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Student experiences of nursing education in shaping character: A phenomenological study

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Abstract

Background: Character building is an important aspect of nursing education to produce competent and ethical professional nurses. Nursing education emphasizes not only technical skills but also the development of moral values and leadership.

Purpose: To explore the experiences of nursing students in shaping character through nursing education.

Method: A phenomenological approach was used by conducting in-depth interviews with ten nursing students. The data were analyzed thematically to identify the experiences and processes of character formation.

Results: Show that the formation of participants character is a dynamic process involving four main aspects: clinical practice experience, self-reflection, social interaction and organizational activities, and internalization of moral and ethical values. Practical experience builds responsibility and decision-making, self-reflection increases professional awareness, social interaction hones communication and leadership skills, while moral values become the ethical foundation.

Conclusion: Nursing education must integrate practice, reflection, social interaction, and moral values to form students who are competent as well as characterful and ethical.

Keywords: Character Building; Ethics; Moral Values; Nursing Education; Self-Reflection; Student Experience.

INTRODUCTION

Nursing students, during their education, not only learn clinical skills and nursing theory, but also form the professional character that will be the basis of their nursing practice in the future. Nursing education is considered an important vehicle in instilling the values of integrity, empathy, responsibility, and cooperation, which are the essence of the character of nursing (Karlsholm, André, & Grønning, 2024). During clinical practice, students experience intense interaction with professional nurses and patients, which becomes a context of character learning through example and real experience (Nes, Zlamal, Linnerud, Steindal, & Solberg, 2023). In addition, the humanization aspect in nursing care also emerges as an important dimension that is internalized by students in education (Naef, Brysiewicz, Mc Andrew, Beierwaltes, Chiang, Clisbee, & Eggenberger, 2021). These character values are increasingly important as

the demands of professionalism and ethics in the nursing profession continue to grow globally (Kabak, Halitopo, Auparai, & Hadi, 2022).

Although many theories and research have underlined the importance of character in nursing, there is still a gap in understanding how students themselves perceive and live their role in shaping their character during education (Honkavuo, 2021). Some research in Indonesia focuses more on professional identity and the formation of roles as nurses, but less focuses on students' internal experiences in building character through clinical interactions and personal reflection (Syabariyah, Anesti, & Alfin, 2022). In addition, previous research has also shown that students' relationships with nursing teams during practice can affect their self-esteem and learning strategies, but the implications of character have not been fully explored (Khaira,

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Gopal, Saini, & Isa, 2024). Meanwhile, some phenomenological studies on students' clinical experiences emphasize more on technical competence or caring, and less explicitly highlight character aspects (Ahn & Kim 2021). Thus, there is a need to deepen a phenomenological understanding of how nursing students realize, internalize, and strengthen their character during nursing education (Seidel, Schnitzler, Kosel, Stürmer, & Holzberger, 2021).

This research is particularly important because it closes a gap in the literature by exploring nursing students' subjective experiences of their role in building professional character. Through a phenomenological approach, this study offers new insights into the dynamics of character formation from a student's perspective, rather than simply assessing character outcomes quantitatively. The purpose of this research is to uncover the life experiences of nursing students in educating themselves in character through clinical practice, interaction with role models, and personal reflection, so as to make a conceptual and practical contribution to a more holistic nursing education curriculum.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study uses a qualitative phenomenological approach to understand the experiences of nursing students related to their role in shaping professional

character. The phenomenological approach was chosen because it was able to explore the subjective experiences and meanings that participants gave to their educational process and clinical practice.

Participants consisted of 12 final semester nursing students at the Health Polytechnic of the Ministry of Health, Jayapura, selected by purposive sampling to ensure that all had relevant clinical practice experience and were reflective enough to explain the character formation process.

Data were collected through in-depth interviews with open-ended questions, complemented by participatory observations and reflective notes of students to enrich the context of the reported experiences.

The analysis was carried out with a phenomenological thematic approach, including reading the transcript thoroughly, marking the unit of meaning, arranging themes and subthemes, and conducting member checking to ensure interpretation in accordance with the participants' experience.

The validity of the data is maintained through triangulation of data sources, verification with participants, and systematic recording of the research process. Research ethics are guaranteed by the provision of informed consent, the guarantee of identity confidentiality, and the right of participants to withdraw at any time without consequences.

