

## **Abstract**

**Background:** This paper describes the experiences of underrepresented BSc. Nursing students' in realising the dream of becoming a nurse in one university. In the past ten years, pre-registration nurse education has become established within higher education in Ireland. This development includes promoting access and inclusion of students from traditionally underrepresented groups in higher education. A third of nursing students currently access places on programmes through routes specifically designed for underrepresented groups.

**Methods:** A qualitative descriptive study design provided an opportunity for student voices to be heard. Ethical approval was sought and granted. Eleven students were interviewed nearing completion of a four year BSc. Nursing programme. Data analysis followed a thematic approach, in generating themes.

**Findings:** Three themes emerged from the data: taking the first steps; finding a way and getting through. Findings highlight participants' challenges in balancing study, clinical practice and family life in achieving and realising their dream of becoming a nurse.

**Conclusion** This study illustrates the nature and complexities of participants' experiences throughout the BSc Nursing programmes towards becoming university graduates, eligible for registration as a nurse. Students from underrepresented groups bring rich and diverse life experiences in preparation for and becoming caring practitioners. It highlights the individuality within participants' experiences and draws attention to the value of personalised support for students. An opportunity to encourage the development of emotional intelligence needs to be fostered within nurse education programmes. Creating positive learning environments is critical to supporting student understanding of compassionate patient centred care. Findings have relevance for global curriculum design and structures to support individual student centred engagement. Further research is required to consider how best to support students from underrepresented groups.

## **Keywords**

Student nurses, education, underrepresented, nursing programmes

## **Title: REALISING THE DREAM OF BECOMING A NURSE: UNDERREPRESENTED BSc NURSING STUDENTS EXPERIENCES**

### **Introduction**

Over the last decade, pre-registration nurse education has become established within higher education in Ireland, with commencement of a 4 year, level 8 honours Bachelor of Science (BSc) nursing preregistration degree programme in 2002. Concurrently, the Government of Ireland through the Higher Education Authority (HEA) developed and published several policy documents, reaffirming the commitment to widening participation, seeking to include students from groups traditionally underrepresented in higher education. Underrepresentation may have different classifications across the globe. Within the Irish context the term is used to describe students who are socially, economically or culturally underrepresented in higher education, mature students and students with a disability (Higher Education Authority 2004, 2008). Students can now access nurse education programmes through routes designated for such groups. Given that a third of students access Irish nursing programmes through these routes, it is acknowledged that perspective students may fulfil more than one designated criterion for entry.

In Ireland, BSc Nursing programmes integrate theory and practice throughout the four years as stipulated by national standards and requirements (An Bord Altranais, 2005; Nursing and Midwifery Board Ireland, 2016). Clinical placements are key to programme delivery but may

be a source of stress (Bickhoff et al., 2016). In year one, students are introduced to a first clinical placement after 8 weeks theory. This integrated pattern continues throughout years 1, 2 and 3. Year 4 students undertake a 36 week internship placement, during which students have joint status as university students and health service employees. Practice placement involves working a 39 hour week across 24 hour shift patterns, attaining competencies in meeting requirements for eligibility to register with the professional body (Nursing and Midwifery Board Ireland, 2016). The programme structures may be challenging for students in managing life, work and study. These challenges may be intensified for students from underrepresented groups as they balance study, life and practice.

Previous research within an Irish context has focused broadly on the experience of mature students (Fleming and Mc Kee, 2005; Keogh et al., 2009; O' Brien et al., 2009). To date, little published research has explored the views of underrepresented nursing students. This study therefore, aims to contribute to understanding the experiences of underrepresented student groups on nursing programmes within a university setting.

### **Design**

The study followed a qualitative descriptive approach which has been used across health care disciplines (Dawson et al., 2012; Killam and Heerschap, 2013 and O'Brien et al., 2016). Qualitative research designs are gaining increased credibility in providing rich data informing the phenomena being researched (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011). Qualitative descriptive design provides a comprehensive straight forward approach and summary of events in 'everyday terms' remaining close to the data Sandelowski (2010); Savin-Baden and Howell Major, (2013) and is valuable in remaining close to the detailed description of participants every day life. This design offered an opportunity to listen to the voices of underrepresented students as central to the study (O' Brien et al., 2016).

