ABSTRACT

With the projected shortage of nursing faculty, formalized programs are needed to provide mentorship programs that will encourage and support faculty as they move from the role of novice to expert educator. The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore the experience of protégés participating in a mentorship program for novice faculty. An interpretive phenomenological research study was conducted to illuminate the meaning of the experiences of the protégés participating in the program. The study of the experience of protégés participating in a mentor-protégé program led to the emergence of three main themes: Creating a Meaningful Mentor-Protégé Relationship, Transitioning as a New Nurse Educator, and the Mentor-Protégé Program—Lessons Learned. Data from the study will provide insight into the meaning of receiving mentorship in the role of novice nurse educator.

Literary context

For decades, the literature has documented the use of mentoring as a strategy to retain nurses. Several authors have investigated mentoring in the practice setting and have reported relationships between mentoring, retention, and clinical competence (Barton, Gowdy, & Hawthorne, 2005; Hurst & Koplin-Baucum, 2003; Nelson, Godfrey, & Purdy, 2004). Other authors anecdotally described their mentoring programs, noting similar results (Bally, 2007; Funderburk, 2008; Nickle, 2007).

Mentoring as a strategy to retain neophyte nurse educators has also been studied. The literature abounds with descriptions of these mentoring programs. Morin and Ash-
ton (2004) reviewed the literature regarding faculty orientation programs for nurse educators and identified several commonalities among the successful programs. These included a prolonged orientation over a substantial time frame, a focus on the role of the academician, an inviting environment, and an identified mentor. Other authors found that meeting off campus, having a scholarship day at home, and peer mentoring were also valuable (Cangelosi, 2004; Jacelon, Zucker, Staccacini, & Henneman, 2003; Smith & Zsohar, 2007).

Another common theme in mentoring literature is related to personal characteristics necessary for mentors and protégés. Mentoring characteristics identified were generosity, competence, self-confidence, and a commitment to the mentor relationship (Cangelosi, 2004). Thorpe and Kalischuk (2003) identified caring, connecting, and communication as integral components of successful mentoring relationships. Brown (1999) found that the protégés most valued their mentors’ availability, listening skills, and ability to provide feedback.

Clearly, mentoring programs that foster personalized, supportive relationships are positive strategies that retain neophyte nurse educators. What is lacking in the nursing literature is research that seeks to explore the meaning of being a protégé in a formal mentoring program. The outcome of such research is critical to the current nurse faculty shortage. It may offer support for the continuing need to further refine mentoring programs to retain novice faculty.

**MENTOR PROTÉGÉ PROGRAM**

The school of nursing encountered faculty shortage challenges similar to those at national levels. Three years prior to the program, 17 new full-time faculty members were hired, 16 of whom were considered novices in the teaching role. In addition, the majority of the part-time work pool consisted of individuals who also lacked experience or preparation in teaching. This, coupled with the fact that 80% of the experienced full-time faculty at the school of nursing were 50 or older (one third of these were eligible for retirement within 3 years), necessitated a strategy to maintain program quality. Therefore, the purpose of the program was to create and maintain an effective mentoring culture for nurse educators to enhance faculty and student learning. A formal mentor-protégé program was developed for novice faculty (full-time and part-time) in both the undergraduate and graduate programs. The program included a series of two off-campus retreats and four all-day workshops with 15 mentors and 33 protégés. A needs assessment of the protégés revealed topics for the workshop sessions and retreats. Included topics were mentoring, teaching and learning strategies, curriculum development, clinical teaching, assessing and evaluating learning outcomes, and tenure and promotion issues.

All participants in the program were given the opportunity for input into the selection of the mentor-protégé dyads. Each protégé was then assigned a formal mentor. Biweekly contact between mentors and protégés was encouraged. Protégés submitted journals to mentors on a monthly basis. In addition, teaching materials that provided reference for faculty, such as books and journals, were purchased for mentors and protégés. The final retreat was convened to review and celebrate the accomplishments of the novice faculty.

**Method**

Approval for the study was obtained through the university’s institutional review board. The purposes and procedures were fully explained at the beginning of the program, and written informed consent was obtained. Focus groups were used for data collection to provide an opportunity for the generation of dialogue and the potential for sharing stories related to the common experiences of the informants. Focus groups also “(took) advantage of group dynamics for accessing rich information in an efficient manner” (Polit & Beck, 2004, p. 342).

