

Original research

Prevalence and factors associated with adjustment to learning environment; A study among first-year nursing students at four government nursing schools in Sri Lanka

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Abstract

Introduction

Adjustment to the school of nursing as a newcomer is crucial for academic progress and a successful career in the future as well as a successful life as an individual. To be effective nurses in the future, the new students should enjoy an optimal level of psychological and physical well-being, a spiritual sense of serving the society and the best practice of study and work. This study aimed to assess the level and factors associated with adjustment to the new learning environment among first-year nursing students of government nursing schools in Sri Lanka.

Methods

A descriptive survey was conducted in a random sample of 420 first-year nursing students from the schools of nursing of Ampara, Batticaloa, Jaffna and Vavuniya, using a pre-tested self-administered questionnaire comprised of Students Adjustment to the College Questionnaire (SACQ).


Results

The total adjustment was found to have a low value among the majority of the participants (98.8%) compared with the sample validated for SACQ questionnaire. Similar trends were seen in all categorical parameters: academic adjustment (91.3%), social adjustment (91.3 %), personal adjustment (51.2%) and institutional adjustment (98.1%). Gender, ethnicity, age, receiving psychological support and receiving academic assistance with adjustment were found to have a significant association ($P < 0.05$). Personal factors (61.67%) were reported as the most difficult in adjustment during the first academic year. Using professional knowledge in clinical practice (62.2%), socializing (60.8%), regular attendance to clinical training (65.5%) and receiving learning support (60.2%) were perceived as the most difficult in their adjustment.

Conclusion

The majority of the students had a poor adjustment to the learning environment. Institutional maladjustment was most prevalent. The personal factors were greatly affecting for adjustment at the first academic year. Continued learning support, supervision and socialization programs need to be strengthened in the nursing school environment and in the clinical learning environment.

Keywords: nursing students, adjustment, learning environment, adjustment factors

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Introduction

The preparation of nursing students to become professional nurses is challenging. The first year of studies of a nursing student is critical and determines how the rest of the study years might proceed. Psychological distress and poor adjustment among nursing students are important issues in nursing education [1]. Adjustment problems are more common during the first year, during which most of the students suffer from various adjustment problems which affect emotional, physical, social well-being of the student [2]. The level of adjustment of first-year BSc nursing students in India was poor revealing that 80% had severe adjustment problems [3]. Similarly, in another study, 84% had moderate adjustment problems, and 16% had severe adjustment problems [4]. The sources of maladjustment to the learning environment among nursing students include unclear assignments [2] and excessive tasks of academic studies [5]. In clinical practice, lack of experience, fear of making mistakes and worrying about possibly harming a patient are just a few of the stressors for beginners [6]. Dissatisfaction with the training environment and unavailability of counselling services in school is significantly associated with the coping abilities of the students [7].

Adjustment problems affect the health and academic functions of the student and unless dealt with effectively, nursing students face high levels of stress; they feel passive and self-condemned [8]. Further, college adjustment can be predictive of academic performance in college and retention rates [9]. Statistics from the Ministry of Health show that among nursing students in Sri Lanka, the dropout rate from basic nursing diplomas accounts for 1.5 % of recent recruitments. The statistics of schools of nursing reveal that during the past six years, the students' drop rates in the school of nursing Jaffna, Ampara, Batticaloa and Vavuniya are 17.4%, 7.5%, 5.3%, and 1.5 %, respectively.

The global shortage of nurses intensifies the challenge of recruiting more nurses. Therefore, nursing educators in different countries need to collaborate their efforts in solving this problem because nursing schools are responsible for supplying sufficient numbers of skilled nurses for both national and international healthcare services. The discovery of factors affecting the adjustment of new students, particularly those related to academics, will help teachers to design appropriate strategies for teaching in both classroom and clinical

settings. Therefore, this study aimed to investigate the level of adjustment and associated factors for adjustment to the learning environment among first-year nursing students in Sri Lanka.

Methodology

We conducted a descriptive survey to investigate the prevalence and factors associated with adjustment among first-year nursing students at Schools of Nursing, Vavuniya, Jaffna, Batticaloa and Ampara. Based on the demographic formula, considering the estimated percentage as 50% and 10% non-responses, the final sample size was 422 participants. The proportion representing each school is estimated based on the available number of students in each nursing school. In order to gain the balance, the systematic random sampling method was used to select the sample from each school.

