

Factors Associated with Attractiveness and Retention in Nursing

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ABSTRACT

The study describes factors associated with the attractiveness and retention of nursing, as experienced by registered nurses (n=24) upgrading their education to a Master's Degree at a University of Applied Sciences in Finland. The study aims at producing knowledge that can be used to improve nurse retention and the attractiveness of the clinical nursing profession. The 6-3-5 Brainwriting Method of Rohrbach was used to collect data which was analysed using inductive content analysis. The findings support previous international literature. Promotion of appreciation, professional development and wellbeing at work through optimal working conditions, increased influence and compassionate, supportive leadership were among the most significant, recurrent themes in the participant contributions. Further work is required to increase the appreciation of nursing in order to retain nurses and attract new applicants. The measures suggested in this research include the development of more compassionate leadership, professional development options and optimal conditions to ensure wellbeing at work.

Keywords: Attractiveness, retention, career, nursing, wellbeing at work

INTRODUCTION

Millions of new nurses will be required globally by the year 2030; the pre COVID-19 pandemic world was already short of almost six million nurses [1,2]. Finland is also struggling to attract and retain nursing staff; the shortage of staff is likely to persist and even intensify within the next decade [3]. In this article, attractiveness refers to any force or means that helps organizations recruit and retain staff and to promote work engagement [4]. Retention refers to an organization's ability to prevent staff leaving their work [5].

Health services across the world are facing the challenge of poor retention, as well as ageing and retirement of the workforce. A significant part of the nursing workforce will retire or leave the profession in the next few years, while the need for services is likely to increase in countries with ageing populations [2]. It is important, both nationally and internationally, to explore what kind of factors could promote nurse retention and help recruit new professionals [6, 7].

International research indicates that nurse retention and the attractiveness of the profession can be promoted by nurses' influence over their work, professional development and career opportunities, a positive work atmosphere and well-functioning multiprofessional collaboration [8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13]. Open nurse-leader dialogue and mutual appreciation can increase retention [14, 15, 16, 17]. Support and encouraging feedback, both in words and deeds are called for [18]. It is recommended that leaders make an effort to listen to their employees and to be more approachable and flexible to reduce turnover intention. [19, 20]. In other words,

more compassionate leadership might have a positive impact on the turnover rates [18]. Nurse engagement - nurses' commitment to and satisfaction with their jobs, and their level of commitment to the nursing profession itself - has also been found to be associated with nurse retention [21, 22, 23, 24, 25].

In contrast, a perceived heavy workload and stress have been found to decrease nurse retention and the attractiveness of the profession [18, 26, 27, 28]. The same holds true when the work requirements have been considered unreasonable, the working conditions inadequate [10] and/or the professional development prospects poor. [11, 29]. Lack of leader support and appreciation, a negative work atmosphere and poor management and leadership mar nurse engagement [18, 27, 30, 31]. Experienced bullying early during the career can cause nurses to leave their profession [11, 32].

In Finland, the attractiveness of the nursing profession has been studied recently from the perspectives of nursing students [33], licensed practical nurses [34], and nurses [35, 36, 37]. The results are similar to international research. According to the nursing students, the role and appreciation of nursing should be advanced at the level of individual nurses, organizations and society [33]. Increasing the appreciation of nursing is essential for licensed practical nurses as well [34]. Nurses agree that the attractiveness of their profession has deteriorated. Their wishes include adequate human resources, better professional development opportunities and salaries to match the responsibilities [35, 36, 37].

RESEARCH PURPOSE AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study describes factors associated with the attractiveness and retention of nursing, as perceived by experienced nurses undertaking a Master Programme in Advanced Practice Nursing. The study aims at producing knowledge that can be used to improve nurse retention and the attractiveness of the clinical nursing profession. The research problems are:

1. What kind of factors are associated with improving the attractiveness of nursing?
2. What kind of factors are associated with improving retention in nursing?

DATA AND METHOD

Data Collection

A qualitative approach was selected to explore experienced nurses' views of factors associated with the attractiveness of nursing and retention of nursing professionals. The participants (n=24, including 22 women and 2 men) were registered nurses with 5-25 years' experience across a diverse range of clinical specialities. They were upgrading their education to a Master's Degree in Advanced Practice Nursing at a University of Applied Sciences. The participants were employed as nurses in various locations across Finland.

