

# Student Nurses' Experiences in Academic Failure

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## Abstract

An investigation into the reasons for academic failure was done using focus group interview among eighteen first year Basic B.Sc (N) students in from selected colleges of Kolar. Only students who had failed in more than three subjects of the first year university examination were included through purposive sampling technique. The findings showed that the student nurses perceived failure was the result of lack of confidence, inability to understand the subject matter, lack of time, language problem, incomplete reading and stress.

**Keywords:** Nursing students, academic failure, focus group discussion.

## INTRODUCTION

Higher education is about more than just what you learn in the classroom, it's about maturity and learning how to learn. It's very difficult for some people to make that leap, even if they are excellent students primarily due to challenges of the external or the internal environment. Learning experience refers to the interaction between the learner and the external condition in the environment to which the learner can react<sup>1</sup>.

The retention of nursing students is an ongoing problem both in developed as well as developing countries. Retention of nursing students could be enhanced to some level if they are successful in their academic endeavors. Hence they should identify with the desire to succeed, recognize personal attributes and take responsibility for personal success and failure<sup>2</sup> as well as be able to be given the right kind of support to meet the challenges of stress a professional course brings with it.

A study conducted on student nurses stress in Brunei, revealed that that student nurses had academic stress related to assignments and study in English<sup>3</sup>. Another study conducted, on eleven undergraduate nursing student attrition in New York, showed that a combination of two or more stressors in the academic, social and or external environment were main reasons for them quitting the programme. Any combination of

two or more stressors may become manifested in academic failure<sup>4</sup>.

Aspects of nursing education programme that were reported to be the cause of stress among nursing students in Ireland, included academic related stress like writing assignments, intense amount of work, lack of free time and appearing for examination<sup>5</sup>.

The above mentioned studies showed that student nurses' experience stress in every day life. When this stress increases students may not be able to recognize the signs of stress or causes of stress. This may succinctly affect the students' concentration, their ability to submit assignments on time and their interest in studies with resultant high rates of absenteeism, failure in the examination and lastly withdrawal from the educational programme. Hence the researcher was interested to conduct a study in her setting with an objective to investigate the reasons for academic failure among first year Basic B.Sc (N) students.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

Focus group involves organized discussion with a selected group of individual to gain information about their views of a topic and particularly suited for obtaining several perspective about the same topic. Focus groups are widely used as a data collection technique. The purpose of selecting this method was to obtain qualitative information from a predetermined and limited number of people, on their expression of reality and with an attempt to describe people in natural situations.<sup>6</sup>

Formal written from the Principals of selected colleges

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was first obtained. Then consent of participants who were selected through purposive sampling technique from two selected colleges of Kolar was obtained. This included 18 nursing students who had failed in three or more than three subjects of the first year Basic B.Sc (N), and not eligible to sit in the second year. Following this, focus group interview was conducted (nine in each focus group) on 06th and 07th November 2009.

The tool that was developed by the researcher, consisted of 12 open ended questions. The first two questions were related to reasons for selecting nursing profession and feeling as a student in nursing education. These questions were used to stimulate discussion and encourage participants to interact in a normal manner with the researcher. Remaining ten questions were related to reasons for academic failure. The researcher facilitated the group interviews. Her assistant, who was also a post graduate nursing teacher, attended all focus group discussion, helped by taking notes during the course of the group interview. The focus group interviews were also recorded through a tape recorder.

Data analysis was done immediately, by debriefing after each focus group, transcribing information collected and checking it for quality by listening to the recorded version and verifying the data. The data was read reflectively, looking for significant statements and codes according to the topics addressed.

The researcher used three levels of coding. In level one coding, researcher examined the data line by line and made codes which were taken from the language of the subjects who attended the focus group. In level two coding, comparing of coded data with other data and creation of categories were done. In level three coding, the categories that seemed to cluster together were formed as themes. Then the documents were submitted to two assessors for validation. This action provided an opportunity to determine the reliability of the coding.<sup>7</sup>

## RESULTS

- Study finding revealed that most (72%) of the students were females, majority (94%) were between 18 to 20 years of age group, 83% of students scored above 60% of marks in PUC (PCBE); and 89% had passed their pre-university examination in the first attempt.
- Students expressed the following reasons for

selecting the nursing profession: career opportunity, chances of going abroad, mother or family member was a nurse and to serve people.

- Almost all the students stated that they were proud of being nursing students, but if they compared their status with their friends from other professions, they felt inferior.
- From both focus groups, six themes emerged. These were lack of confidence, inability to understand the subject matter, lack of time, language problem, incomplete reading and stress. These themes are described using quotes of the students during the focus groups.

### Theme-I- Lack of confidence

This theme emerged in both focus groups. Students perceived that they developed a lack of confidence at the beginning of the Programme itself. This could probably be due to negativism exhibited by the seniors, with regards the subject matter and possibility of luck in getting through the examination. Could it mean that they were inferring that the evaluation system was not objective enough, is a matter that needs to be investigated indepth.

#### One student stated that:

"Our senior tells that what ever was your percentage in the PUC and how well you are fluent in English passing in first year at the first attempt is difficult. Because the syllabus is vast and luck also should be there."