### **Ethics**

Ethics approval for this study was sought and obtained through the university research ethics committee (EHSREC 11-49). At the outset, the role of the researcher as a team member and inherent power relationships between student and supervisor was acknowledged (Jones et al., 2014; Maxwell, 2012; Silverman, 2013). A gatekeeper role was established in recognition of balancing these power relationships. A similar approach was taken by Bradbury-Jones et al., (2011) when interviewing nursing students. The gatekeeper had no involvement in assessment or supervision of participants throughout the study. The gatekeeper emailed two student cohorts inviting potential participants from underrepresented groups to consider volunteering. Information sheets and consent forms were circulated in advance and the importance of choice was emphasised before consent to participate was obtained. Participation in the study was completely voluntary. Data were managed in accordance with data protection guidelines (Government of Ireland, 2003). Pseudonyms were used to protect confidentiality and anonymity.

### **Participant student profile**

The study took place in a department within an Irish university with over 450 pre-registration undergraduate students. It is possible that participants were eligible to enter the BSc programme through more than one entry route. Students were self-selecting in meeting the inclusion criteria from underrepresented groups. Eleven students volunteered to be interviewed from two cohorts from a possible 220 students. These students were nearing completion of their four year programme. All students were female, over 28 years and eight had dependents.

## Data collection and analysis

Participants participated in one to one semi structured interviews which took place at a venue and time of their choice. Interviews were conducted by the third author (DOS) and lasted up to 60 minutes. Interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed verbatim and checked for accuracy. Data collection and analysis was a continuous process until data saturation was reached. Each interview transcript was analysed separately following Burnard's (1991) framework. The interview transcripts were read repeatedly in seeking themes that represented the data. Emergent themes were initially identified by DOS and then grouped together by all authors leading to a detailed description. Finally all authors discussed, reviewed and agreed three final themes that represented the data enhancing rigour within the study. Morse et al., (2002) believe that a study is trustworthy when the researcher remains close to the data and can demonstrate how themes evolved.

## Findings

Three themes describe the experiences of students from underrepresented groups. These are:

- Taking the first steps
- Finding a way
- Getting through

These themes describe student experiences in realising their dream of becoming a nurse. The findings are illustrated using quotes according to the pseudonym aligned with each interview.

### Taking the first steps

Students described taking time in working through application processes and subsequently accepting nursing programme places. The interrelated elements of family influences, financial implications and confidence are shared.

For some students a nursing qualification was described as a 'dream', for others the choice was about wishing to gain a higher education qualification. One student commented,

*...I had a dream to be a nurse...people always said I had the potential to be a nurse (Julia)*

Another student spoke about getting a college education aware of financial implications,

*I wanted to go to college, had being thinking about it for a long time before I plucked up the courage to apply. I had to sort money and family out. I had been home with the kids but I wanted the challenge (Emer)*

Whereas the significance of receiving a place on a nursing programme was illustrated by Irene,

*Some people just finish school then go to college ..... For me it wasn't like that, it was like getting a place on the X Factor (Irene)*

One student portrayed a naivety about programme realities,

*You are so innocent going into it you don't know what is ahead of you. You don't know about the hours and the placement (Julia)*

Students described finding out about the reality of a nursing programme,

*There was a lot of stuff I didn't know when I applied for nursing. I didn't know the hours involved, the course structures, semesters... what was expected in the modules, I was worried about the requirements to pass (Irene)*

A steep learning curve was described,

*I had an awful lot of catching up to do in the first few theoretical modules, physics, chemistry was new. But when I got over that I was fine (Jessie)*

As students began their studies and became familiar with the university environment, they then prepared for the first clinical experience,

*My first placement was very daunting....but I learned loads (Brona)*

Whereas another student expands recalling her distress regarding nursing practice realities,

*I remember my first placement, I went home crying thinking what did I get myself into (Millie)*

And another spoke about family choices,

*The choices between family and study are tough and fraught with guilt. As a mother you want to do things yourself but have to accept that this is not always possible (Emer)*

### **Finding a way**

Students are challenged to finding ways to move and navigate through the challenges in combining academic study and placement demands. Those students with families and dependants illustrate these competing demands in managing and balancing life.

