

REVIEW PAPER

The Importance of Reflective Practice in Nursing

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Abstract

Reflection is an essential attribute for the development of autonomous, critical, and advanced practitioners (Mantzoukas & Jasper, 2004). According to Chong (2009), "Reflective practice should be a continuous cycle in which experience and reflection on experiences are inter-related" (p. 112). Studies have shown that nurses who take the time to reflect on their daily experiences provide enhanced nursing care, have a better understanding of their actions, which in return develops their professional skills (Hansebo & Kihlgren, 2001). Reflective practice is the ability to examine ones actions and experiences with the outcome of developing their practice and enhancing clinical knowledge. Reflective practice affects all levels of nursing, from students, to advanced practice nursing students, as well as practicing nurses. Reflective practice is an important component of the nursing curriculum. Research has shown the relationship between student nurses and their mentors is vital. In order for reflection to be effective open-mindedness, courage, and a willingness to accept, and act on, criticism must be present (Bulmam, Lathlean, & Gobbi, 2012). This paper will explore the current literature and implications related to reflective practice in nursing.

Key Words: Caring, Reflection, Nursing, Reflective practice, students

Research Methods

A literature review was conducted utilizing Medline, CINAHL, EBSCO Host and Google Scholar. Search terms used included: reflective practice, reflective practice nursing care, reflective nursing, reflective practice nursing students, and reflective practice students. Additional articles were located from the reference lists of articles obtained from the database search. The search was limited to articles published in English. The time criteria for literature searched was between 2001 and 2012. The inclusion criteria included research articles

regarding practicing and student nurses utilizing reflective practice. Articles detailed the outcome of using reflective practice in nursing. Exclusion criteria included articles not written in English and those that lacked of relevance to the search topic. A total of 16 articles, 15 qualitative and one quantitative, were included in the review. A complete summary of all articles that were reviewed is available in Table 1.

Findings

Following an analysis of the literature, four themes emerged: Development of Practice, Emotional Impact, Mentor Support, and Barriers

in Reflection. The following will be a description of these themes and what the literature reviews.

Development of Practice

Chong (2009) conducted a quantitative study with 98 diploma nursing students to examine the students' perceptions on reflective practice and to discover if it was a useful task. Students were given a structured questionnaire having them rate their feelings towards reflective practice using a five point Likert scale. According to Chong (2009), students viewed reflective practice as playing a major role in applying theory into nursing practice. Students stated that reflective practice helped to develop their nursing practice by allowing them to view the clinical situation from different angles, identify their learning style, and improve their decision making (Chong, 2009). Students felt they developed a greater sense of responsibility and accountability in their practice (Chong, 2009).

Smith (2005) examined eight nursing students' feelings towards reflective practice and whether they believed it was a meaningful activity. A qualitative study was conducted utilizing a web discussion board and focus group interview (Smith, 2005). Findings from the study showed students considered reflection a key component in nursing because it developed their nursing skills and increased their clinical competency (Smith, 2005). As nursing students in the study participated in reflection, they noticed a change in their way of thinking; they became "more self-aware and confident with the process, they realized the benefits of reflecting on achievements and celebrating good practice" (Smith, 2005, p.35).

Bulman, Lathlean, & Gobbi (2011) studied the concept of reflection within nursing. An interpretive ethnographic approach was used to examine reflection from students' and teachers' perspectives. Students also reported reflection was responsible for, "changing and improving" their practice by shifting their thinking and actions (Bulman, Lathlean, & Gobbi, 2011, p. e9). When students are able to recognize their achievements, they become more comfortable in their role as a nurse, allowing them to provide optimal patient care (Bulman, Lathlean, & Gobbi, 2011).

Glaze (2001) explored 14 advanced nurse practitioner students (ANPs) experiences of reflection. A qualitative methodology was used to collect data by conducting interviews and using reflecting learning contracts. The researcher found all but one of the fourteen students found reflection in nursing practice positive. Students described themselves as being more aware, realistic, open and confident and also reported having an increased appreciation for nursing. Development of their nursing practice was seen as ANP students felt liberated and more politically aware from reflecting. ANP students realized it was essential to become educated politically. They realized the importance of becoming involved with the agendas of other practitioners, agencies, and organizations in order incorporate the nursing agenda and to push nursing practice (Glaze, 2001).

