Paper 4

Contexts and narratives of attrition for child branch students in nursing: an ethnographic performance

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'A staff nurse from another ward said to my mentor: 'Can I borrow your student?' It was from that point I knew I was just a nameless body in a shameful profession.'
(A Girl Called Student Cohort 208)

'I knew it was going to be hard, but I never anticipated the guilt you feel when ignoring the kids and the other half. He calls himself a University Widower…'
(University Widower's Wife Cohort 107)

'The Child Branch can't even do practical skills because there's no simulation babies.'
(Baby-less Student in Burton Cohort 206)

Abstract

This paper is a report of a study conducted at the University of Wolverhampton to explore and describe in detail the experiences of child branch students when undertaking their Registered Nurse training. The recruitment and retention of nursing students is a major cause of concern both nationally and globally. The implications of high attrition rates are wide ranging for higher education institutions in terms of meeting targets, and incurring financial penalties. One of the aims of Project 2000 was to increase student satisfaction and reduce attrition rates, however, little research has been conducted on the implications of increasing group sizes, and the impact of a common foundation program on students studying smaller branches. Using an ethnographic approach child branch students from six cohorts were invited to attend a focus group interview towards the end of their Common Foundation Program during 2008/09. The findings suggest that student attrition is influenced by: experiences concerning power, surveillance, hierarchy, subject positioning, symbols of identity, maintaining status and the ugly nature of social-hood. That these experiences are variable for each and every student and that the personal characteristics of the student; the ability of each student to conform to the social norms of the profession; the levels of support provided to students both from an educational and clinical perspective are influential in the students' perceptions of these experiences and ultimately influence their behaviour. A number of strategies have been implemented to improve the overall student experience within the School of Health and Wellbeing including: pre-course taster days; appointment of a student advisor and protected learning time during clinical placements.

Introduction

The recruitment and retention of students on nursing programs is a major cause of concern both nationally and globally (Pryjmachuk, 2009; Gilchrist, 2007; Grainger and Bolan, 2006). The implications of high attrition rates are wide ranging not only for higher education establishments in terms of meeting targets and economic use of resources, but also the impact on staff morale (Council of Deans and Heads, 1998 cited in Glossop, 2002). National Health Service Trusts also have a responsibility to provide a supportive learning environment for students, whilst on placement, and maintain an adequate nursing workforce in order to provide patients with the highest standard of skilled nursing care (Moseley and Mead, 2007). There is also the obvious emotional, social and financial implications for those students who have withdrawn or been discontinued from the programme (Glossop, 2002).

One of the aims of Project 2000 was to increase student satisfaction and reduce attrition rates (Glossop, 2001). At the same time the entry gate for nursing programmes was widened, with a greater proportion of mature students entering nursing. There has also been a steady increase in the number of student nurse recruits (McCarey et al. 2006) leading to ever increasing group sizes. Little research has been undertaken on the implications for smaller branches, of the introduction of a Common Foundation Programme and

whether the experiences of (child branch) students during this time has a negative effect on their willingness to complete their nursing programmes.

Aims of this article

The aims of this article are to:

1. Review the literature on student nurse recruitment and retention.

2. Discuss performative ethnography and the limits of its application as a research methodology.

3. Consider some of the emergent ethnographic themes as a way of substantiating the effectiveness of the overall study.

Literature review

A literature review was conducted using an electronic online search using the following databases: British Education Index; British Nursing Index; Cumulative Index to Nursing and Allied Health Literature (CINHAL); Educational Research Abstracts and Netlibrary. Key terms included: nurse recruitment, retention, attrition, ethnography.

Obsessed by Predicting

The growing demand, by the NHS for more qualified nurses has resulted in a year on year increase in the number of student nurse recruits (McCarey, 2007). Finding suitable recruits has been challenging, partly because of the demographic changes to the population but also due to the number of alternative career opportunities available to school leavers. Not surprisingly therefore, much of the literature concerned with student nurse retention is concerned with predicting which students are likely to succeed (Pryjmachuk, 2009; McCarey, 2007; Moseley & Mead, 2007; McCallum, 2006) in an attempt to develop tools to minimize the selection of high risk students (Wharrad, 2003, Glossop, 2002).