Interpretive phenomenology was used to analyze the transcripts of the two focus group interviews. This research approach was used to explore the lived world as it was subjectively experienced. The protégés who participated in the program had unique stories to tell. The purpose of this research method was to hear their stories and uncover the shared story. A phenomenological approach provides a framework for identifying themes and enhancing descriptions of the common meanings and shared understandings embedded in the narratives of everyday experiences (Diekelmann, 2001).

**Informants**

Informants in the study consisted of 23 novice faculty in a school of nursing who participated as protégés and agreed to share their stories of the experience; 19 were Caucasian and 4 were African American. The age range of the informants was 32 to 65 years. The faculty who were protégés for the project had been teaching for an average of 1.8 years at the university where the study occurred.

**Data Generation**

The research team consisted of three nurse educators with qualitative research expertise. One of the researchers, who was from outside the university, conducted the focus group interviews. This approach was used to ensure informants’ comfort level and to encourage candor because the other two researchers were mentors in the program. Consent for participation in the study and pseudonym selection were obtained via audiotapec from each informant at the time of the interviews.

**Data Analysis**

The focus group interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed hermeneutically by the research team members as outlined by Diekelmann and Allen (1989). Using this approach, the three researchers individually read the transcripts as a “whole,” followed by multiple readings to gain a sense of the overall story. Multiple research team meetings...
were held to discuss and validate the individual interpretations of the findings. Dialogue among research team members continued until agreement was reached concerning the shared stories of the informants. Common themes emerged, and subthemes were identified under each.

**Methodological Rigor**

Methodological rigor was achieved using the trustworthiness criteria (credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability) described by Guba and Lincoln (1989). Credibility was met through member checking. Preliminary findings were sent to informants, who were asked to comment on the fairness and accuracy of the interpretations and to confirm descriptions. Credibility was also addressed through peer debriefing between members of the research team during numerous team meetings. Dependability and confirmability were achieved through journaling by research team members during the data analysis process. This process allowed the researchers to achieve consensus on the common story embedded in the individual stories of informants. The rich description of the findings will allow the reader to make a judgment regarding transferability.

**FINDINGS**

**The Protégés**

The study of the experience of protégés participating in a mentor-protégé program led to the emergence of three main themes: Creating a Meaningful Mentor-Protégé Relationship, Transitioning as a New Nurse Educator, and the Mentor-Protégé Program—Lessons Learned.

**Theme 1: Creating a Meaningful Mentor-Protégé Relationship**

The stories related to creating a meaningful mentor-protégé relationship are described in two subthemes: connectedness and inclusion, and communication and openness. For some, close relationships developed that could truly be classified as mentoring. For others, constraints such as time, schedules, and physical location hindered the development of the relationships. As Kate stated:

> I think a big part is also the relationships that we have built, not only with our mentor, but the opportunities to be at these workshops...that we're able to build those relationships.

As a whole, the informants expressed their beliefs in the importance of the retreats as essential to the development of relationships and the promotion of collegiality among the faculty.

**Connectedness and Inclusion.** The importance of perceptions of connectedness and inclusion to the development of a meaningful relationship between the mentor and protégé was consistent throughout the data. As Fire Woman stated:

> I would say the networking [was important] for me because I wasn't there every day. Just knowing that I had resources and then finding out who those resources were. Bernadette thought that “the networking...was one of the best parts.”

An added benefit of the program was bringing the faculty together as a whole. Carla stated:

> The thing that got me was the feeling of inclusion, and the feeling that this was something that they [mentors] wanted to do, and that really made a big difference for me.

Fire Woman stated:

> I think it's really important from a kind of inclusion and a valuing sort of thing to bring new faculty in under the mentor protégé program.

Creampuff indicated that:

> It was the idea that when an institution takes the time and energy and expense to put on a program of this scope and takes you places and gives you time and the right environment to absorb it.... It really does make you feel very valued and very validated even in the apprentice role.

**Communication and Openness.** The importance of communication and openness to the development of a meaningful relationship between the mentor and the protégé was revealed through the stories of the informants. Communication occurred through either journaling or one-on-one interaction. The openness and availability of mentors for communication at all times was seen by protégés as essential to the development of the mentor-protégé relationship.