Gustadsson & Fagerberg (2004) examined practicing nurses' experience of reflection in relation to many daily nursing care situations. A qualitative study was conducted by interviewing four registered nurses. Gustadsson & Fagerberg (2004) discovered many advantages from reflection in the development of nursing care. Reflection is a tool used to promote courage, to meet the needs of a unique patient, and to help empower nurses (Gustadsson & Fagerberg, 2004). The experienced nurses in the study felt reflection was useful to "develop and mature professionally" (Gustadsson & Fagerberg, 2004, p. 278). Over years of practice and utilizing self reflection, the nurses found they had not only been able to learn from their achievements in nursing, but they also felt competent to educate other nurses (Gustadsson & Fagerberg, 2004). Encouraging nurses to reflect promotes professional development, which will reflect in better care for the patients (Gustadsson & Fagerberg, 2004). Cirocco (2007) also examined practicing nurses' use of reflection in practice and the outcome. Using a qualitative survey, she discovered reflective practice helps to improve nurses' practice by identifying areas of strengths and areas that need improvement (Cirocco, 2007). These studies show that reflection has the potential to enhance the development of the practice of nursing.

Emotional Impact

In a research study conducted by Rees (2012) a nursing student named Jane described how she, “absorbed her patients emotional trauma ‘like a sponge, I absorb the lot’” (Rees, 2012, p.3). Reflection allowed Jane to squeeze out the sponge. Jane was able to use reflection to, “deal with the emotional challenges such as fear she frequently felt in practice” (Rees, 2012, p.3). Rees (2012) explored the role of reflective practice in 10 female final year nursing students responding to the emotional challenges of nursing. Data was collected through qualitative interviews in which the students described their feelings. The process of reflection allowed students to recognize the experience that caused them distress or uneasiness in order to gain a better understanding of their personal response, disperse the emotional load, and think deeply about what they learned about themselves and their nursing practice (Rees, 2012). It helped the nursing students discover what it means to them to be a nurse (Rees, 2012). While some students found reflection helpful in understanding themselves and their reactions to different events, others were unable to find the connection and could not make personal sense of a patient’s experience. (Rees, 2012). Disembodiment is used by many nurses who do not want to suffer personally while in distressing patient situations (Rees, 2012). Reflection can be useful for students dealing with these new emotions.

O’Donovan (2006) aimed to discover mental health nursing students’ perceptions of reflection while in clinicals. A qualitative study was conducted by interviewing five nursing students. The use of reflection “heightened students’ awareness of their actions, thoughts, attitudes, and feelings” (O’Donovan, 2006, p. 612). Students spoke of feelings of inadequacy, anxiety, accomplishment and fear while partaking in reflective practice (O’Donovan, 2006). Other students reported that reflecting helped to, “reassure themselves that they handled the situations better than they had thought” (O’Donovan, 2006, p. 612). Exploring these feelings helps to develop more emotionally intelligent nurses.

Barry, Blum, and Purnell (2007) conducted a phenomenological study detailing the experiences of student nurses caring for individuals and families left homeless by hurricanes Katrina and Wilma. Seven first- year junior nursing students reflected on their experiences by completing a written assignment. Reflection enabled students to discuss their experiences and feelings from caring for those displaced by the tragedy. Students were urged “to look inward at core beliefs and outward to living these beliefs in practice (Barry, Blum, & Purnell, 2007, p. 72). This study showed the deep emotional impact nursing can have and how the outlet of reflection helped the students cope with their experiences. The day to day emotional impact of nursing can take a toll on nurses. Reflective practice allows nurses to have a safe outlet to discuss and better understand their feelings and practice.

Mentor Support

As reflective practice becomes more of a staple in the undergraduate nursing curriculum, nursing preceptors have a tremendous role in facilitating the learning process. Duffy (2009) conducted a qualitative descriptive study to explore the experiences of seven preceptors directing student nurses through reflective practice while in clinicals. Semi-structured interviews took place to uncover whether the preceptors felt their experiences with reflective practice affected their practice and added to the preceptorship experience (Duffy, 2009). Duffy (2009) discovered that due to preceptors’ perceived lack of experience and knowledge assisting students on reflective practice, education and support are needed to facilitate the process to properly engage students. With proper support preceptors are able to guide students through reflection and in return have an enhanced understanding of the students experience, build trust, and challenge students (Duffy, 2009). It is imperative to provide continuing support to allow preceptors to fulfill their role (Duffy, 2009). According to O’Donovan (2006), students found there was a lack of awareness and lack of culture in reflecting among preceptors and nursing staff in certain clinical placements. Due to the lack of knowledge, students expressed a reluctance to bring up

reflection with their preceptor (O'Donovan, 2006). In-service workshops to educate preceptors on student learning strategies, specifically reflection, would nurture the relationship between preceptors and students (O'Donovan, 2006).