Students described the struggle and the realities of family life impacting on learning and results,

*I know I could have done better but I just didn't have the time. There were times when I could have picked up the books, but I didn't. I had to make choices (Selina)*

Support from family, partners, spouses and friends, was critical in helping balance the demanding life of student nurses,

*I divided and organised my time, I had study time and I had home time. I had great help from my parents collecting the kids from school and helping at home (Freda)*

Similar skills are drawn on when managing part time work while being a full time student. One student described daily college life, making the best of the limited time available,

*When lectures finish at five, I go straight home and am working by seven. I am not hanging around on campus to study or have coffee. I have to manage my time. I only get to the library if there is a break between lectures (Gillian)*

This balance is subtle in managing a fine line between being able to meet programme requirements and making choices about study and life. In some instances student health suffers as some students described striving to make ends meet,

*I worked for two years without a break, I was on placement from Monday to Friday. I would go home, go to bed for few hours, and then go out to work Friday and Saturday night in a nursing home. I would come home at 9am on Sunday, go to bed and then force myself to get up again at 3 o'clock. I had to try and eat, do my academic work and try and be back in bed for a least 11 o'clock to be up again for 7 am for placement. My health suffered severely and I just couldn't keep it up the weekend job after two years (Irene)*

Financial pressures were evident throughout,

*I had bills to pay, loans to pay I had financial stress which for me was 100% on the Richter scale (Selina)*

Pressures in managing family life and placement was seen when Emer speaks,

*It's a nightmare. Shifts are just so long. My partner has the children all weekend. It is all the late nights. He takes them to school, brings them out to and from the crèche. I have to have everything completely ready for him in the morning. I have all the bags packed. That's what I spend my night doing when I get home at the end of a twelve hour shift. Just getting ready for the next day (Emer)*

### **Getting through**

Students describe an ability to seek and accept support enabling them to continue with their studies. Students identify a growing confidence during the internship. Getting through to the end of the programme brings a sense of pride and achievement.

A sense of determination and commitment emerges throughout the data. As one student commented on working through personal crisis,

*It was really hard but stopping wasn't an option. I would have to be in a hospital bed to stop. I was determined to finish. I knew there were loads of supports in the university even though I never used them before. I now use all of them (Freda)*

Individual arrangements during difficult times enabled one student to continue when sharing her experiences,

*I was pregnant on placement, then had my baby and came back to college 3 weeks later for lectures. The support was brilliant both from the university it was tough. I found it was as simple as*

*saying I need help, not being afraid of saying it and everyone was brilliant (Brona)*

Students accessed supports available through the university following bereavement,

*I received great support from the university when my Mum passed away suddenly in first year and that meant a lot. I used the counselling services which helped (Millie)*

Towards the end of the internship students spoke about drawing on all reserves in managing pressures and expectations. Managing study, work, home and family life placed pressure on students,

*In fourth year it was hard to multi task. I found it exhausting but I just wanted to do it so much. You had to be on placement and focus on placement and competencies and assignments. It tests coping mechanisms and stress levels which are needed for nursing (Jessie)*

Students described a growing acceptance of what is required to complete the programme. Students seem to grow in confidence and pride nearing the end point.

*The stress of 4th year, the money, the job situation, I have too much invested after 3 years to say right I am going to walk away at this stage but it takes determination to stay (Julie)*

Another student clarified,

*Those days in the university doing PRT [protected reflective time] helped me during the last few months allowing us to talk about experiences, things that we might have seen that upset us or just the pressure I learnt how to manage and work through these emotions (Emer)*

Near the end of the programme students demonstrate an increasing ability to manage personal expectations to succeed. Some students refocus towards achieving the goal of becoming a nurse rather than academic results. Moving through this period, managing the pressure and submitting a final academic project, sees the emergence of a growing sense of confidence, as students begin to look towards the future. Selina shared her feelings,

*Studying nursing gave me more confidence in myself, I wanted to be a care assistant because I wasn't confident enough to think that I could be responsible enough but the programme has changed all that (Selina)*

Student commitment and determination weaved through the findings which is closely linked to a sense of pride in achievement,

*I really enjoyed it. It was brilliant and I am so happy I did it, but it's funny, it's all like a dream now (Esther)*

Finally Freda says,

*I think for me going back to college fundamentally changed me..... I am a different person...I have more confidence in myself. I*

*am highly motivated now whereas I never was before....I had to do it for me, I know I can help people. I knew I could do it..... I am wearing my navy pants [Registered Nurses Uniform] and I am really proud of myself. I like being a nurse (Freda)*

## **Discussion**

Participants describe a growing sense of pride in achieving and realising their dream to become a nurse. This study provides insights and highlights the challenges and struggles in managing study, practice and family life for students. Participants detail a process of adjusting to the university environment and balancing the realities of academic timetables while managing home life. Similar recurrent themes are reported in the literature by Fleming and Mc Kee, (2005) Hinsliff-Smith et al., 2012; Keogh et al., 2009; O' Brien et al., 2009). Adjusting to university life may be challenging for all students and is well documented across international literature from Australia (Carolan and Kruger, 2011; Salamonson et al., 2014) and from England (Hamshire et al., 2013a,b). Perhaps for underrepresented students adjustment is even more complex. Participants identify the necessity to work part time to supplement income as highlighted by Salamonson et al., (2009). Part time working commitments may have a negative impact on performance (Rochford et al., 2009).