RESEARCH RESULTS

Table 1. Characteristics of Participants (N=12)

Participant Code	Age (Years)	Gender	Final Education	Length of Service (Years)	Unit/Workplace
P1	30	Female	Profesi Ners	6	Hospitalization
P2	35	Male	Profesi Ners	10	IGD
P3	32	Female	Profesi Ners	8	Hospitalization
P4	40	Male	Bachelor of Applied Nursing	15	ICU
P5	34	Female	Profesi Ners	9	Hospitalization
P6	38	Female	Profesi Ners	12	Health Center
P7	36	Male	Bachelor of Applied Nursing	11	Hospitalization
P8	29	Female	Profesi Ners	5	Health Center
P9	42	Male	Bachelor of Applied Nursing	7	Nursing Management
P10	33	Female	Profesi Ners	7	IGD
P11	45	Male	Bachelor of Applied Nursing	9	Clinical Education
P12	37	Female	Profesi Ners	13	ICU

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This study involved twelve nurses who were participating in a study assignment as participants. The age range of participants ranged from 29 to 45 years old, with a varied background of clinical work experience, ranging from five to twenty years. Participants consisted of male and female nurses with D4 education levels of Applied Bachelor of Nursing and Nurse Profession. All participants had clinical practice experience before undergoing study

assignments and came from various health service units, such as inpatient, outpatient, emergency departments, intensive care units, health centers, nursing management, and clinical education. The diversity of these characteristics provides a rich context in exploring the meaning of nurses' experiences related to learning tasks and career development phenomenologically.

Table 2. Participant Analysis by Theme

Theme	Participants	Participant quotes	Interpretation/Meaning of experience
Theme 1: learning through practical experience	P1	I learned to lead while dividing nursing group practice tasks.	Students assess that leadership and character-building skills emerge through hands-on experience in group and clinical practice.
	P3	Dealing with patients in the clinic taught me how to make decisions quickly.	Clinical activities train decision-making skills quickly and precisely, forming adaptation to complex situations.
	P6	Leadership emerges from hands-on experience, not just theory.	Real experience is considered the foundation of repetitive learning, which shapes the character and leadership abilities of students.
Theme 2: Self-Reflection and Awareness of Professional Responsibility	P2	After practice, I always reassess what I've done and what needs to be improved.	Self-reflection helps students evaluate strengths, weaknesses, and actions that need to be improved, as the basis for character development.
	P4	Leadership starts with self-awareness and responsibility for my own actions.	Self-awareness becomes an important foundation before leading others, reinforcing professional integrity and responsibility.
	P8	Reflection makes me wiser in making decisions as a prospective leader.	The reflection process supports mature, ethical, and responsible decision-making, which is further related to the ability to interact socially.
Theme 3: Social Interaction and Organizational Activities	P5	Being the chairman of the committee made me learn to manage the team and solve problems.	Organizational activities provide hands-on experience in team management and collective decision-making.

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Theme	Participants	Participant quotes	Interpretation/Meaning of experience
Theme 4: Moral and Ethical Values as Foundations of Character and Leadership	P7	Interact with Different friends Teaching Opinion, patience and diplomacy.	Social interaction trains communication, negotiation, and conflict resolution skills.
	P9	Organizational activities provide an experience of real leadership and motivate the team.	Participation in organizations helps students develop collaborative and adaptive leadership.
	P1	A good leader must be exemplary and honest.	The value of honesty and exemplary behavior is the main principle in shaping character and professional leadership.
	P10	Ethics are the basis decisions I made, both in academia and practice.	Ethics are a guideline in decision-making, ensuring that student actions are on the side of the patient and the team.
	P6	Without ethics, Leadership will not be effective.	Morals and ethics are the main foundations for student leadership, and character is consistent and beneficial to society.

The analysis in table above shows that the character and leadership formation of partisipants takes place continuously, starting from hands-on practical experience, followed by self-reflection to foster awareness of professional responsibility. Furthermore, participation in social interactions and organizational activities helps strengthen leadership skills through the development of communication, cooperation, and conflict management. In the final stage, the application of moral and ethical values is the main foundation that ensures that partisipants actions are always on the side of the patient, the team, and the community, so that the entire nursing education process forms mature character and leadership.

DISCUSSION

This study confirms that character formation in nursing education is a multi-layered process and takes place continuously. The process is not only influenced by clinical practice experience, but also by the ability to reflect, the dynamics of social

interaction, and involvement in organizational activities. The four themes that emerged show that the development of professional character does not occur instantaneously, but rather through the integration of direct experience, self-assessment, and the internalization of nursing ethical values (Guraya, Guraya, Harkin, Ryan, Mat Nor, & Yusoff, 2021). These findings are in line with the view that integrity, empathy, and honesty are the main foundations of the formation of a nurse's professional identity.

Theme 1: Learning Through Practical Experience

Clinical practice experience, as well as group-based practice activities, form the main foundation for the character development of nursing students. Real-world situations in practice demand decision-making, responsibility, and effective collaboration under pressure. The clinical environment provides an opportunity to deal with complex problems that require a quick and professional response, so that partisipants learn to understand the essence of

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leadership through direct action, not just theory (Suikkala, Timonen, Leino-Kilpi, Katajisto, & Strandell-Laine 2021).

