ORIGINAL RESEARCH

Health Policy Immersion Experience of Doctoral Nursing Students: A Phenomenological Study

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Abstract

Background: In today's political environment, there is a significant need for healthcare professionals to be aware of health policy and its impact on practice and the population. Nursing, a respected and trusted profession, has a responsibility to increase its awareness and advocacy efforts to ensure practice and execution of responsible and ethical health policy.

Objectives: The purpose of this study was to describe the lived experience of doctoral nursing students' (PhD and DNP) engagement in a week-long immersion trip to Washington, D.C. as a requirement of their mandatory health policy course. This immersion trip encompassed participation in numerous activities that focused on health policy, nursing's role in research, and its presence in the political arena. In addition to describing doctoral nursing students' lived experience, the researchers sought to discover how this experience impacts doctorally-prepared nurses' political awareness and future interest in health policy.

Methods: Data were gathered using Google Forms to obtain doctoral nursing students' experiences after participating in a week-long Washington, D.C. immersion as part of their mandatory doctoral coursework at a Mid-Atlantic college in the United States. The survey was emailed to 43 PhD and DNP students, of which 30 met the inclusion criteria. Demographic data analysis, in addition to thematic analysis of survey responses with the aid of NVivo, were performed.

Results: Four themes emerged from the analysis to describe the experience and impact that the week-long Washington, D.C. immersion had on doctoral nursing students: Knowledge and Understanding of the Political Process, Recognition of the Role Professional Nursing Organizations Play in the Political Arena, Empowerment Through Increased Awareness, and Nursing's Role as an Advocate for the People

Conclusion: Through increased knowledge and awareness of health policy, doctorally-prepared nurses may be more inclined to seek and engage in the political arena and actively participate in advocacy efforts to improve health policy and the healthcare system.

Keywords: advocacy, doctoral nursing students, health policy, healthcare system, political process

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Health Policy Immersion Experience of Doctoral Nursing Students: A Phenomenological Study

In light of today's political environment, there is a significant need for healthcare professionals to be aware of current health policy and its impact on practice and the population. Nursing, a respected and trusted profession, has a responsibility to increase its awareness and advocacy efforts to ensure the practice and execution of responsible and ethical health policy. Nurses, as the largest group of healthcare professionals, have the ability to identify and bring to light the healthcare needs of the people (Hinshaw & Grady, 2011).

Nursing research, with its emphasis on health promotion, health disparities, management of chronic illnesses, and caregiving, can serve as a crucial guide for government officials as they set political agendas and introduce legislation for the betterment of society (Hinshaw & Grady, 2011). Through lobbying efforts of professional nursing organizations, such as the American Nurses Association (ANA), government officials can gain awareness and insight into current health issues, which directly impact the public. While professional nursing organizations engage in health policy, all nurses need to be aware of and involved in this process.

Background

Health policy, as per the World Health Organization (2018), "refers to decisions, plans and actions which are undertaken to attain specific healthcare goals within a society" (para. 1). It provides the foundation and domain for which both healthcare and public health systems operate. Appointed or elected local, state, and national officials actualize the ideas, decisions, plans, and actions surrounding health policy. There are numerous complex processes involved in the development, implementation, and evaluation of health policy. Healthcare professionals have a shared interest in knowing about and engaging in the intricate political and regulatory processes of health policy. In turn, these policies impact healthcare professionals' practice and the populations they serve exponentially.

In 2003, the Institute of Medicine (IOM) expressed the importance of training healthcare professionals in health policy. They stated that education in policy analysis, development, and application need to be addressed, as "dwelling on the science of public health without paying appropriate attention to both politics and policy will not be enough" (p. 13). Offering education in health policy to students of the healthcare professions is a means to enhance their understanding and increase their political engagement (DiCenso et al., 2012; Jansson et al., 2015; Primomo & Björling, 2013).

While clinical care is extremely valuable, research demonstrates that healthcare rendered by clinicians has less impact on the health of the population than the social determinants of health (IOM, 2011; Russo, 2015). Healthcare professionals are accustomed to advocating for their patients in a clinical, one-on-one level, typically at the bedside or in a healthcare facility. However, healthcare professionals achieve greater outcomes when they advocate at the policy level. Good health is not solely the result of competent, one-on-one care provided by healthcare clinicians, but also the result of creating conditions in which people can be

healthy. Sound health policies, laws and regulations positively influence the health of millions of people (IOM, 2011).

