

How does your CLINICAL EXPERIENCE affect your future NURSING SPECIALTY?

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INTRODUCTION

Nursing students experience many factors within the program that may or may not steer them into choosing a nursing career path. The study was done to further understand nursing students' experience and discover what aspects of their clinical experience impacted their decisions in regard to choosing a specialty.

Studies by Hood and Copeland (2021), Tehran et al. (2021), Mukan et al. (2021), and Niederitter and colleagues in 2017, all included an emphasis on the importance of the clinical instructor. The clinical instructors had a massive influence on the students both negatively and positively.

Nursing students expressed that their positive and negative experiences such as the lack of adequate amount of support, and friendly nurses contribute to their future decisions in nursing.

Qualitative studies on nursing student experiences are directed towards staff and the faculty to show what positive and negative factors students experience. It shows what may or may not need to be changed for students to have a much more positive experience in the program (Hood & Copeland, 2021).

METHODOLOGY



Our study used a **descriptive phenomenological qualitative** research methodology to examine how clinical experiences affect nursing students' specialty decisions. This approach enabled us to dive into participants' rich, lived experiences, providing valuable insights into how these experiences affect their future career pathways



- capture the essence of people's experiences
- understand complex dynamics of clinical settings & their impact
- collect extensive descriptions of students' lived experiences

Ethical Considerations: This study was conducted with informed consent, ensuring confidentiality and data security. Ethical guidelines adhered to, with provisions for participant distress.

SAMPLE SIZE

For our sample group, we interviewed a total of 81 students from semester 1 to 5 and sent out an online survey to semester 6 for them to complete. All participants voluntarily agreed to participate, were over the age of 19, and were Douglas College Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BSN) students. Participants were chosen based on their classes' schedules and availability. We chose to interview all six semesters as we felt that it would give us a variety of answers as they are all at different points in the nursing program.



DATA COLLECTION & ANALYSIS

- Interviews began by students reading and signing our consent forms.
- The researchers conducted 15-20 minute interviews with semester 1 to 5 BSN students.
- The data was collected via voice memos and transcribed by the researchers.
- Semester 6 were sent a Qualtrix form through their clinical instructors.
- **Thematic analysis** was utilized to identify patterns and themes within the data.
- Each researcher who interviewed the group transcribed their own recordings.
- The researchers then identified meanings, patterns, and interesting excerpts using coding to identify similar patterns.
- After the data was coded, we collectively listed and compared what themes emerged.

RESULTS/FINDINGS

Our findings suggest there is a correlation between a nursing student's clinical experience and their decision to pursue a particular nursing specialty.

We asked various questions about the clinical experience itself and other factors that may have positively or negatively influenced students' experiences in the clinical setting. Throughout our group interviews, we identified the most common themes that influenced students' experiences as follows:

Clinical Instructor

- Many students viewed their teaching styles and characteristics to either positively or negatively influence their clinical experiences. Some positive attributes clinical instructors possess are passion for their specialty, supportive towards their students, and approachability. Some students stated having an instructor who is **“passionate about not only what field they're in, but in teaching makes the world a difference.”**, thus driving students to want to specialize in that area. Similar to what this student said, **“If they have a passion and a positive attitude it'll make me want to do it even more”**.
- On the other hand, some students reported that instructors with high/unrealistic expectations tend to hinder their learning experiences. Some students feel discouraged due to this, and some even say these characteristics **“took away from the experience, and [made them] more anxious and less able to focus on the actual tasks at hand”**. Sometimes certain teaching styles do not align with all student's learning styles, which is of no one's fault, however some found certain teaching styles made it **“impossible to learn properly, or [instructors] just made it [a] really miserable [learning environment]”**. The most prevalent theme we gathered as a group was that **“the experience that you have with the instructor can really make or break your perception of the actual focused field of the specialty”**.

Clinical Placement

- Based on the data, a commonality which impacted overall experience was the clinical placement itself including the patient demographics, the unit, and the hospital itself. Students said they found the older population in Semester 1 very hard to work with and it was difficult to make patient connections, therefore geriatrics emerged as the least popular area to work in after graduation. Pediatrics emerged as one of the most popular specialties to work in post graduation as experiences were generally positive. Comments regarding the units of the hospital were positively and negatively mixed, however one student explained **“some of the units are so terrible that we've been on that I feel in general it really deterred me from wanting to work [there]”**, suggesting the unit has an impact on students post-graduation.

- Finally, regarding the hospitals, students described some as **“really dingy”**, and that the overall hospital environment was **“toxic”**. An aspect of placement not included in patient demographic, unit, or hospital included students' opportunity to apply the skills learnt in theory. Students frequently connected the ability to apply skills with a positive clinical experience and thus a positive experience in that particular specialty.

Interprofessional Experience

- A similarity between the group interviews was how the nursing staff both hindered and facilitated student learning. Many students agreed that some of the nurses are **“stuck in their ways”** and are **“mean to [students]”**, and further comments describe how the experience of having a **“really crappy nurse switched [their] idea and view of the hospital”**.
- From the opposite point of view, some students reported that the staff was supportive, saying **“the nurse[s] are encouraging you to learn and happy to teach you”**, especially in places such as the OR or LDR where students noted the staff were very kind. Most students gave these answers in response to questions asking them to describe clinical experience which impacted their view of a particular nursing specialty. Their answers imply that BSN students are very influenced by hospital staff's demeanors and attitudes, thus contributing to their overall view of the specialty.

Clinical Opportunities

- Many nursing students expressed that observation days such as OR, LDR, NICU, PACU and ER piqued their interest in that specific specialty. With that being said, many students strongly suggested that more shadow shifts and observation days be implemented into the program as they are very beneficial in experiencing various nursing roles.
- Many voiced they would appreciate more opportunities to explore specialized units such as Oncology, in which BSN Students at Douglas College do not have a rotation in. One student described how **“seeing the whole process [of birth] and meeting the baby and the family afterwards was super rewarding [and] very enlightening”**.

LIMITATIONS

We encountered several limitations that impacted the scope and depth of our research:

- Inexperience in the clinical setting amongst semester one nursing students
- Semester two nursing students are exposed primarily to medical/surgical experience
- Semester six students posed as a limitation as trying to connect with them was difficult, evidenced by low responses to online surveys
- Transcribing audio recordings carried the risks of misinterpretation and potential research bias
- Dominant voices may have overshadowed others, potentially skewing the findings toward a particular viewpoint
- Emotions during the interview could have influenced each other and influenced the responses, which potentially affected the reliability of the data interpretation

IMPLICATIONS

Our research study revealed important aspects of a nursing student's clinical experience that has an overall effect on what they do post-graduation. Our study sets up future researchers to look more into the clinical experience of nursing students to hopefully lead to future research studies that help us learn more about how to improve hospitals, units and staff to help facilitate student learning and positive experiences in that specialty, how to get students to choose more undesirable nursing specialties, and how to improve future clinical experiences for nursing students.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study was able to bring to the surface areas of a nursing student's clinical experience that has made an impact on the nursing specialty these students go into after graduating from the Bachelor of Science in Nursing program at Douglas College. While the themes discovered impacted students' clinical experience and thus their potential nursing specialty choice, we do acknowledge many students also expressed they were motivated by factors outside of clinical practice for their choice. These included media such as movies or TV shows, family or friends, as well as healthcare work experience such as an Employed Student Nurse. The data collected from this research study can hopefully help benefit future studies in regards to the clinical experience of nursing students which can ultimately help improve student nurses' clinical experiences.

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