors (Barbagallo, 2019). The educators need to understand the process of reflective practice to maintain an immersive learning environment and trigger students to think through challenging feedback. Thus, nursing educators need to create an educational climate and support the reflection behavior of nursing students (Karimi *et al.*, 2017b). The students' experiences and expectations of early clinical practice are conveyed primarily emotionally. Self-reflection allows students to communicate their thoughts and concerns in order to relive and recognize difficulties, and also to better understand themselves (Mlinar Reljić, Pajnkihar and Fekonja, 2019). The Nursing Profession Study Program has been practicing reflection at this professional stage since 2016. The Gibbs' reflective cycle was selected because of its simplicity to follow the steps and because it encourages students to learn and cultivate reflective thinking from students (Bulman and Schutz, 2013). t Getting to know and understand what they have learned in their clinical practice, what feelings they have been facing, and what their first encounter in the clinical setting is are important for the

professional and personal growth of students. The purpose of this research was to explore the practical experience of reflection on students at the Nursing Professional stage in the Nursing Profession Study Program, Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences (FKIK) Universitas Muhammadiyah Yogyakarta.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Study Design

This study used a qualitative design to explore the experiences of the nursing profession students while undergoing reflective learning. This method was selected because of the nature of the phenomena. The theoretical and functional distance is too complex to be defined by the use of quantitative research of its different dimensions. In the naturalistic model and qualitative approaches, truth is observed on the basis of the context, and numerous realities and mechanisms of the phenomena, which are also not readily detectable, are used for this reason (Elo and Kyngäs, 2008).

Participants and Sampling

This research was conducted in August 2019. Participants in this study were students of the Nursing Profession Program of Nursing School Universitas Muhammadiyah Yogyakarta (UMY) batch 26. The selection of the participants used a purposive sampling technique. The selection of participants took into account the representation of the six main teaching hospitals of the Nursing Profession Program UMY. The number of participants was 16 divided into two groups for focus group discussion (FGD). The FGD was conducted two times with different participants. This aimed to explore student experiences so that the data received were richer. Another consideration was that there were very many means of practice that can be represented.

Procedure

The collection of the data was conducted using semi-structured interview guidelines. The data were collected online using a Zoom meeting with 16 final stage students of the Nursing Profession Program, divided into two groups of FGD (eight participants in each group) between 60-90 minute duration (Galutira, 2018). The FGD used Zoom media because the data collection of this study was carried out during a pandemic where it was not possible to meet face-to-face in order to prevent the spread of Covid-19. The first researcher served as the interviewer in this FGD, and the second researcher served as the note-taker. The leading questions were as follows: (1) Please explain one of your clinical encounters that caused you to think and reflect more; which circumstance caused you to reflect more? (2) What leads you to think about these situations? Then, according to the answers, exploratory and deeper questions were asked as follows to clarify and probe for potential details: (3) Could you explain it more? All interviews were recorded using audio-recording and were transcribed using verbatim transcripts. The credibility of the findings was established through close contact with the researcher. The member check is used to compare the suitability of the ideas derived from the data and the opinions of the participants.

Data Analysis

After completing the interview, the interview transcript was reviewed, and the accuracy checked with the recorder. The researcher checked the recorder and transcript repeatedly to ensure the suitability of the data. Data analysis based on thematic analysis by Colaizzi used open code software (Nowell *et al.*, 2017). The accuracy and reliability of this qualitative data refer to the criteria (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). The credibility of the findings was built through good interaction with participants. Member check was used to compare the suitability between the ideas obtained from the data and the opinions of participants (Connelly, 2016). Suitability was assessed by an external examiner who was familiar with qualitative research. Extracted codes and categories were presented to peers, and their suitability was controlled and verified. Researchers recorded and reported the entire research process to allow further research by others so that this research can be relied on.

Ethical Clearance

This research has been approved by the Committee of Ethics of Health Research of Universitas Aisyiah Yogyakarta decree number 1664/KEP-UNISA/VII/2020. All participants received an explanation and stated that they were willing to participate in the study by signing an informed consent before data collection was carried out. None of the participants refused to participate in this study. All participant identities are removed in this publication for confidentiality.