Although the IOM made its recommendation relating to health policy education, it remains that current training for nurses and healthcare professionals is limited and does not include the depth of policy education required for transformational changes in population health (DiCenso et al., 2012; Heiman et al., 2015). Barriers to the implementation of health policy education include numerous challenges of integrating health policy into clinical training programs, such as nursing and medicine. Notably, there is a lack of perceived relevance to the program, lack of faculty interest and knowledge, including lack of faculty recruitment with policy expertise. In addition, a lack of resources, as well as conflicts with scheduling or time constraints, specifically those that would compete with core required clinical training, serve as barriers (Cohen & Milone-Nuzzo, 2001; DiCenso et al., 2012; Heiman et al., 2016; Mou et al., 2011).

Healthy People 2020 identifies that eliminating disparities and achieving health equity will require addressing, not only disparities related to healthcare, but also those of structural and environmental factors, including social determinants of health (United States Department of Health & Human Service, 2010). Health policy education for students of the health professions inspires future clinicians to address issues that ail populations' social determinants of health, as well as treat patients' maladies.

This phenomenological study aimed to describe the lived experience of doctoral nursing students' engagement in a week-long immersion trip to Washington, D.C. as a requirement of their health policy course. In addition to describing doctoral nursing students' lived experience, the researchers sought to discover how this experience impacts doctorally-prepared nurses' political awareness. This engagement in health policy can positively influence population health in the future.

Methods

Design

A phenomenological approach was chosen to explore the lived experiences of doctoral nursing students' week-long Washington, D.C. immersion and its impact on future practice. Interpretive phenomenology, as outlined by van Manen (1997), employs both interpretive and descriptive elements and "aims at gaining a deeper understanding of the nature of the meaning of our everyday lived experiences" (p. 9). Exploring the participants' lived experience offers a deeper and richer meaning to provide a better understanding of its impact on the participants.

Data Collection and Survey

Data collection occurred from October 2018 through January 2019, using Google Forms sent via email to doctoral nursing students (PhD and DNP) to explore their lived experiences after their mandatory participation in a week-long Washington, D.C. immersion encounter, as a requirement to satisfy the health policy course embedded in both the PhD and DNP programs. Demographic data analysis, in addition to thematic analysis of survey responses with the aid of NVivo 12 were performed.

Survey questions used to obtain participants' demographics included age of participant, the current program in which enrolled – PhD or DNP, as well as the current year in their program. Participants were provided unlimited text capability to type in their own words to describe their experience. The focused question asked of each participant was, *What effect, if any, did the Washington Immersion Experience have on you as a nursing professional?*

Ethics

The researchers obtained an Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval from the institution where the study took place, a college located in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States. Participants volunteered and provided informed consent prior to the survey. Responses were anonymous and there were no identifiers retained or recorded at any time from the participants.

Sample and Setting

Following IRB approval, 43 potential participants, picked using purposive sampling, received an electronic correspondence, which provided a description of the study, a request for their voluntary participation, and the link to the Google Forms page. Of those 43 emailed, 30 met the inclusion criteria. The criteria included current enrollment in a doctoral nursing program (PhD or DNP) at the Mid-Atlantic US college with successful completion of the mandatory health policy course, including the fulfillment of the week-long Washington, D.C. immersion experience.

Fifty percent of the prospective 30 students returned the completed data collection tool. The demographic data of these 15 participants who met the inclusion criteria for this research appear on Table 1. This sample size was accordant with other phenomenological studies and allowed for proper identification of themes and patterns (Guest et al., 2006). Data saturation occurred after 11.

Table 1
Frequency Distribution of Demographic Data of Study Participants

Description	N
Program Type	
PhD	12
DNP	3
Age	
< 30	0
30-39	4
40-49	4
50-59	5
≥60	2
Program Year	
2nd	3
3rd	4
4th	3
5th	5
Total Participants	15

The participants ranged in age from 30 to greater than 60 years old with data showing four in the 30-39 age range, four in the 40-49 age range, five in the 50-59 age range, and two as ≥60 years of age (Figure 1). Of the 15 participants, 12 were current PhD students and three were current DNP students (Figure 2) with three participants in their second year, four in their third year, three in their fourth year and five in their fifth year of studies (Figure 3).