#### Another student added:

"One of my senior showed me one girl who failed for more than 5 times in the first year and struggling to clear her subjects, how you would clear it?"

### Theme-II- Inability to understand the subject matter

This theme emerged from both focus group discussions, where students described the differences in the teaching methods by the medical and nursing faculty.

#### One student stated that:

"Doctors handle medical related subjects very briefly and they teach very fast. Since majority of us come from Kerala and our first language was Malayalam till 10th



standard, we cannot follow the teaching properly. Apart from this doctors maintain distance where as nursing teachers' make us to understand the concept while teaching and we feel free to ask doubts with them".

**Another student added that:**

"While handling classes nursing faculty explain step by step and at the end they ask us whether we have understood the concept or not which was not done by medical faculty".

**Theme-III- Lack of time**

Nursing education is a practice discipline; the nursing students will learn the subject matter by doing the things and practicing skills in the clinical area<sup>8</sup>. Cumulative record requirement was another issue expressed by both the focus group. The cumulative record is an evidence of practice done by student to achieve a particular competency. However several students are likely to report this as stressful if both theory and practical demands are made on them simultaneously.

**One student said that:**

"We were placed in a partial block. We required to fulfill our syllabus requirement like care plans, case studies and procedure demonstration as per our cumulative record in the clinicals and also assignments in the class hours. Complete 8 hours we are packed (morning clinicals and afternoon classes) with out a single hour to relax. Hence we are not able to cope with".

**Another student added that:**

"We plan to read daily what we have learned in the class as well as in the clinicals but we won't get sufficient time because of writing work which we have".

**Theme-IV-Language problem**

This theme also emerged from both focus group that some of the student nurses were not able to understand English or speak it fluently. Nursing is a profession that could place additional stress such as being able to communicate effectively in the local language as well as master English the spoken and medium of instruction.

**One student said that:**

"I studied in local language. When I came to nursing I was exposed to English hence I was not able to understand the content but I used to mug up. In the

examination when applied questions were asked I am not able to understand".

**Theme-V- Incomplete reading**

During focus group, students compared their study experiences in nursing college with that of their school and general college days.

**One student said that:**

"During our school and college time we had unit test every week which made us to read regularly and we never felt difficult during our final examination time. Where as here we read during the time of internal assessment test hence for the exams we are not able to complete the portions".

**Another student added:**

"The combination of subjects (Anatomy and Physiology, Biochemistry and Nutrition) in each paper makes it difficult for us to complete the portion within 15 days of our study leave (which is same in 2nd year, 3rd year, and 4th year who have 2 subjects, 4 subjects etc)".

**Theme-VI- Stress**

Students often found their status as students caused them stress. It was expressed from both focus groups.

**One student stated that:**

"Majority of us stay in the hostel and we are away from our parents, we have problems like home sickness, adjustmental problems, academic problems and restrictions in the hostel. Hence we face stress in our day to day life".

**DISCUSSION**

First year nursing students undergo a major transition. They have ten subjects with 930 theory hours and 450 practical hours. The literature reviewed for the present study showed that student nurses face lot of stress which is a possible hindrance for their learning in turn which might be the cause for academic failure. The present study was a preliminary attempt to address the reasons for academic failure among nursing students in Indian setting.

The findings of the present study brought to light six themes as reasons for academic failure. They were lack of confidence, inability to understand the subject



matter, lack of time, language problem, incomplete reading and stress. With regard to lack of confidence, nursing students clearly expressed that in the beginning of the academic year itself they had developed a lack of confidence, that they were not able to pass in the first year. Developing confidence should be facilitated by the process of nursing education. With regard to inability to understand the subject matter, students expressed that nursing faculty were very good in making them understand the subject matter in simple terms while handling the classes. To support this finding there were no studies. With regard to lack of time, students clearly said that there was a difficulty in completing their academic related work in time due to their busy schedule; similar to findings of Carson and Kuipe's study<sup>3</sup>. With regard to language problem, majority of nursing students expressed that they studied in local language up to tenth standard whereas in nursing the medium of instruction is in English. Hence the language problem in nursing is an issue of concern. All students expressed that they were not able to read completely before the examination, similar to findings of Fiona Timmins and Kaliszer<sup>5</sup>. With regard to stress, students expressed that, regularly with one or the other reasons they encounter with stress, similar to findings of previous studies<sup>3-5</sup>.

#### **Recommendations:**

From the study findings the following recommendations were made to students and nurse educators.

#### **Students:**

- Study systematically and regularly
- Make a point to read the lessons before hand
- Keep a dictionary with you while reading
- Develop self-confidence-it means faith in your own strength and faith in your studies
- Have an intense desire to excel the studies
- Study in groups with peers
- Draw a time table from time to time and study accordingly.

#### **Nurse educators:**

- Plan full block classes or clinicals
- Conduct mentor programme for weak students
- Maintain good student and teacher relationship

- Conduct stress management classes before commencement of examination.

#### **CONCLUSIONS**

From the findings of the present study it can be concluded the more concerted efforts would need to be made by nursing faculty to help students address the various causes of academic failure. Nurse educators could also take a proactive step in identifying students with possible increased levels of stress, assisting them, and helping them to cope with these stress levels positively thus improving their results.

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