This obsession with predicting who will stay and who will not has tended to focus on demographic variables such as age, academic abilities of students and their personal trait characteristics, e.g. their strength of character; at the expense of the contextual experience of nurse education as a conveyor of complex and multiple learning experiences. The bulk of the studies carried out in North America and Canada have established that the only true predictors of success are previous academic qualifications (Byrd et al 1999; Wong and Wong 1999). However, it is a false belief that academic entry qualifications are the only significant predictors of future academic success. Studies carried out in the UK have identified previous education and age as the most significant predictors of academic success for students studying the Diploma in Nursing (Kevern et al. 1999). Mature students, (aged over 22 years), often with non conventional qualifications, appear to do better academically (White et al. 1999) despite having greater demands placed on them in terms of managing personal relationships, child care and financial commitments.

Evaluating levels of satisfaction

Several studies have focused on the perceptions and levels of student satisfaction with their nursing programmes (Grainger and Bolan, 2006; Karaoz, 2004; Watson, et al. 1999). A number of factors have been identified as contributing to dissatisfaction: lack of clinical preparation, poor course organisation, an unnecessarily high academic level and bias towards the adult branch (Steele, et al. 2005; Ansari, 2004; Kinsella et al. 1999; White et al. 1999). In addition Braithwaite et al. 1994 (cited in Kinsella et al. 1999) identified personal difficulties; family problems and disillusionment as major reasons for withdrawing from the Common Foundation Programme (CFP). Other themes focus on the economic difficulties faced by students and the social and psychological factors contributing to attrition (Stott, 2006, McSherry and Marland, 1999).

Multi-factorial approaches

Pryjmachuk et al. (2008) suggest that the reasons why students leave are complicated and probably interlinked and that when looking at attrition the factors associated with non-completion (risk factors) and

completion (protective factors) should be taken into consideration. The Department of Health (2006) has identified the following factors as contributing to attrition: age on entry (younger students are more likely to drop out); academic attainment on entry (those with minimum entry requirements more likely to drop out); student commitment (those not accepted by their first choice institution and subsequently obtaining a place through clearing are more likely to drop out); the speciality being undertaken (the child branch speciality in particular has high drop-out rates, particularly during CFP); cultural and ethnic issues (black/minority ethnic students more likely to complete than white students); the widening participation agenda (those with non standard entry qualifications often fare better than those with standard qualifications).

The majority of the literature and research on student nurse retention attempts to pigeon hole retention research in this way, but this does not provide a holistic view of the individual experiences of the students. It is easier to focus on the individual and forget the impact culture, systems and organisations have on the experiences we have and the choices we make.

Methodological Philosophy: Performative Ethnography

Ethnography is one of the oldest qualitative approaches used in nursing research (Oliffe, 2005). As a methodology it provides an effective means of learning *about* people by learning *from* people, and is therefore well suited to describing differing cultures (Roper and Shapira, 2000). An ethnographic research approach is primarily concerned with interpreting the chosen culture under study, however, it is also particularly useful in developing understandings about organizations. As researchers we were interested in developing an understanding of the cultural rules, norms and values of students within the School of Health and Wellbeing and how these informed and influenced the students' behaviours in relation to withdrawing or not from the CFP.

Denzin (2003:3) invites ethnographers and social scientists to re-think the ways that performing cultures can be written. He cites the work of Conquergood (1998) and the sequential developments that ethnographic research has travelled from performance as imitation, or dramaturgical staging (Rock, 2007; Goffman, 1959) to 'an emphasis on performance as liminality and construction' (Cortazzi, 2007; Spencer, 2007). In short, that the performance constituted by culture is a construction which itself creates, generates and constitutes new meaning rather than just merely representing it. For example, a simple representation or drama may instill in the actor a sense that they are imitating responses and behaviours typical to all other students or as typical to how they as individuals always seem to respond, 'I know I will fail this course because I've never been any good doing exams', and at a more analytic depth the belief that, 'in every group there are dynamics which mean I can't get on with everyone'. However, at what Denzin (1997) describes as the seventh moment ethnographers are now at a point of 'performing culture as they write it', and this is something wholly different.