The self-administered questionnaire, which was derived from the validated Student Adaptation to College Questionnaire (SACQ) developed by Baker and Siryk (1999), consisted of 67 self-rating responses and was used to assess the students' level of adjustment. The second part of the questionnaire was literature supported and developed by the researcher to identify the potential associated factors with adjustment problem. Data collection was done by the third year nursing students of each nursing school. Level of adjustment is categorized as good adjustment (488 and above), moderate adjustment (361-487) and low adjustment (67-360) [10]. Data analysis was done with the SPSS software version 20. Both descriptive and inferential statistics were used. The nonparametric tests were used for inferential statistics. Mann Whitney U and Kruskal Wallis tests were used for assessing the significance while Spearman's correlation test was used to assess the correlation between factors associated with adjustment and level of adjustment. Finally, the results were interpreted as a statistically significant association if $p < 0.05$ and 95% of confidence interval. Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the Ethics and Research Committee, International Institute of Health Sciences (IIHS). Data was collected with the permission of institutional heads. Participants' consent was obtained to participate the stud

Results

Socio-demographic characteristics of the participants

The response rate was 99.52% (n= 420). The majority of the participants were females (Table 1). The mean age of the study group was 22.5 years (SD \pm 1.07), while a large proportion of the students belonged to the age group of 21-22 years. Over half of the participants were Sinhalese and Buddhists. Most of the students (n=201, 47.9%) were residing in hostels. Over one-third of the study group (n=156, 37.1%) travelled less than 50 km to attend nursing school. The majority of the respondents spent their leisure time in college chatting with friends. Regarding psychological support, the majority of respondents never received counselling (n=225, 53.6%), while (n= 203, 48.3%) of respondents never received academic assistance after joining the school.

Adjustment among the Respondents

Low levels of total adjustment were reported by 415 (98.8%) participants, while none reported a good level of total adjustment (Table 2). In addition, low adjustment levels were reported by the majority of the participants for academic adjustment (91.7%), social adjustment (97.1%), personal emotional adjustment (51.2%) and institutional adjustment (98.1%).

The majority of the participants (n=259; 61.7 %) reported that personal and emotional factors were the most difficult in their adjustment. Regular attendance to clinical training (65.5%), keeping optimistic attitudes (62.2%), and dealing with health problems (56.9%) were reported as mostly affecting personal and emotional factors to adjustment.

Among academic factors, adjusting to the heavy workload (62.2 %), managing study activities (50.4 %), using professional knowledge and skills in the clinical setting (62.2%) and keeping interested in the clinical work (58.6%) were reported as most difficult to adjust. Considering the social factors affecting adjustment, socializing and making friends (60.8%), being away from home was reported by more respondents (55.3 %). Receiving learning support (60.2%), psychological support (59.7%) and infrastructure facilities (57.6%) were reported as the factors favourable for adjustment to the nursing school.

Table 1: Socio-demographic characteristics of the participants

Variable	Frequency	Percentage (%)
<i>Gender</i>		
Female	318	75.7
<i>Ethnicity</i>		
Sinhalese	231	55.0
Tamil	162	38.6
Muslim	27	6.4
<i>Religion</i>		
Buddhism	231	55.0
Hinduism	142	33.8
Islam	28	6.7
Christianity	19	4.5
Other	6	1.5
<i>Age group</i>		
21- 22 years	223	53.1
23-24 years	180	42.9
25-26 years	15	3.6
Above 27 years	2	0.5
<i>Place of staying for training</i>		
Own home	64	15.2
College Hostel	201	47.9
Boarding place	127	30.2
Rented home	22	5.2
Other	6	1.5
<i>Province of permanent residence</i>		
Northern	79	18.8
Eastern	174	41.4
North Central	32	7.6
Central	58	13.8
North Western	1	0.2
Sabaragamuwa	1	0.2
Uva	66	15.7
Southern	8	1.9
Western	1	0.2
<i>Distance from the nursing school to the residence</i>		
< 50 km	156	37.1

Mean score of total adjustment was statistically significant with only the staying place of the students (p=0.001) (Table 3). Furthermore, place of staying is significantly associated with academic adjustment and institutional adjustment. Those who reside at home were more adjusted academically, socially and institutionally than those who are in a college hostel, boarding place or a rented house. There is a statistically significant difference in the academic adjustment scores with gender (p=0.012) and staying place (p=0.001), indicating that female students face much more difficulty in

adjusting academically to college than male students. Sinhalese students face much more difficulty with institutional adjustment than non-Sinhalese students. Among the subscales, the social adjustment is statistically significant with the students' age group ($p=0.033$), leisure time activity ($p=0.008$), and receiving

psychological support ($p=0.008$). Personal and emotional adjustment is significant ($p=0.015$) with receiving academic support from peers. Those who received academic assistance when they needed it are more adjusted than the students who did not receive it.