This study identifies the value that students place on university support services in getting through the programme (Banks et al., 2012; Hamshire et al., 2013a,b; Ooms et al., 2013; Ross et al., 2014). Students may benefit from support structures within universities and underrepresented students may be no different. Student support is valuable in enabling the development of caring practices as reported in The Mid Staffordshire inquiry (Francis, 2013).

Findings indicate that participants have developed life skills to balance academic and family life demands towards enabling programme completion (Carolan-Olah, 2014; Rankin 2013). Such development could be seen to have a likeness to the attributes within emotional intelligence. Goleman (1998) defines emotional intelligence as an ability to express, monitor and manage one's own feelings and those of others in positive ways. Developing these attributes may minimise responses to stress in overcoming challenges towards developing resilience (Bulmer-Smith et al., 2009; Rankin, 2013). High levels of emotional intelligence may increase wellbeing in female students (Ruiz-Aranda et al., 2014). From an American stance, Jones-Schenk and Harper (2014), report that students with significantly higher levels of emotional intelligence remain on nursing programmes. Furthermore, the development of emotional intelligence potentially assists nurses in becoming compassionate carers (Rankin, 2013). Students from underrepresented groups bring rich and diverse life experiences which may enable them to become caring practitioners.

Creating positive learning environments is therefore, critical to fostering student growth in promoting compassionate patient centred care (Healy and Mc Sharry, 2011). Reflection is a strategy that has been promoted in supporting students to develop person centred care (Bulman, 2013, Johns 2017). Rees (2013) reports that reflective activities help final year students manage the emotional challenges of nursing. Similarly, our findings show that students identify the relevance of guided group reflection in supporting personal and professional development. Our department has developed guided reflection, recognising self-care as a process which contributes to developing emotional intelligence in becoming competent caring practitioners (Johns, 2013).

Nurse educators' face challenges in designing curricula meeting regulatory requirements while providing flexibility in supporting students in balancing work life and practice demands. A view supported by Australian research (Carolan-Olah et al., 2014).

The study illustrates individual participant experiences and challenges impacting on the BSc Nursing programme journey. The primary aim of the study was to seek the views of underrepresented students.

At first glance it may appear easy to classify or 'fit' students into one or other unrepresented group. The reality however, presents a more complex picture (Higher Education Authority 2008). Caution needs to be taken in labelling individuals and groups. The findings, however, may have relevance and value for nurse education development and practice beyond the context of the study.

### **Limitations**

It is acknowledged that this a small scale qualitative descriptive study with eleven volunteer participants from two cohorts in one university in Ireland. As with any qualitative research, caution is needed in generalising findings across a global context. The voluntary nature of participation was critical to the study and details of student route of entry were not a primary focus. Students may have been eligible to apply for admission to nursing programmes through one or more entry routes. Nevertheless, the findings offer a rich description of the world of the BSc Nursing students from underrepresented groups. Data were collected nearing programme completion, perhaps, at a time the students could visualise the programme end point.

### **Conclusions and recommendations**

Throughout the study, participants identified the value of individualised support in helping them to get through the programme. Government policy has focused on fairness and equity in accessing broader entry routes. Attention is required to provide individual and responsive support for underrepresented students. Research is required to examine the experiences of students who are unsuccessful. The voices of such students have yet to be heard and could contribute to deepening understanding of underrepresented students' world. A longitudinal study tracking these student experiences from a national and international perspective may be worthwhile.

The findings have relevance nationally as the Irish Nursing and Midwifery Board and government agencies finalise the roll out of revised curriculum programme standards and requirements (Nursing and Midwifery Board Ireland, 2016). Insights from this study have global relevance for curriculum designers in developing structures to support individual student centred engagement. Education strategies that foster development of emotional intelligence and resilience need to be included in curricula. Nurse educators need to develop structures and supports that enable students from underrepresented groups to manage study, life and practice in realising their potential for success in becoming a nurse.

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