The relationship between the student and their mentor is significant for proper reflection in practice. According to Smith (2005), students believed that if trust was established between themselves and their mentor, then they were able to be more honest and share reflections on a more personal level. A lack of support in clinical areas by mentors were seen by students as an obstacle in reflective practice (Chong, 2009). Manning, Cronnin, Monaghan, and Rawlings-Anderson (2008) conducted a qualitative study with nursing students to determine whether reflective groups were an effective means of support for students. Students reported the skills of the preceptor were paramount to the success of the groups (Manning, Cronnin, Monaghan, & Rawlings-Anderson, 2008). Key skills of preceptors noted by students included being non-judgmental, respecting everyone's views, and the ability to offer different perspectives on situations (Manning et al., 2008). With proper guidance and support from mentors students are able to actively participate in meaningful reflection.

Barriers

In order to truly reap the benefits of reflection, students must have a positive attitude towards the outcomes of reflecting. Ip et al. (2012) conducted a research study with undergraduate Chinese nursing students in Hong Kong to evaluate whether attending a program aimed to improve self-reflection skills helped manage clinical situations more successfully. Ip et al. (2012) found students desire to acquire reflective learning skills was highly related to their perception of the value of reflection. Time constraints were a noticeable barrier in many studies. Students argued that in order to modify their perspective and transform their reflective abilities they needed time; the changes were not able to happen overnight (Chong, 2009). O'Donovan (2006) found that reflection is a purposeful thinking process for students and proper time needs to be allowed in order to reflect.

According to Ip et al. (2012), it is important that mentors provide "sufficient time for students to process their recalled events" as well as the "structure of a safe environment for learning to occur" (p. 260). According to Elmqvist, Fridlund, and Ekebergh (2011) it is important to set time aside for group reflection in the workplace because it supports inter-professional communication.

The method of conducting reflective practice can make a difference in the outcome and success. The two primary methods found to be used were reflective journaling and group discussion. Chirema (2006) examined the use of reflective journals by post-registration nursing students in promoting reflection. 42 students participated in the qualitative study in which the data was collected by journals and interviews (Chirema, 2006). Chirema (2006) found mainly positive views on the use of journals, stating it was cathartic writing about sad and difficult situations. Other students viewed journal writing as difficult and stated they would prefer to talk about issues than write about them (Chirema, 2006). O'Donovan (2006) discovered students found reflective discussions with their preceptors and peers more constructive and easier to do than writing reflections.

Practicing nurses come across barriers along with student nurses taking part in reflection. Mantzoukas & Jasper (2004) conducted an interpretative research study with 16 practicing nurses in England to explore how reflection is viewed by nurses within their daily ward. Nurses felt reflection was a way of enhancing their professional knowledge, but was of limited value due to nurses' limited power to initiate any changes. A major barrier discovered was the power relationship between nurses and physicians. The researchers found that nurses felt belittled and devalued by those with more power. This was considered a major barrier because it prevented nurses from discussing their thoughts and ideas, and impeded the dissemination of important knowledge (Mantzoukas & Jasper, 2004). Acknowledging the barriers that exist with reflective practice will help to make the necessary changes for positive outcomes and success.

Conclusion

Reflection is a critical thought practice. Purposeful reflection provides an opportunity to examine nursing practice and identify new knowledge (Chong, 2009). Reflection is a professional motivator to “move on and do better within practice” with the goal of learning from experiences and examining oneself (Bulman, Lathlean, & Gobbi, 2011). Analysis of the literature revealed four major themes: Development of Practice, Emotional Impact, Mentor Support, and Barriers in Reflection. Development of nursing practice, are those studies that explore the impact reflective practice has on expanding the knowledge and increasing clinical competency. The field of nursing can be emotionally draining and reflection was seen as an outlet to disperse those feelings. Reflection allowed nurses to discuss or write journal entries about their feelings to better understand why they felt a certain way. Mentor support was identified as a crucial theme related to reflection. Students partaking in reflection require appropriate guidance and adequate time. A safe, non-

judgmental environment also needs to be provided to facilitate open communication. The role of the preceptor needs to be given proper support and guidance to provide optimal results. Although barriers exist with reflection, taking the time to discover which reflection style works best for each nursing student or practicing nurse will open the door to amazing learning opportunities.

Reflection has the opportunity to enhance clinical reasoning while having a positive impact on patient care. Further studies are needed to explore the impact of reflective practice and the quality of care received by patients. Additional research also needs to be completed regarding implementing workshops or conferences educating preceptors in proper reflective practice and the impact it has on student’s reflective practice outcome. Reflection is an ongoing practice within the field of nursing. There will always be room to develop and mature professionally. From students to practicing nurses, reflection encourages growth and helps nurses continue to provide the best care to patients.