Table 2: Distribution of the level of adjustment for overall and subscale

Scale	Good adjustment			Moderate adjustment			Low adjustment			Number of items
	score	frequency	%	score	frequency	%	score	frequency	%	
Total adjustment	≥ 488			361-487	5	1.2	67-360	415	98.8	
Academic adjustment	≥ 173			122-172	35	8.3	24-121	385	91.7	24
Social adjustment	≥ 156			104-155	12	2.9	19-103	408	97.1	20
Personal emotional adjustment	≥ 111	1	0.2	71-110	204	48.6	14-70	215	51.2	15
Institutional adjustment	≥ 61			46-60	8	1.9	8-45	412	98.1	15

Table 3: Distribution of Adjustment among selected socio-demographic variables

Socio-demographic variable	Total Adjustment (P value)	Academic Adjustment (P value)	Social Adjustment (P value)	Personal/Adj ustment (P value)	Institutional Adjustment (P value)
Gender	0.151	0.012	0.755	0.277	0.363
Age Group	0.082	0.231	0.033	0.821	0.280
Ethnicity	0.481	0.088	0.794	0.736	0.001
Residence province	0.589	0.797	0.722	0.341	0.023
Staying place	0.001	0.001	0.154	0.061	0.008
Leisure time activity	0.183	0.089	0.008	0.676	0.320
Receiving psychological support	0.360	0.277	0.008	0.765	0.109
Receiving academic assistance	0.922	0.282	0.569	0.015	0.633

Discussion

We found that the adjustment to college of nursing was low among the majority of the participants while gender, ethnicity, age, receiving psychological support and receiving academic assistance had significant associations with various subscales of adjustment. Personal factors were reported as the most difficult in adjustment during the first academic year.

The greater prevalence of low adjustment is in line with the prevalence reported in nursing students in India, which was 80 % having severe adjustment problems [3]. Similarly, a study in Ethiopia found 80.8% prevalence of adjustment problems [10]. Respondents of the present study had low adjustment for all four subscales; academic adjustment, social adjustment, personal

adjustment and institutional adjustment. Of them, academic and social adjustment problems were found to be the main problems, similar to the findings of a study conducted in Ethiopia [10],

The acquisition of professional knowledge and skills in the clinical setting was reported to be a major challenge in adjustment. The result is in line with other studies conducted among Sri Lankan nursing undergraduates [7]. Most of the students in the present study reported difficulty in keeping an interest in the clinical works, which is similar to previous observations in India [11]. In addition, participants reported that socializing and making new friends were also stressors, consistent with previous studies [12]. Similar to the present study, a

previous study found that dealing with completely new and difficult social relationships was a barrier to resilience [13]. The majority experienced regular attendance to the clinical training difficult and this finding is in line with a previous study in Sri Lanka [14]. Similar to the Sri Lankan study done among nursing undergraduates, struggling to keep optimistic and positive attitudes on training is noted in the present study [15]. Dealing with health problems was a prevalent factor of adjustment which is similar to what was observed in the study in India [12]. Among the factors, receiving psychological assistance led to their adjustment in line with previous studies conducted in Sri Lanka [7,14]. The present study shows that the statistically significant difference in the academic adjustment scores for male and female students is similar to the study conducted in Ethiopia [10].

In contrast to the present study, the study in India [2], reported there is a significant association of adjustment

problem with students' age. The present study shows that students from Northern and Eastern provinces are more institutionally adjusted than other provinces.

The four major adjustment areas - academic, social, personal and psychological, and institutional - as well as total adjustment scores indicated that the respondents of the study face serious adjustment difficulties in government nursing schools in Northern and Eastern provinces of Sri Lanka. Female students were highly challenged in academic adjustment compared to male students. Sinhalese students were more challenged in adjusting to the institution than others. Among the identified associated factors using professional knowledge in clinical practice, adjusting to heavy workload, socializing and making friends, regular attendance to clinical training and receiving learning support to be an active learner was more problematic for students' adjustment to the new learning environment.

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