The 'performance' of the student is a new way of thinking about retention research. It focuses on the social and systemic nature of university life as a contextual and collective way of overlapping and merging experiences. The problem with past retention research is that it has tended to hope that the issue is singular e.g. just about a personal trait and about something tangible such as a specified clinical standard that the student cannot meet. However, by viewing retention as a process, as a reflexive performing of culture which is dynamic it is feasible to ask different types of questions in different types of ways and thus, reconsider the purpose of the research.
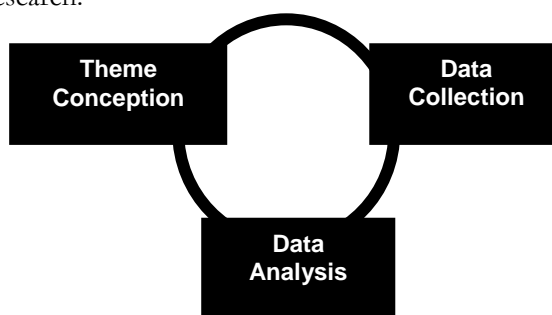
Figure 1: <u>the 3 spectacles of performance happen continuously.</u>

Performance ethnography is the latest development in a long line of anthropological research methodologies and methods. It has the distinct driver that the process and action of all participants, including the researchers, creates meaning. All meaning is constructed and arbitrary to the culture under study. The recent work of Gobo (2008) and Smith & Gallo (2008) supports the idea that we are now in the age of the post-modern ethnographer. This can be described as an approach which 'disputes the authority of the objective participant'. It criticises classic ethnography for being what Denzin (1997) describes as 'realist, impersonal and falsely neutral'. In short, this means that 'truths' about retention could not be located by the authors just because they were, 'simply there'. The performative ethnographer is a dynamic contributor to the data collection process, the tool by which meaning is made and interpreted in the process of performance. The post-structural factors that play havoc with the usual accounts of retention (e.g. Ethnicity, age, maturity, finances) are recognised as existing even if they are not within the dynamics of the performance, and then, interpreted as fictions, as stories, as narratives, and provide a different way of looking at the politics of retention (Also see Crang & Cook, 2007, Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Holyoake, 2002, 2001, Travers, 2001).

The study

The aim of the study was to explore and describe in detail the experiences of child branch students when undertaking their Registered Nurse training at the University of Wolverhampton, in order to identify those factors that may contribute to student attrition.

Research Design

The study was concerned with the students' stories and cultural experience of 'doing' the child branch. Ethnography lends and shares much of the constructionist philosophical foundation, which allows for an intimate exploration of these phenomena. Ethnography is a form of social research concerned with exploring the mundane, dismissible and even ugly truths of how people interact with each other and the objects within their culture. According to Spradley (1979), the aim of an ethnographic study is to understand another way of life from the native's point of view, in the hope of learning from them. This approach enabled the researchers to explore the experiences of students within the wider context of their families; their social networks, the environment of the School of Health and Wellbeing and their placements. It was envisaged that these factors would have some influence on the difficulties the students experienced, the ways in which they were able to cope and ultimately on their decision whether or not to withdraw (Glossop, 2001).

Population and sample

Sampling in ethnography initially requires a broad approach to enable ethnographers to meet and have conversations with as many members of the culture under study as possible (Polit and Beck, 2006). Later ethnographers may focus on gathering data from a small number of key informants. It is important to recruit as diverse a group of informants as possible in order to ensure information richness. The study sample for the project was purposeful and aimed to include all child branch students undertaking the RN Dip HE. In practice this meant a complete sample of 140 student nurses who made up 6 cohorts (20 to 30 per cohort).