The literature supporting these findings explains that clinical experience plays a crucial role in developing non-technical skills such as discipline, problem-solving, and leadership skills. This experience also strengthens the internalization of professional values through direct exposure to challenging ethical situations. However, the quality of the practical experience is strongly influenced by the availability of supervision and the learning culture established by the clinical supervisor. The presence of senior nurses as role models is crucial because they provide concrete examples of professional ethics and expected social behavior in healthcare (Wallander Karlsen, Sørensen, Finsand, Sjøberg, Lieungh, & Stafseth, 2023; Klotz, Riedel, Lehmeier, & Goldbach, 2022).

Theme 2: Self-Reflection and Awareness of Professional Responsibility

Self-reflection emerges as a key component in the formation of professional character. After undergoing practice, participants review their actions, evaluate the decisions made, and identify aspects that need to be improved (Hakim, 2023). Through this process, participants develop a deeper understanding of the reasons behind professional actions and the ethical consequences that come with them. Self-reflection helps to connect experience with moral principles, so that participants learn to take responsibility for their clinical decisions as well as their interpersonal behaviour (Jeong, Ju, Choi, & Kim, 2021).

The literature shows that effective reflection is closely related to the formation of professional competence, especially in terms of self-awareness and self-control. Thus, reflection serves as a bridge between theory and practice, allowing students to interpret experiences critically (Yang, Du, Zhao, Tang, & Yang, 2021). Self-awareness that develops through reflection also encourages the emergence of a leadership mindset, where students begin to organize their actions based on professional values, rather than simply following instructions.

Theme 3: Social Interaction and Organizational Activities

Social interaction in the educational environment and involvement in participants organizations provide additional space for character building. Experience collaborating in teams, establishing communication with various personality types, and resolving organizational conflicts trains participants to develop flexibility, tolerance, empathy, and diplomacy skills (Howard, Hartman, Allen, & Reynolds, 2021). This situation creates opportunities to understand group dynamics, motivate team members, and make decisions oriented towards common interests.

Through organizational activities, participants hone their coordination skills, time management, negotiation, and leadership in a non-clinical context (Qi, An, Zhang, & Wang, 2020). This experience directly contributes to strengthening soft skills that are very important in nursing practice. The nursing leadership literature confirms that social learning plays a significant role in shaping nurses' interpersonal abilities, as this profession requires cross-disciplinary collaboration and effective communication within healthcare teams (Alsadaan, Salameh, Reshia, Alruwaili, Alruwaili, Awad Ali, & Jones, 2023).

Theme 4: Internalization of Moral Values and Professional Ethics

The findings of the study also show that character formation cannot be separated from the process of internalizing moral values and professional ethics. Values such as empathy, integrity, respect, and fairness are the main guidelines in carrying out nursing practices professionally (Guraya, Guraya, & Yusoff, 2021). The internalization of these values occurs through a combination of clinical experiences, reflection processes, and social interactions that participants face every day. These three aspects build awareness that the role of nurses is not only technical, but also moral (Sundal & Ulvund, 2023).

Nursing education must ensure that participants have the opportunity to recognize professional values through ethical discussions, mentoring guidance, as well as exposure to clinical situations that demand moral judgment (Berhe & Gebretensaye, 2021). When students successfully internalize these values, they are better able to make responsible decisions and display professional behavior in various service contexts

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(Sellberg, Palmgren, & Möller, 2021). This is in line with the literature, which emphasizes the importance of moral integrity in nursing practice as a fundamental element in maintaining the trust of patients and the community.

The study has several limitations, including that participants come from a single institution, so the results may not be completely generalizable, and data are obtained only through interviews, without observation methods or diary records. Further research is suggested involving various institutions and mixed methods to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the character formation process. Educational interventions, such as character development modules or mentoring programs, can be evaluated for their impact on the ethical growth and leadership of participants.

Based on the findings, nursing faculty and clinical educators need to consider the integration of systematic character education programs, including: providing regular reflection sessions, both individual and group, to evaluate practical experiences, activating student organizations and leadership programs in practice labs to strengthen social experiences and leadership, developing ethics and character modules that combine theory with simulation, ethical discussions, and mentoring from senior nurses, engage educators and clinicians as ethical role models who demonstrate real moral leadership.

CONCLUSION

The development of nursing student character is a holistic and dynamic process involving practical experience, self-reflection, social interaction, and the internalization of moral and ethical values. These four aspects are interrelated in shaping students' character and professional leadership. Therefore, nursing education needs to be systematically designed by integrating practice, reflection, social interaction, and the learning of moral values so that students develop professional competence as well as strong, ethical character.

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