Figure 1
Participants' Age Distribution by Percentage

Figure 2
Doctoral Program Type, Distribution by Percentage

Figure 3
Current Program Year of Participants by Percentage

Data Analysis

As explained by van Manen (1997), data analysis involves the reflection on essential themes that characterize the phenomenon. In this study, the authors utilized Colaizzi's (1978) and van Manen's (1997) phenomenological methods, along with aid of NVivo 12 Pro for Windows, a qualitative data analysis software, for analysis. Each participant's written response to the question was read and re-read. Significant written responses were extracted and identified as Level I codes. The researchers continuously

compared new Level I codes with those previously identified. Broader codes, labeled Level II, were meanings from significant statements condensed from basic codes (Level I). General themes and patterns came from interrelated and condensed Level II codes. The researchers then used these themes to formulate generalities from individual participants and as a group.

The flowchart shows the themes identified from the participants' responses (Figure 4). It also illustrates the hierarchical process of condensing and identifying the themes that emerged. Extracted significant statements were denoted as Level I. The meanings of Level I statements were formulated and shown as Level II. The final step was the identification of themes that emanated from formulated meanings, and these themes appear as Level III. The following themes emerged: 1) *Knowledge and Understanding of the*

Political Process; 2) *Recognition of the Role Professional Nursing Organizations Play in the Political Arena*; 3) *Empowerment through Increased Awareness*; and 4) *Nursing's Role as an Advocate for the People*. Additional themes noted to be of lesser extent may be the result of the varying itineraries of the participants' immersion experience as described in the research limitations. These included National Institutes of Health (NIH) and the healthcare process and policy. All respondents described their experience in a positive manner, with some participants using words such as "wonderful" (R1, R14, R15), "great" (R2), and "awesome" (R1, R5, 12). Also noted was interest in future engagement in policy. One participant stated, "In addition, I am more interested in policy and correlate that with my experiences" (R13).

Figure 4

Analysis of Themes Flowchart

Knowledge and Understanding of the Political Process

Because nurses are clinically engaged in day-to-day patient care roles, they are not engaged or knowledgeable in health policy processes and the political arena (Catallo et al., 2014). Participation in the healthcare policy immersion during the ANA Hill Day raised the students' awareness and appreciation of the political process. One participant said, "The experience gave me increased knowledge on the political process" (R8). Others stated, "The exposure...in just how government works." (R2); the experience provided a way "... to understand all that goes into lobbying..." (R7); "It was a wonderful learning experience..." (R11).

Recognition of the Role Professional Nursing Organizations Play in the Political Arena

Professional organizations, such as the ANA, have mandates and processes to engage nurses in policy development (Catallo et al., 2014). As part of political advocacy, doctoral nursing student participants in the health care policy immersion trip had the opportunity to participate in ANA's Hill Day. The participants in the study described their recognition of the integral role that professional organizations play. "I have a greater appreciation for the various nursing organizations...and what they do" (R7); "... seeing how nursing is represented by [the American Association of Colleges of Nursing] AACN" (R2); "...showed me how important nurses' voices are...we need that seat at the table" (R5).

Empowerment through Increased Awareness

Empowerment, a central concept in health promotion, denotes working with communities to enable them to identify and achieve their goals (Carter, 2017). The overall experience, as stated by participants, was "...very valuable and empowering" (R15); "It raised my awareness....and it showed me how important nurses' voices are in changing old or implementing new policies" (R5); "...opened my eyes..." (R6); "...made me more aware and more interested" (R2).

Nursing's Role as an Advocate for the People

Nursing has historically advocated to impact health policy, particularly for various vulnerable populations. This immersion experience afforded students an increased awareness and understanding that further action on their part will be required for the betterment of society. As stated by one participant, "...I have become more aware of advocacy...related to the concerns impacting professional nursing, population health and healthcare in general" (R8); "...brought awareness to the impact nurses have and can have..." (R13); "The trip was a great way to learn to advocate....to speak with [legislators]....lobbying on our behalf" (R7); "It showed me the importance of...making a hill visit" (R10).

Discussion

The participants of this study described the lived experience of their immersion trip to Washington, D.C. The emerging themes of this study revealed that by way of health policy education and an

immersion experience, doctoral students' gained knowledge and understanding of the political process, as well as an awareness to serve as advocates through political involvement. In addition, a sense of empowerment through increased awareness emerged. These doctoral nursing students also described their recognition of the paramount role that professional nursing organizations play in the political arena.