Data Collection

The principle method of data collection was in keeping with the anthropological tradition as noted in all ethnographic literature (Smith & Gallo, 2007; Madison, 2005; Spradley, 1979). Data were collected via focus group interviews conducted by the researchers at the end of CFP. Students were asked to describe their experiences on the course, the researchers then explored particular areas of concern as identified by the participants. The questions asked of the participants were deliberately broad and open in order to encourage the students to talk about what was important to them, as a result of their experiences, rather than direct them along a specific line of questioning.

The promotion of a relaxed and conversational style of data collection helped to break down the potential barriers between the two authors (who are senior lecturers) and the students who sometimes perceive themselves to be powerless and need to be 'careful about what they say'. This of course is just the type of cultural meaning that performative ethnography aims to explore. In practice, it meant that data was collected in stages with one cohort being asked to join both authors in conversations about retention and life at the university. The data collected from one group would then be used to help structure the next focus group with a different cohort (See figure 1 for a simple diagram).

Due to the guiding principles of performance ethnography (interpret data as fictions, stories, and narratives), there is a consistent feedback loop and collaboration between the researcher and the researched. The actual data collection process never ended. As with most ethnographic studies there are no easily definable sections or phases to the data collection and subsequent analysis. The two occurred hand in hand, with the one part informing the other. One of the strengths of the methodology was the allowances it made for multi layering and organising data for analysis into contextual domains and ethnographic themes which represented meaningful cultural utterances.

Ethical considerations

There is inevitably a difference in perceived power between the nurse lecturers conducting the research and the students who were asked to participate, to the extent that the students may not have felt they had the freedom to refuse. In order to overcome any feelings of coercion, students were invited to participate by letter. Their consent was sought prior to participation and they were reassured that their participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time.

The researchers were mindful that during discussions with students they may become aware of circumstances or situations which posed a hazard for either staff, students or patients. Students were therefore asked to ensure that they protected the anonymity of staff and patients when discussing their experiences, and to raise any concerns with their personal teachers, subject coordinator or student advisor. Ethical approval was sought and granted by the School of Health and Wellbeing Research Ethics Committee.

Data analysis

Ethnographic data analysis is a search for patterns in the behaviour and thoughts of the participants (Polit and Beck, 2006) as these patterns make up the culture. Ethnographers use particular structural models of analysis to acquire a deeper understanding of the culture being studied. Data was analysed using Spradley's (1979) Developmental Research Sequence (Fig 3). Spradley's structural approach to analysis in ethnography works on the principle of exploring the multiple possibilities of semantic relationships between what he calls folk terms and collective cover terms (the names people give things in their culture e.g. 'doing the bed pans'). This initial approach to analysing the data allowed for a structuring and 'making sense' of the retention issues the students considered important as opposed to what the authors might consider of value. The structural Developmental Research Sequence (Spradley, 1979, cited in Polit and Beck, 2006) has 12 steps, which include both data collection and data analysis (see figure 3). The primary task was to organise the data with the help of the students into 100's of domains.

Examples of domain(s): 'child branch'
personal tutors is personal tutors is **part of the**
branch
a **result of the** *child branch*

*A domain has to have 3 things:
A Folk Term
A Semantic Relationship
A Cover (Domain) Term

Figure 2: Examples of a domain

- Locating an informant
- *Interviewing an informant*
- *Making* an ethnographic record
- Asking descriptive questions
- Analysing ethnographic interviews
- Making a domain analysis*
- Asking structural questions
- Making a taxonomic analysis
- Asking contrast questions
- Making a componential analysis
- Discovering cultural themes
- Writing the ethnography

Figure 3: Spradley's Developmental Research Sequence (1979).