Mentors and protégés were required to journal as a component of the program to enhance communication. There was a distinct dichotomy in the views of the protégés regarding journaling. Some informants felt journaling was beneficial, whereas others did not. Those who felt that journaling was beneficial acknowledged personal growth through the reflective process. Sally stated:

> I enjoyed the journaling because it made me sit down and think things through.... It made me do a little bit more of searching...so, I actually found some benefit from it.

Kate looked at journaling as an opportunity for growth:

> I think it's going to be interesting for me to look back at my very first one [journal]...to see how much I've changed... to see hopefully growth...through my journal writing.

Those who did not feel that journaling was beneficial seemed to do so because they felt they had personal one-on-one contact with their mentors that met their need for communication. As Fire Woman stated:

> I really didn't feel that it [journaling] was that much of an additive...because I spoke to my mentor on a regular basis anyway.

Carla indicated:

> I guess, for me, I would prefer to sit down and talk to someone as opposed to writing something out. So it was more, for me, a kind of a lesson (laughter).

Regardless of the level of mentorship reported, the protégés universally agreed they had opportunities for communication with their mentors when needed, either electronically or face-to-face. Mentors were described as open and available. Kate described her mentor as:
Just being open and it didn’t matter, you know, if I just popped into her office. She took the time with me, and [was] very encouraging.

Judy indicated:

My mentor, I see multiple times a week...and that was really the most helpful thing for me is just to have her be there.

Theme 2: Transitioning as a New Nurse Educator

The stories related to the role of the novice nurse educator revolved around two subthemes: frustrations: go forth and teach, and putting it into practice. There were many descriptions among the informants regarding the frustrations of functioning in the role of a novice nurse educator. There were also stories about being able to function more effectively in the role as educator by putting what was learned during the mentorship program into practice.

Frustrations: Go Forth and Teach. Novice faculty members expressed frustrations concerning a lack of preparation to teach, as well as limited understanding required to function in their role. Marilyn described her experience as:

Then it was like, okay, you have got these little credentials after your name and you're supposed to go out and teach, while I didn’t take a lick at anything related to teaching. My first academic position was like “go forth and teach.”

KT expressed her views as:

I came from another setting where I taught, and had never gotten any teaching on how to teach.... I think that’s true for most of nursing, we just kind of “go teach.”

Judy validated KT’s response, “We’re not taught how to teach.... We have our nursing degrees, our masters in nursing, not teaching.”

Sally's frustration stemmed from feeling unprepared to function in the university setting:

I got kind of thrown in and you swim because of your experience. It's just in general, how do you get your parking permit? [She laughs.] And it's like you need an introductory phase. This is the way we operate, and then each of the facilities, I've been to three different facilities and you just get thrown in, and where do you go at Institution X to do this?

There were also stories of frustration due to a perceived lack of adequate guidelines for functioning in the role, as well as inconsistencies among faculty. Marilyn’s frustration related to the desire for more guidelines about how to function in the role of educator: “It was just having to learn by the seat of my pants on a regular basis, and I’m still doing it after 2½ years.”

Laura’s frustration stemmed from the tacit knowing within the educational setting that is sometimes difficult for new or novice faculty to grasp and the desire for more guidance:

I had a student turn in three unknown authors last semester on her scholarly paper, which was unusual to me. So I'm like, well is this customary? I'm just a novice at this, so it would be nice if we could have more standards.

Connie’s frustration was described as:

All of a sudden now it's just “you’re on your own and you’re the head of this”...being brand new in the course you don’t really understand the paperwork...and you’re supposed to be the one who knows, and you’re clueless about your own course because it’s just kind of thrown at you.

Putting it into Practice. The informants felt they gained skills and knowledge in the “how to” of teaching, as well as being able to go to their mentor for practical help. Participation in the mentorship program seemed to help them overcome some of the frustrations as they learned useful strategies to become better teachers. For Connie, the program helped her because she realized that when:

You really start “putting it [what was learned in the program] into practice,” it just makes so much more sense because I'm using it.

Sally indicated:

I found some of the presentations [during the mentorship program] particularly helpful in terms of skills and ideas for classroom teaching. Things I could put into practice and follow.

Theme 3: The Mentor-Protégé Program—Lessons Learned

Discussion of various components of the program constituted a major portion of the conversation during the interviews. Perspectives of the protégés related to the lessons learned emerged as a significant pattern within the stories of the informants’ experience. Within this pattern, two subthemes emerged: beneficial and not beneficial, and what comes after?