Although there are approximately four million registered professional nurses currently active in the United States, comprising the largest group in the healthcare workforce, nurse advocacy for health policy continues to remain low (Catallo et al., 2014; National Council of State Boards of Nursing, 2018). Nurses play a critical role in their patients' journey along the healthcare continuum. This frontline presence allows nurses firsthand knowledge of the challenges that individuals encounter as they navigate the healthcare system (American Nurses Association [ANA], n.d.). Two landmark documents, the IOM *Future of Nursing Report* (2010) and the ANA *Code of Ethics* (2015) both emphasize the importance of nurses capitalizing on their unique role in healthcare in order to advance the nursing profession. Nursing knowledge and experience influence health policy and its processes (Lewinski & Simmons, 2018).

According to Wakefield (2004), health policy is developed without evidential support from nursing research. Ellenbecker & Edward (2016) maintain that "by increasing nurse researchers' understanding of the policy process and how research contributes to each stage, nurse researchers will be more effective in contributing to policies that improve the health of the nation" (p. 208). Research demonstrates that nurses require, yet do not often receive, education and training regarding advocacy in health policy (DiCenso et al., 2012; Heiman et al., 2016; Lewinski & Simmons, 2018). This study shows that health policy education and a Washington D.C. immersion experience can elevate nurses' health policy knowledge and can promote future political involvement.

Limitations

This research is subject to several limitations. With the exception of ANA Hill Day, the itineraries of the Washington, D.C. immersion experiences varied with each group of doctoral nursing students. This inconsistency between groups may have influenced each participant's interpretation of their experience. The next limitation was the use of an electronic survey for data collection. This approach, though convenient, does not allow for direct questioning, observation, and additional clarifying questions by the researcher. Although participants responded to open-ended questions, the written responses may not be fully descriptive and therefore may not express their experiences accurately. There was also an inability to validate the statements of the participants, due to the anonymous nature of the email survey format. Lastly, the potential for bias exists since all the researchers participated in the immersion and bracketing of that personal experience had to be acknowledged and maintained throughout the analysis process. (Creswell, 2013; Creswell, 2014).

Implications for Nursing

In order for political engagement of nurses to occur, an increase in exposure to health policy through education is paramount. Nurses often cite a lack of political awareness, including the internal workings of the government and how policy decisions are made (Abood, 2007; Cramer, 2002). Nurse leaders who work with professional nursing organizations and nurse educators need to cultivate greater political interest and engagement, beginning with undergraduate level nursing students and continuing with practicing nurses (Deschaine & Schaffer, 2003; Duncan et al., 2012; Vandenhouten et al., 2011). The relevance of a health policy course in the nursing curriculum must be emphasized at the undergraduate and graduate levels. This will facilitate political engagement by broadening student awareness of current health policy issues and the processes involved to address these problems. Professional nursing organizations can play a role in providing ongoing continuing education for nurses in practice to address knowledge gaps (Vandenhouten et al., 2011). Educational strategies can focus on raising nursing awareness of the typical pressures faced in a policy environment, such as its fast-paced nature, multiple competing priorities, limited time to make consequential decisions, and a need for relevant evidence for appropriate decision-making (Catallo & Sidani, 2014). With a better understanding of the policy process and arena, including the pressures surrounding decision-making and multiple competing drivers, nurses can identify and develop a role that facilitates ongoing political engagement. Some examples of learning opportunities for nurses include activities that support the articulation of a current health problem using a nursing and policy lens, identifying options that policymakers deem relevant within the broader health system to address nursing or policy problems, and describing local implementation considerations in a succinct manner. These areas of focus are consistent with international initiatives such as the *SUPporting Policy relevant Reviews and Trials (SUPPORT) Project* (Lavis et al., 2009), which are tools for evidence-informed health policymaking with relevance to healthcare system stakeholders.

Conclusion

This study examined the lived experience of a small purposive sample of doctoral nursing students who participated in a week-long health policy immersion as a requirement in a health policy course. All the participants reported positive feedback. Themes that emerged from the study include participants' appreciation of the political process, recognition of professional nursing organizations' roles, empowerment by way of heightened awareness, and nurses' role as advocates for the population. Primono (2007) explains that political advocacy is a component of the nurses' role in health promotion, nurses' active participation in health policy development, and the inclusion of policy and advocacy aspects in nursing curricula will help nurses realize their full potential as healthcare advocates. Nurses possess a wide array of knowledge and expertise regarding the care of patients (Phillips, 2012). Through increased knowledge and awareness, doctorally-prepared nurses will engage in the political arena and

actively participate in advocacy efforts to improve health policy and the health of individuals, communities, and populations.

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