RESULTS

The characteristics of the participants in this study are the Batch 26 students in the final year of the Nursing Profession Program of PSIK FKIK UMY consisting of five males and 11 females. The results of the qualitative data analysis obtained four themes, namely (1) the gap between theory and practice; (2) emotional experience; (3) perceived benefits of reflective practice; (4) perceived barriers of reflective practice. Table 1 presents an overview of the categories and themes.

Based on the table above, there are four themes, each of which is supported by certain categories. The following is a description of the table above and supported by statements from participants.

Theme 1: Gaps in theory and practice.

This theme illustrates the gap between the theory students get at the academic stage and when students take professional education. Theme 1 has two categories, namely: (1) perceived gaps; (2) efforts made to minimize the gap.

Sub-theme 1.1. Perceived gaps

All students stated that there was a gap between theory and practice in the field of student practice during their professional education. These gaps are found starting from the nurse's communication with the patient, the actions or procedures given and documentation. The following is an excerpt from the student's statement:

"... we already know that our theory is correct, but in practice ... we have to make adjustments in the field because from practice and theory it is very, very different ..." (P6)

"... When we go to the hospital in a profession and there are some that are not suitable, such as introducing ourselves ..." (P3)

Sub-theme 1.2 Efforts made to minimize gaps

There were several efforts made by students to minimize the existing gaps, including initiating creativity when giving actions to patients while maintaining safety, carrying out efficiency of consumables, changing negative to positive feelings, sharing between friends, opening minds, looking for journal articles, comparing the events experienced with existing theories and the importance of feedback from the preceptor / educator. The following is an excerpt from participants:

"As much as possible for us, if we can manage according to theory, we will do each one of them accordingly ... but if there is something very different from theory and practice, we continue to discuss with our friends in the reflection of the case, why the causes could be different, maybe because of the facilities or maybe because of the ignorance of the nurses ..." (P6).

Theme 2: Emotional experiences

Table 1. Overview of themes and categories

Theme		Subtheme
Gaps in theory and practice	1.	Perceived gap
	2.	Efforts made to minimize the gap
Emotional experiences	1.	Negative feelings
	2.	Positive feelings
Perceived benefits of reflective practice	1.	Personal development
	2.	Professional development
	3.	Expectation
Perceived barriers of reflective practice	1.	Barriers from student
	2.	Work culture
	3.	Undesirable effect

This theme illustrate the emotional experiences by the student during the reflective practice. This theme has two categories, namely: (1) negative feelings, and (2) positive feelings.

Sub-theme 2.1 Negative feelings

Various feelings arise during the practice of reflection, including shock, sadness, confusion, fear, anxiety and disappointment. This feeling arises when participants encounter events or see events in the practice milieu that was appointed as a case for their reflection. The following are quotes from participants:

"...How come the theory that we learned in college is different from the actions taken in the hospital, like that ma'am, at first it was disappointed.."(P3)

"I'm still confused and it's like, it's kind of shocking, what a shock, I'm surprised with my friends, how come this is different from theory ..." (P8)

Sub-theme 2.2 Positive feelings

Some participants were motivated and challenged to become a better person and to improve the quality of better service after the reflective practice. In addition, there was a strong desire to make changes in the future. The following are excerpts from participants:

"The analyses that we make have theories that we can hold, so it seems like we will continue to do so, so that we don't shift to forgetting the right theory. It can also make us more used to it and learn to be agents of change." (P6).

Theme 3: Perceived benefits of reflective practice

This theme illustrates the benefits felt by students during learning reflection. This theme has two categories, namely: (1) personal development, (2) professional development, (3) Expectation.

Sub-theme 3.1 Personal development

The personal development felt by students included training the mindset when they were getting new experiences and learning from experiences, opening minds, exercising emotions, self-evaluation and motivating to learn. The following are excerpts from participants:

"... for me, reflection is a means for us to capture the moment to capture the incident and then we can analyze it to be able to use the incident as our learning experience. So, if, for example, we are not facilitated by reflection, we are not used to use each moment. So, in my opinion, it trains our mindset when we have new experiences when we experience events that we have never seen before for learning materials .." (P2)

"... we are still learning what factors influence that it cannot be like a theory, it cannot be like what we have learned, because there are indeed several circumstances that make it that way, ma'am, but we are ultimately more critical .." (P1)

Sub-theme 3.2 Professional development

The professional development felt by students included the development of abilities and skills, communication, fostering cooperation, and increasing professionalism. The following is an excerpt from participants:

"...That case reflection helps me to develop abilities and skills in nursing ... "(P7)

Sub-theme 3.3 Expectations

Most of the participants had some expectations, comprising expectations for nursing practice, expectations for nurses, and expectations for the participant themselves. The expectation for nursing practice was that, in the future, there would be no gap between theory and practice in the field and that improvements could be achieved in a shorter time. The expectation for nurses was that nurses could know what the participants have reflected, and nurses have a sense of openness to new things. Moreover, the expectation for the participants was to not imitate inappropriate or unfavorable events in the future. The following excerpts are from participants:

"... So it's like we're bettering ourselves, not to be like that .." (P6)

"Hopefully tomorrow when it is our time at work or in the future there will not be repeated things that we might have felt yesterday during our professional study.."

Theme 4: Perceived barriers of reflective practice

This theme describes the barriers faced by participants during their reflective practice. This theme had three categories: (1) barriers from student (2), work culture, and (3) undesirable effects.

Sub-theme 4.1 Barriers from students

Some of the participants stated that the barriers to the practice of reflection include

being unable to identify learning issues to reflect upon, and lack of courage to convey. The following is a quote from the participants:

"... we honestly don't dare to tell the acceptor at that time ..." (P5)

Sub-theme 4.2 Work culture

All participant stated that the barriers of reflective practice were the lack of an open mind from the mentors or nurses, low willingness to accept new concepts, and lack of self-reflection that was less supportive in nursing practice. The following is a quote from a participant:

"... it actually happened at that time when I practice, so I talked to the leader, then instead I was told 'You are hardheaded' " (P4)

Sub-theme 4.3 Undesirable effects

There were several statements describing the unwanted effects of the practice of reflection, namely, following fewer correct traditions or practice habits, being accustomed to incompatibilities, and being more inclined to reflect on things that are negative issues.

"... So, the second case, third, fourth, we got used to it, ma'am ..."

"... for reflection, from me, my experience in my profession was more inconsistent with the theory, right? That's what I usually use as a reflection of my case ...."

DISCUSSIONS

The purpose of the research was to determine how nursing students experience their reflective practice in nursing during the clinical practice experience. This study illustrates that there are still some gaps between theory and practice in clinical education. These gaps were found in several aspects, including communication, interaction, nursing action, and documentation. The existence of a gap between theory and practice in nursing is not new. This is not only experienced by new nurses, but also by clinical practice students (Greenway, Butt and Walthall, 2019).

Students had made several efforts to minimize the existing gaps. Efforts to minimize this gap were not only carried out by students themselves but also by educators as well the preceptors in the hospital. Reflective practice is an effort to minimize the gap between theory

and practice. There are several efforts that can be made to minimize the gap between theory and practice based on the discussion of nursing experts, including developing and expanding a context-based curriculum, interactive collaboration between nurses in practice and in academia, design and implementation of clinical guidelines (Shoghi *et al.*, 2019). Apart from that, the practice of reflection can also bridge this gap. The key concepts of reflective practice in nursing are reflection, clinical situation / experience, enabling and inhibiting factors, and outcomes (Galutira, 2018), structured reflection process with six steps (Gibbs, 1988; (Knight, 2015) and focus on practicing (Knight, 2015).

There were many emotional experiences gained from reflective practice by students. Students experienced various feelings during reflective practice both negative and positive. These feeling arose because of a perceived gap. The results of our research are consistent with other studies that found the emotional response of students during their first clinical practice such as confusion, fear (Mlinar Reljić, Pajnkihar and Fekonja, 2019), and positive feelings such as satisfaction, happiness, and self-confidence (Karimi *et al.*, 2017b). In order to gain a better understanding of their personal response, to disperse the emotional load, and think deeply about what they learned about themselves and their nursing practice, the process of reflection allowed students to recognize the experience that caused them distress or uneasiness (Caldwell and Grobbel, 2013). Self-reflection can help students to understand and reflect on their emotions, help revive them, identify problems and provide a better understanding (Miller, 2020).