Beneficial and Not Beneficial. The stories of the informants related to the benefits of the mentor-protégé program were universal. Carla described this beautifully:

I think if I had not had this mentor program I would have had a very different feeling about the faculty world.

At the end, I’m not sure it would have been as positive as it is now, having had this. [The retreat site] helped a lot.

The educational programs presented were seen as beneficial. Protégés agreed that the programs were well planned and provided information useful to the teaching role. As Sally stated:

I was just awestruck about some of the in-depth preparations for the workshops. The top people that were giving the lectures, I thoroughly enjoyed that part of it.

Dottie verbalized that she felt she:

Got a lot of creative insight...ways to approach the same old, same old with kind of a freshness.... I was really excited after that one [program on teaching strategies].

Some faculty members had taught before and expressed the value of the program and the wish that they had been offered something similar when they first started to teach or when they first came to the institution. Marie recalls her early teaching experiences:

So, I never got any kind of formal program that would help me and being with this group and seeing how this program has been set up.... I have seen so many things that I could have used back when I first started.
Judy verbalized the need for a mentor-protégé program for all new faculty. She indicated that she had been at the university for 3 years and felt that “...had I had [when she first came] some of these resources [the mentor-protégé program]...it would have been helpful.”

When informants were asked how the program might be improved, suggestions focused on two main areas. Sally indicated the need to do a better job of matching the mentors to the protégés.

I recognize the importance of having a mentor. It’s very valuable for new faculty. I would like to see a process that matches mentors with protégés.

More support for part-time faculty was expressed by Marilyn:

I don’t think the part-time faculty members get enough orientation to what their goals and what their responsibilities are.

What Comes After? An additional component of the story of the protégés related to what would happen once the formal project ended. The need for the continuation of some type of mentorship program for novice faculty was universal among informants. Fire Woman stated that:

It seems to me that this might be something that they might want to continue on beyond a mentor-protégé program.... I think more than anything it’s to kind of keep us in touch with one another over time...just as a way to keep connectedness between faculty.

Marie verbalized her hope that this would be continued as well: “not just let it be a ‘this year’ thing, but let it keep on going.” Marilyn also agreed that the program should be continued:

I really think they need to incorporate that [the mentor-protégé program] on a regular basis to make sure the people have the opportunity to not just kind of get there blind, but that they have the opportunity to learn the process and get to know the faculty and get to know how the system goes.

DISCUSSION

This study seeks to describe the experiences of protégés who participated in a mentoring program with expert nursing faculty. The literature (Morin & Ashton, 2004; National League for Nursing, 2006; Smith & Zsohar, 2007; Thorpe & Kalischuk, 2003) supports a mentoring program as an effective way to assist novice faculty as they seek to move toward becoming expert educators (Benner, 1984). From this research, three overall conclusions were reached:

- Developing reciprocal relationships that foster open communication is essential for successful mentoring.
- Novice nurse educators require support and guidance to navigate through the challenges in their new role.
- Deliberate and planned activities over time in a formal program enhance the development of novice faculty.

The first conclusion was supported in the theme “Creating a Meaningful Mentor-Protégé Relationship.” Mentor-protégé programs have the potential to develop into long-term relationships that exist beyond the length of the formal program. The informants in this study verbalized the desire to continue the relationship with their mentor after the program’s conclusion.

These experiences are consistent with the Collegial Mentoring Model that is based on the notion that friendship is essential to professional achievements (Thorpe & Kalischuk, 2003). The model stresses the importance of taking time to develop collegial relationships between the mentor and the protégé. Thorpe and Kalischuk (2003) maintained that this type of mentoring relationship leads to invaluable and lasting friendships, along with employee retention.

There was one negative story among those of the protégés related to the relationship between mentor and protégé. One protégé did not have a good experience with her preceptor and verbalized the need for a “better match” between preceptors and protégés and voiced concern that preceptors should be chosen who have a desire to serve in the role. The researchers pose two lessons that can be learned from this story. First, mentorship must be a reciprocal relationship—both parties must be willing participants. Second, there must be a good “fit” between the mentor and protégé for the relationship to succeed and, thus, for the program to be effective. The researchers recognize that it is possible the protégé did not realize what she had missed until the focus group interview.