Once the authors had developed their primary domains (to list a few out of hundreds: Child Branch Nursing, Support, Peers, Money, Tearful Phone calls, Course Expectations, Personal Tutors, Favouritism, Being Ignored), it was possible to start building taxonomies (lists) of all the related folk terms students might suggest belong to each domain. As can be seen this is a long and tiresome process, but it helped to build up a complete and structured appreciation of related cultural markers related to retention in nurse education. To date, the authors have decided upon 3 core ethnographic themes (see figure 4). The following cultural utterances are examples of those which were used to build the structured Domains and Taxonomies during the months of data collection:
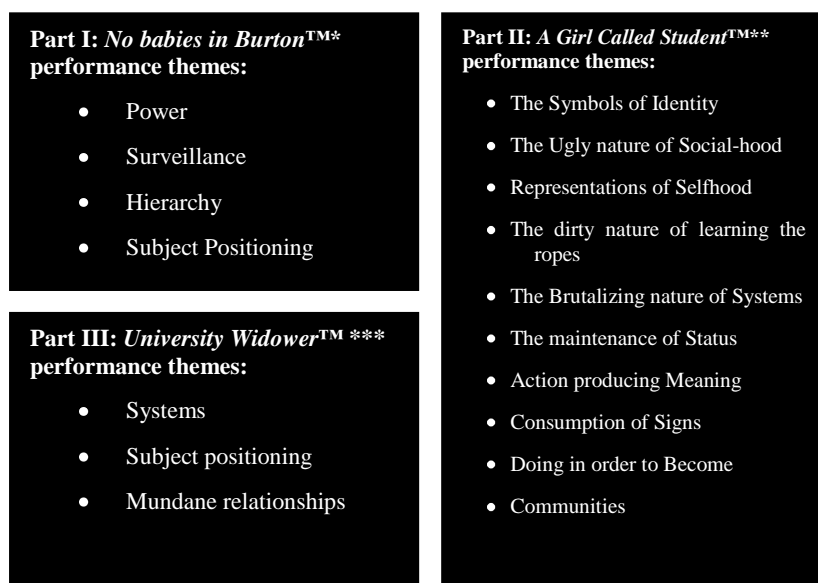
- my husband is a 'university widower'

- 'the placements kept me going'

- The personal tutor role is poorly assigned

- 'I was told to stop whinging and to get on with it'

- the university centred course

- 'can I borrow your student?'

- £1.50 an hour

- 'they tagged us on to the end'

- Little faith in the lecturers knowledge

- Lack of personal touch

Findings

Over the initial period of collecting data from three of the cohorts the authors were overwhelmed with the types of data given above. The raw utterances were scrambled into loosely fitting domains and then fed back to following cohorts in an attempt to verify their authenticity. But in addition to building domains and taxonomic ethnographies the authors were also concerned to avoid what Spradley (1979) termed 'translating' the data so that a type of post structural analysis could be applied. The work of McKee (2003) allowed the authors to add a textual analysis to the already formed domains. Thus the theme: 'University Widower' is taken from a comment made by a student that her husband makes her feel guilty for being at university. This sentiment was echoed by many mature nursing students, especially those with children who had to perform on at least two stages. First, there was the home life system and second, the demands of

the university. But instead of focusing on the way these demands are individual and the responsibility of the student, the authors were able to think more about the mundane, up close, personal meanings associated with the conflict in performance and a new language for thinking about retention narratives.

The realisation that the domains as seen in figure 4 lend themselves to a visual analysis and a new language shows the possibilities of utilizing new models of analysis as highlighted by Rose (2007, p79) who in the semiotic tradition of Spradley points out that it is possible to focus analysis on the nature of the semantic relationship between the signifier (e.g. The need to be on the one hand a diligent student and on the other a dutiful mother) and the multiple signification (non caring mother, over burdened student, competent and organized person, vulnerable incapable learner). Rose (2007) notes Roland Barthes (1977 :78) and the importance of anchorage and how Semiology offers a detailed vocabulary for specifying what particular signs are doing and being in a social performance (Rose, 2007:87). In particular, the notion of voyeurism and the compositional organization of meaning between actors are significant aspects. (Mulvey, 1989). Therefore, the three themes shown in figure 4 offer an exploration and at best an interpretation of cultural iconography which is a variance of social experience for the students.

