

Abstract

The public image of nursing is a powerful indicator of the contemporary value and status of nursing in modern society. The traditional perception of nursing as a predominantly female group of hand-maidens caring and cleaning for patients reflects the role of the nurse throughout history and also the definition of nursing itself. The enormity of change and development within health care delivery over the last fifty years now dictates the role of the nurse in a totally different dimension.

The NHS Plan (Department of Health, 2000) set out plans for investment and reform within the United Kingdom, and in Scotland the introduction of the National Framework for Service Change in the NHS in Scotland (Scottish Executive, 2006) was intended to support reform of the NHS and modernisation of the service, creating a health service that is “better, quicker, closer and safer” (Scottish Executive, 2005). As each decade passes, nurses become more knowledgeable, more competent, and more accountable, and partnership between the National Health Service and nurse education providers is paramount (Department of Health, 2008a). Furthermore, within nurse education there is widespread recognition of a variety of professional, vocational and academic qualifications, resulting in a changing student profile.

This qualitative study focuses upon a sample of students entering nurse education from Scotland’s Colleges with diverse backgrounds, experiences and educational needs, exploring the effects of the student learning experience upon their expectations and perceptions of nursing and nurse education. Using an interpretivist paradigm, repertory grids were employed to provide a framework to explore how each student interprets experiences, events and situations, and constructs their own reality. Focus groups facilitated further discussion, and data generated by these approaches was analysed using thematic analysis.

The findings confirmed that the student nurses’ perceived role of the nurse before commencing nurse education, and the actual role of the nurse identified by the students’ learning experience within the clinical environment are dissonant. The student nurses’ expectations and perceptions of nursing and nurse education are influenced by staff roles and responsibilities within the clinical learning environment, particularly the health care assistant. Furthermore, the student nurses’ expectations and perceptions of nursing and nurse education are influenced more by clinical learning within the care environment than by academic learning within the university.

This thesis includes recommendations for those involved in the preparation of students for entry into nurse education, and also those engaged in educating students within the university and the clinical environment.

Key words:

Nurse education; expectations and perceptions; role of the nurse