According to Smith and Zsohar (2007), caring, connecting, and communicating are integral components of a successful mentoring relationship. They describe the importance of the mentor-protégé match and note that not all senior faculty have the desire or skill to serve as mentors to new faculty. Dunham-Taylor, Lynn, Moore, McDaniel, and Walker (2008) also noted that poorly matched mentors possibly could result in lower retention of faculty. Therefore, it is critical to make sure that mentors want to and have the ability to do the job.

If mentorship programs for novice faculty are to be effective, finding ways for communication to occur is imperative. Novice faculty must feel included and valued as a part of the nursing faculty structure. This seems especially necessary for part-time faculty, who are not present on a regular basis to have the opportunity to interact with other full-time faculty. The protégés’ need for communication is consistent with research by Peters and Boylston (2006), who asserted that fostering collegial mentoring relationships is invaluable as a means to promote communication, connection, and caring among part-time faculty.

A second conclusion in this study is related to the support and guidance of the novice as depicted in the theme “Transitioning as a New Nurse Educator.” This theme describes the frustrations of novice faculty as they embrace the role of nurse educator. These frustrations were related to learning how to be a nurse educator and how to function in a new setting. Based on Benner’s (1984) theory of novice to expert nurse, the expectations for novice faculty should be considered. Mentoring programs should be designed to allow the novice educator time to move into the role in a
way that promotes progression from novice to advanced beginner during the first year of teaching. This concept is consistent with Morin and Ashton (2004), who found that effective faculty orientation programs should occur over a prolonged period.

The need for socialization into the nurse educator’s role was expressed by many protégés in the program. The overall unfamiliarity of the environment of the university setting is a challenge to navigate. Knowing the responsibilities, how to teach, and the unwritten rules and norms were expressed by many. Dunham-Taylor et al. (2008) noted the importance of socialization of new faculty as well. They noted that mentoring novices involves both an orientation to the teaching role, as well as the university environment.

The final conclusion is drawn from the stories in the theme “The Mentor-Protégé Program—Lessons Learned.” The theme describes informants’ views on what they felt was beneficial about the program, what could be improved, and the potential aftermath of the program. The informants described the value of mentoring in their development as nurse educators during the year-long program. Findings from this study are similar to others from the literature that emphasize the importance of communication, significance of self-reflection, and personal growth of protégés and mentors (Chester & Espelin, 2003; Morin & Ashton, 2004).

Overwhelmingly, informants indicated the need for more support, particularly for part-time faculty. As nursing programs continue to grow to address the current and projected nursing shortage, more part-time faculty will be used to meet teaching needs, especially in the clinical arena. These faculty members will need careful mentoring to maintain the quality and integrity of nursing programs. Peters and Boylston (2006) advocated the use of Web-based services, such as Blackboard® as an innovative solution to foster communication among part-time faculty and their mentors, who have time constraints and busy schedules.

Further research is needed using multisites to more fully understand the significance of mentoring to create a positive experience for novice nurse educators as they move along the pathway to expert (Benner, 1984). This study presents the stories of novice nursing faculty who participated in a mentorship program. The stories of the expert nursing faculty who served as their mentors is also important in understanding the role transition for novice nurse educators. The findings from the study of mentors can be found in a sequel article (Wilson et al., 2010). Although there are differences in the stories between mentors and protégés, there are also similarities.

For both groups, the relationship between mentors and protégés was significant. Communication was a critical element in the development of the relationship. Mentors and protégés benefitted from forming relationships with colleagues and participating in the educational activities and retreats that were provided as components of the program. Mentors and protégés identified the need for mentoring programs in nursing education as crucial to the development of novice faculty. There was also a common belief related to the need for nurse educators to be taught how to teach, in addition to their skills and knowledge related to nursing practice. Therefore, the authors recommend that mentoring programs, such as the one developed, or students’ graduate education focus on providing new faculty with the nuts-and-bolts of teaching. In addition, support in the form of communication and relationship building should be a priority in developing mentoring programs and graduate curriculum.

**CONCLUSION**

This article reports on the evidence-based findings from a funded project on faculty mentoring. The results support those in the literature that assert that a carefully structured and deliberate mentoring program can be an invaluable tool for schools of nursing that are committed to develop nurse faculty in their professional and scholarly roles. The outcomes of this study inform not only this nursing program, but also other programs that are struggling to address the nursing faculty shortage. The data provide insight into the meaning of receiving mentorship in the role of a novice nurse educator.

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