

Nursing Students' Perceptions of the COVID-19 Pandemic's Impact on Their Education and Clinical Experiences

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic imposed unprecedented challenges on health care education, particularly for student nurses who found themselves navigating their professional training under crisis conditions. This study explores how the pandemic affected graduating student nurses' perceptions of their education and clinical experiences. Incorporating both a quantitative and qualitative analysis of student responses, the data reveals a significant change in their understanding of the nursing profession. A concerning 41% of students reported considering withdrawing from the nursing program due to the pandemic's impact on their education and mental well-being. The implications of this underscores the need for adaptive measures in nursing education and offer insights into fostering resilience in future health crises.

Keywords: Student Nurses; COVID-19 Pandemic; Nursing Education; Clinical Experience; Perception of Nursing.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic brought unprecedented challenges that rippled through all aspects of life. Economic activities suffered a significant decline, leading to a sharp increase in unemployment. As businesses were forced to close for extended periods, employees not only lost their jobs but also faced the erosion of essential skills, which could have lasting effects on their future employment opportunities. Various sectors felt the impact of the lockdown. Industries struggled with poor production levels and disrupted supply chains, while the healthcare sector found itself overwhelmed, battling increased demands with limited resources. Tourism and food services were particularly hard hit, grappling with travel restrictions and diminished consumer activity. In education, students experienced major disruptions, with schools closing and learning coming to a halt. The phenomena of the global health crises pivoted the trajectory of educational experiences, particularly for those preparing for frontline health care roles. The COVID-19 pandemic presented such a turning point for nursing students, whose views on their chosen profession were influenced strongly by the extraordinary circumstances they witnessed and endured. The consequent shift to remote learning

presented student nurses with an altered landscape of educational experiences and clinical exposure.

Prior research, such as "Diaries of Nursing Students during the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Qualitative Descriptive Study," documents the immediate responses of nursing students to the crisis. Studies like "The COVID-19 pandemic increased the stress and psychological needs of nurses and nursing students" elude to the heightened pressures experienced within the profession during this period. The pandemic caused many clinical experiences to be limited or changed to simulations, as healthcare resources were redirected to address COVID-19. As a result, nursing students faced unique challenges during "stay in place" orders and an immediate transition to remote learning, often without a clear understanding of the nursing profession before the pandemic. These experiences significantly influenced their perceptions of nursing. This study aims to investigate the resultant changes in student nurses' perceptions of the nursing profession and its demands as a result of the pandemic.

Methodology

A voluntary survey was conducted among 57 nursing students during their last semester of the program in Fall of 2021. The students had all entered the nursing program prior to the pandemic, and thus has some experience with normal classroom and clinical experiences. Quantitative and well as qualitative data was collected which focused on student perceptions about the nursing profession, classroom experience and clinical experiences during the pandemic. Data from the surveys was transposed on to a spread sheet and uploaded into computer QDA minor software for analysis. In addition to the analysis of the quantitative data, thematic analysis of student responses provided personal

accounts that enriched the understanding of the students' experiences and professional outlook during the pandemic.

Results

Many students initially pursued the nursing profession nursing due to its perceived financial stability and reliable career prospects. Upon entering the nursing program, 46% of the student admitted to having significant changes in their understanding of the profession.

A notable 42% of students acknowledged the pandemic as a factor in changing their perceptions of nursing, with an additional 30% indicating it might have had influenced their views. One of the identified themes revealed the pandemic exposed the students to overworked nurses and instances of disrespect within the healthcare system.

During the pandemic, 43% of students experienced negative classroom challenges, primarily due to disruptions and the shift to online learning. While only 23% reported positive clinical experiences, 28% appreciated the value of COVID-specific training. Additionally, a concerning 41% of students reported wanting to withdraw from nursing program due to the pandemic's impact on their education and mental well-being.

Conclusion

The findings from this study provide critical insights into the perceptions and experiences of nursing students during a tumultuous period marked by the COVID-19 pandemic. The survey revealed a significant shift in students' understanding of the nursing profession, with many initially drawn by the allure of financial stability and job security. However, the realities of the pandemic introduced

them to challenges that altered their views, exposing them to the harsh realities of overworked healthcare professionals and systemic disrespect within the industry.

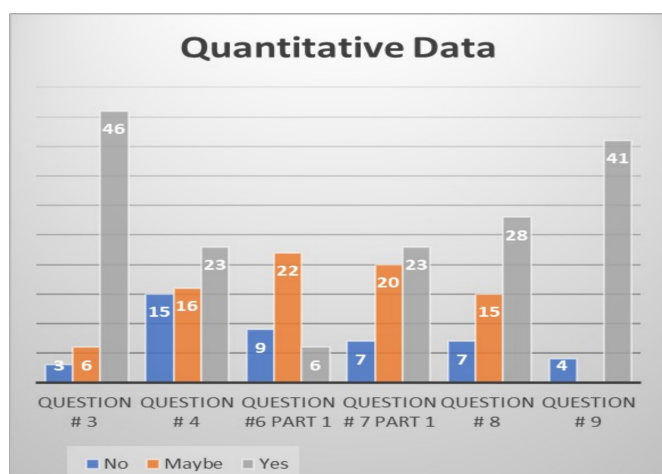
The data highlighted substantial negative impacts on both classroom and clinical experiences, with a notable percentage of students struggling with the transition to online learning and reporting diminished clinical engagement. The pandemic not only disrupted their education but also affected their mental well-being, prompting a significant portion of students to contemplate withdrawing from the program. Despite these challenges, a minority appreciated the targeted training related to COVID-

19, indicating that there were opportunities for growth amid adversity.

These results underscore the need for nursing education programs to adapt in response to the ongoing impacts of the pandemic. By addressing the challenges faced by students and fostering a supportive learning environment, nursing schools can better prepare future professionals for the complexities of the healthcare landscape. Further research is essential to continue exploring these themes and to develop strategies that enhance resilience and retention among nursing students in the face of unprecedented challenges.

Table 1 Thematic Analysis

Theme # 1 Pandemic	Theme # 2 Nurses/Nurse/Nursing	Theme # 3 Clinical Experiences	Theme # 4 COVID
Pandemic Strengthened my resolve to be a nurse	Nurses need more support	Not enough clinical training	Covid Made Nursing School Harder
Pandemic made me want to prioritize my own health care	Nurse are over worked and underpaid	Clinical Experience was subpar	Covid Scared me. I thought I would catch it and die
Very grateful my education was not stalled due to the pandemic	Nurse are critical to our society	Faculty advocated so we could complete clinical hours on time	Covid Affected my learning with loss of hands on experience
Pandemic taught me how valuable health care is.	Nurses need better staffing ratios	Grateful for whatever clinical experience I did get.	Covid Made school much more difficult, I do not feel competent as a nurse
Working as an extern during the pandemic made a bigger impact than nursing school did. Nurse Need more support	Nurse have a lot of stress	Needed more clinical experiences	Covid Made Nursing school much harder, being on line



Graph # 1

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