Table 1. Summary of Articles

Author & Year of Publication	Purpose	Sample & Setting	Research Design & Method	Key Findings
Barry, Blum, & Purnell (2007)	To explore the experience of caring for individuals displaced by hurricanes	First year junior nursing students	Qualitative methodology Written descriptions of experiences	1. Reflection allowed for learning experiences 2. Empathy noted
Bulman, Lathlean, & Gobbi (2012)	To increase understanding of reflection within nursing	11 experienced nursing RN students and nine teachers	Interpretative ethnographical methodology Qualitative- Observations of teaching and learning interactions, interviews with students and teacher, and extracts from program documentation & RLCs	1. Reflection was seen as process of searching for solution to experiences in practice, to make sense of them 2. Reflection allows the ability to move on and do better. 3. Allows nurses to learn from experience and examine self
Chirema (2007)	To examine the use of reflective journals in promoting reflection and learning	Purposive sample of 42 part time post-registration nursing students	Qualitative methodology. 42 reflective journal and 20 interviews	1. Journals are a useful tool for promoting reflection and learning (some more than others) 2. Students would rather talk than write about experiences

Chong (2009)	To examine student nurses perception of reflective practice	98 Diploma nursing students	Quantitative methodology. Three-point Likert scale	1. Some students were skeptical, but overall found it useful 2. Students reported lack of support in clinical areas as an obstacle
Cirocco (2007)	To examine if reflective practice improves nurses critical thinking ability	34 Practicing GI nurses	Qualitative methodology. Surveys	1. Mixed reviews from nurses 2. Reflection highlighted strengths as well as areas that needed improvement
Duffy (2009)	To examine preceptors experiences towards guiding students through reflective practice	Purposive sample of seven student nurse preceptors	Qualitative descriptive methodology. Semi-structured interviews	1. Preceptors felt they needed more formal education and support 2. Reflection key attribute in teaching and assessing student learners
Elmqvist, Fridlund, & Ekebergh (2012)	To describe and understand experiences of being first provider at the ED	Eight first providers (One nursing assistant, four RNs, three physicians)	Qualitative methodology. Interviews	1. Coping strategies are important to develop 2. Important to have group reflection and inter-professional communication
Glaze (2001)	To explore student advanced nurse practitioners (ANP) experiences of reflection	14 ANP students	Qualitative methodology. Interviews and reflective learning contracts	1. Students developed increase confidence and assertiveness 2. Liberating experience 3. Students became more politically active
Gustafsson & Fagerberg (2001)	To describe RNs experiences of reflection in relation to nursing care and how RNs use reflection daily	Purposive sample of four female RNs	Qualitative methodology. Interviews	1. Degree of reflection differs according to skill level of nurse 2. Nurses reflected more on "poor" nursing care situations 3. Reflection helped nurses mature professionally
Hansebo & Kihlgren (2001)	To explore carers' reflections on their everyday life caring for patients, and to discover if any changes took place after intervention	Two nurses and two nursing aides in a nursing home	Qualitative methodology. Interviews	1. Increased quality and awareness of patient care 2. Carers' were self critical 3. Obtained knowledge regarding themselves and their practice
Ip, Lui, Chien, Lee, Lam, & Lee (2012)	To improve self reflection skills of Chinese Nursing Students in clinical settings	38 Undergraduate nursing students	Single cohort group, pre- and post design method	1. Students reported increased understanding of nursing practice, promotion of expression of feelings and understanding.

Author & Year of Publication	Purpose	Sample & Setting	Research Design & Method	Key Findings
Manning, Cronin, Monaghan, & Rawlings-Anderson (2009)	To explore the use of reflective groups in nursing clinical as a means of support	Purposive sampling of two cohorts (Year 1 and Year 3) in an Undergraduate nursing diploma program	Qualitative methodology. Focus group interviews	1. Assisted with problem solving 2. Linked theory with practice 3. Facilitator was paramount
Mantzoukas & Jasper (2004)	To explore how reflection is viewed by nurses within medical wards and investigates whether reflective practice is implemented	16 practicing nurses from four medical wards	Interpretative ethnographical methodology Observation, interviews and qualitative content analysis	1. Reflective practice powerful for developing and enhancing practice 2. Power struggle on ward belittled/devalued reflective practice
O'Donovan (2006)	To discover nurses' perceptions of reflection as a learning strategy	Five undergraduate mental health nursing students	Qualitative methodology. Interviews	1. Reflection facilitated learning 2. Collaborative approach between student and mentor
Rees (2012)	To examine the role of reflective practice in managing emotional challenges and labor of nursing work	Purposive sampling. Ten female undergraduate nursing students	Qualitative, descriptive methodology	1. Reflection helps make sense of personal emotional challenges encountered during practice 2. Assisted nursing students in knowing themselves better as nurses
Smith & Jack (2005)	To determine if students find reflection to be a meaningful activity	8 Undergraduate nursing students	Qualitative methodology. Focus group interview & web discussion board	1. Students learning style is imperative for usefulness of reflective practice 2. Students may require assistance 3. Trust with mentor important

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