Becoming socialized into a new professional role: LPN to BN student nurses’ experiences with legitimation

Sherri Melrose,† Jean Miller,† Kathryn Gordon,‡ and Katherine J. Janzen§

†Centre for Nursing and Health Studies, Athabasca University, Athabasca, AB, Canada T9S 3A3
‡Mental Health and Addictions Services, Foothills Medical Centre, Calgary, AB, Canada T2N 2T9
§School of Nursing, Faculty of Health and Community Studies, Mount Royal University, Calgary, AB, Canada T3E 6K6

Received 11 October 2011; Revised 3 January 2012; Accepted 11 January 2012

Abstract

This paper presents findings from a qualitative descriptive study that explored the professional socialization experiences of Licensed Practical Nurses (LPNs) who attended an online university to earn a Baccalaureate degree in nursing (BN), a prerequisite to writing the Canadian Registered Nurse (RN) qualifying exam. The project was framed from a constructivist worldview and Haas and Shaffir’s theory of legitimation. Participants were 27 nurses in a Post-LPN to BN program who came from across Canada to complete required practicums. Data was collected from digital recordings of four focus groups held in different cities. Transcripts were analyzed for themes and confirmed with participants through member checking. Two overarching themes were identified and are presented to explain how these unique adult learners sought to legitimize their emerging identity as Registered Nurses (RNs). First, Post-LPN to BN students need little, if any, further legitimation to affirm their identities as “nurse.” Second, practicum interactions with instructors and new clinical experiences are key socializing agents.
Vocationally educated Licensed Practical Nurses (LPNs) who enter an online university to upgrade their credentials by earning a Bachelor of Nursing (BN) degree can find the experience of socializing into a new and more complex professional role challenging [1, 2]. Professional socialization is the process of learning a professional role and emerging as a member of an occupational culture [3]. A key element within the overarching process of professional socialization is legitimation or the experience of gaining a sense of affirmation from socializing agents [4, 5]. Where problems occurred in seeking new clinical experiences for Post LPN to BN students was the variance in their previous experience. Licensed Practical Nurses (LPNs) who enter a university to advance their education through seeking a Baccalaureate of Nursing degree often find the experience of socializing into the new professional role challenging. In a descriptive study that explored this experience with professional socialization, the authors explored those socializing factors which contributed to students' feelings of legitimacy in the growth of their new professional identities. Participants were 27 Post LPN to BN students from a Canadian university who attended a practicum on an acute hospital unit. Implications for both nursing educators and Post LPN to BN students include respect for the legitimacy (Klossner, 2008) students have already developed as practicing professional nurses.