Reflection in nursing is very useful in personal, professional development, and expectation. Personal development includes training the mindset when getting new experiences and learning from experiences, opening minds, training emotions, self-evaluation and motivating to learn. Meanwhile, professional development helps to develop abilities and skills, communicate, foster cooperation, and increase professionalism. The practice of reflection is closely related to professional motivation to 'move forward' and 'do better' in practice (Bulman and Schutz, 2013). People who always want to improve and want to become better individuals are those

who can make a difference in their lives and the lives of others (Galutira, 2018; Miller, 2020). This reflection is also useful for learning from experience and providing critical 'self-assessment' (Bulman and Schutz, 2013). Reflective practice is a process of gaining new insights through self-awareness and critically reflecting on current and previous experiences (Jacobs, 2016). The development of various reflective skills can result from these reflective practice activities, such as self-awareness, openness to others and their practices, critical thinking and changes in certain professional practices, but it must consider the culture of the environment in which it is implemented (Dubé and Ducharme, 2015). Reflection can help nursing students develop language through the questions they ask, communicate their nursing knowledge and discover themselves (Bulman and Schutz, 2013) by self-evaluation and the ability to learn from experience. This makes it a challenge as to whether they can change themselves for the better in the future. The existence of a variety of reflected cases can also improve students' reflective skills (Ling Lau, Cheng Chuk and Wei So, 2002).

The students had expectations: (1) for nursing practice, the expectation that there would be no gap in the future between theory and practice in the field and that improvements cannot be achieved over a long time. (2) For nurses, the expectation was that nurses could understand what the participants have expressed and that nurses have a sense of openness to new things. (3). In addition, the expectation for the students is not to imitate inappropriate or improper behavior. In line with other study, expectations are a set of firm beliefs about future outcomes or theories of action that affect human efforts to achieve set goals and desired outcomes (Gómez-Barreto, Merino-Tejedor and Sánchez-Santamaría, 2020).

In addition, students also experienced barriers during their reflective practice, including barriers from students, work culture, and undesirable effects. In the beginning, practicing reflection would have difficulties (Koshy, Limb and Gundogan, 2017), among which were the variation in gaps between the different places that were found. Most students reflected on something that was not appropriate or wrong. This situation forced students to start thinking whether it could be done differently. For example, there were procedures that are not suitable, complications that arose, failure of procedures, patient dissatisfaction, and lack of communication. However, reflecting on what is already good also has the same benefits and can increase self-confidence (Koshy, Limb and Gundogan, 2017). The reflective practice done in a group can also increase self-confidence and show rewards (Knight, 2015). In addition, it can repeat the same event at other times (Koshy, Limb and Gundogan, 2017). Work culture barriers in this research are in line with several references in the literature, for instance, the existence of the support from nurses, feedback, and a less supportive work culture (Galutira, 2018). In addition, other barriers are the influence of a group of friends who are not good, lack of commitment (Platzer, Blake and Ashford, 2000), lack of time, knowledge, skills, experience (Burton, 2000; Miller, 2020), memory accuracy, ethical issues, emotional difficulties, and privacy disturbances (Burton, 2000). The time commitment by the supervisor to provide feedback and mentoring to students is also important (Dubé and Ducharme, 2015; Galutira, 2018). Providing feedback reassures and promotes the professional development of students (Cherkis and Rosciano, 2018). This relationship between students and mentors or preceptors is important (Caldwell and Grobbel, 2013). Students who think and write down their reflections can provide provisions for improving critical thinking skills, knowing their own abilities and increasing their self-confidence (Cherkis and Rosciano, 2018; Mlinar Reljić, Pajnkihar and Fekonja, 2019) and become a better learner (Koshy, Limb and Gundogan, 2017).

This would be a useful avenue for further research because it would give students responsibility for learning. One limitation of this study is that the facilitators of the groups were involved in the clinical teaching process of the groups, which may have limited the students' participation in the groups as well as their responses in the research interviews in some way.

CONCLUSION

The conclusions obtained are based on the results and discussion previously described,

including reflection in nursing as an effort to minimize the gap between theory and practice. Students experienced various feelings during reflective practice, both negative, and positive. Reflection could help students to understand and reflect on their emotions, help revive them, identify problems and provide a better understanding. It is very useful in personal, professional development, and expectation in the nursing profession. Students also experienced barriers during their reflective practice. Therefore, in the future, it is necessary to look again at the achievement of student competence after each stage, that they carry out reflective practice and a strategy is needed to minimize the barriers and challenges faced.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest in this study.

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