Part I: *No babies in Burton™** performance themes:

- Power
- Surveillance
- Hierarchy
- Subject Positioning

Part III: *University Widower™ **** performance themes:

- Systems
- Subject positioning
- Mundane relationships

Part II: *A Girl Called Student™*** performance themes:

- The Symbols of Identity
- The Ugly nature of Social-hood
- Representations of Selfhood
- The dirty nature of learning the ropes
- The Brutalizing nature of Systems
- The maintenance of Status
- Action producing Meaning
- Consumption of Signs
- Doing in order to Become
- Communities

Figure 4: 3 Performative Ethnographies.

All of the concepts above are about the culture, the collective and the
performance expected of students. Each of the utterances is recognizable to anyone who has attended a university education. As flamboyant as some may appear, there is no doubt that they all harbour within them a 'realness' which is different to the usual stunted and predictive concepts of previous retention research. This performative approach to exploring is ripe for criticism, but early feedback from students and colleagues has shown an appreciation for the way this methodology has not succumbed to the temptation of trying to 'make things easy and simple'. The performance of retention is anything but simple. It is personal. It is culture.

To date the research has structured over a 1000 ethnographic folk terms which have cultural meaning for most students. Some of these include issues related to: 'neglecting family', 'having no money' and 'feeling the pressure of handing in assignments'. But the study has also highlighted how students have stories about 'being tagged onto the end' by lecturers who 'often appear to be bored'. Or as one student said 'being known as a girl called 'student'. These are the untold stories unique to this study, which are often conveniently forgotten in other articles about retention. This study has allowed for taxonomies and domains to develop which contextualize many of the concepts actors in the world of retention encounter in their everyday mundane work. This study has been about accepting the mundane as being meaningful and co-constructed at any given time. Therefore the average experience of the disgruntled student nurse is something universal, whilst feeling so personal, because it circulates in the grids, bustle and webs of

meaning being constantly generated and constituted. Therefore, the performance ethnography is about the audience being involved in the play. This may take the form of perhaps directing it, influencing the mood, 'doing' decisions about the next script, doing the scenery and the sting in the tail.

Conclusion

By using a 'different methodology' to explore the nature of retention it has been possible to ask different types of research question: 'What is it like here at the university?' 'When thinking about student retention, what would be useful for us to know about?' Other ethnographic structural questions asked included: What are all the things your peers say about that assignment? These types of questions are geared towards not asking about the individual, but about the impact of the university and the way university structures, systems, expectations and ways of socialising large groups (up-to 200 students in a single cohort of mixed branches) influence student experiences and the choices they make (Madison, 2005). There is a recognition every individual student comes into contact with the university discourse (which is made up of people, metaphor, fantasies, histories, the physical environment and working structures). This discourse then forces each student to participate in a personal performance which generates anxiety and specific meaning which ultimately influences their behaviour: do I stay or do I go? This project was not a replication of previous research, instead it wanted to explore the 'up-close' nature of failure, the dirty linen of nursing politics, the possibility that there can never be an all defining model from which to base substantive conclusions about student nurse retention.

A number of strategies have already been implemented to improve the overall student experience within the School of Health and Wellbeing at the University of Wolverhampton including: pre-course taster days; the appointment of a student advisor and protected learning time during clinical placements. It is hoped that these will help to provide students with a more realistic view of the demands of the nursing programme as well as the realities of clinical practice, and simultaneously studying at a higher academic level.

*Part I: *No Babies in Burton*™ (Presented January 2009 - University of Wolverhampton, UK.)
** Part II: *A Girl Called Student*™ (Presented May 2009 - University of Groningen , NL)
***Part III: *University Widower*™ (Presented in September, 2009 - University of Salford)

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