The 6-3-5 Brainwriting Method of Rohrbach (1968) was used to bring together participants' individual experiences and associations yielded by the shared ideation process [38]. The method is suitable for collecting qualitative experiential expert knowledge. The participants worked in groups of six persons. Two groups were allocated the topic of "Factors that increase the attractiveness of nursing", whereas the other two groups were given the topic of "Factors that increase the retention of nursing professionals". All participants were given a piece of paper and five minutes time to write down three ideas on how to improve the attractiveness of

nursing/ retention of nursing professionals. After the five minutes were over, all participants were instructed to pass their paper to the next participant sitting on their right side. During the following five minutes, each participant read the existing ideas and added three new ideas. The process continued, using five-minute intervals, until the participants received their original papers. Rich material involving fresh associations was produced in each of the four groups during the 30 minutes [39, 40].

Data Analysis

The 6-3-5 Brainwriting Method yielded clauses and sentences, which were analysed using inductive content analysis [41]. The original clauses and sentences were reduced into 198 meaningful units, which were grouped into sub-categories according to content. Last, the sub-categories were combined into more generic categories, which were collapsed into the two main categories.

Ethics and Trustworthiness

Owing to the deteriorating staff shortage in nursing, the topic can be considered to be significant from the perspective of the nursing profession and society. The Research and Development Manager at the University of Applied Sciences granted permission for the research. The Finnish National Board on Research Integrity Guidelines (2023) were followed [42]. Participation was voluntary. All participants gave verbal consent to have the material used as research data. Their anonymity was protected throughout the research process.

The criteria of credibility, confirmability, transferability and reflexivity were used to ensure research trustworthiness. [43]. Credibility means that the findings reflect participants' conceptions of the phenomenon under study. The method used, 6-3-5 Brainwriting, and the fact that participants were nurses with a long work history either in primary health care or specialized medical services across Finland, can be claimed to ensure an authentic picture of the topic. Confirmability means that the findings are based on research data, not on investigators' ideas of the phenomenon. The description of the data collection and analysis, together with tables, make it possible for readers to see how the research process took place. Transferability is about the possibility that similarity could be found in other research contexts. The findings of this study are likely to be transferable at least nationally, and they may provide useful insights to international readers as well. Last, reflexivity means that the investigators acknowledge the effect their pre-conceptions may have on the study. In this study, both researchers' long history of nursing may have influenced their interpretation of the data.

RESULTS

This section presents experienced nurses' views of factors associated with the retention of nursing professionals (4.1) and of factors associated with the attractiveness of nursing as a profession (4.2). Direct participant quotes are provided to support the findings.

Professionalization and Appreciation as Factors Increasing Nurse Retention

The first research question dealt with research participants' ideas of factors that make it more likely for nurses to remain in their current positions. Table 1 shows the seven generic categories (4.1.1 - 4.1.7) and the sub-categories that emerged in the analysis

Table 1. Professionalization and Appreciation as Factors Increasing Nurse Retention

Sub-category	Generic category	Main category
Interesting duties	Meaningful work that promotes and makes use of expertise	Professionalization and Appreciation as Factors Increasing Nurse Retention
Meaningful projects		
Advanced practice nurses as educators		
Allocating advanced practice nurses' duties that match their qualification and competence		
Career advancement		
Making use of nurses' expertise		
Influence over the development of one's job description		
Training opportunities		
Being appreciated in society	Appreciation and promotion of the value of nursing	
Being appreciated in the organisation		
Being appreciated by the employer		
Having one's competence appreciated		
Support and appreciation from leaders		
Appreciation of one's own work		
Making clinical expertise visible		
Making the work/profession visible		
Flexible working hours	Ensuring optimal working conditions	
Adequate resources		
Lunch benefits		
A pool of substitutes		
Visible networking		
Developing leadership		
Adequate support staff (IT, secretarial)		
Remote work		
Work rotation		
Chance to attend to patients without interruptions		
Fully functioning equipment		
Safe working facilities		
Appropriate uniforms		
Adequate salary	Ensuring optimal salaries	
Match between salary and contribution		
Salary bonuses		
Influence over one's salary		

Extensive occupational health services	Promotion of wellbeing at work	
Support for wellbeing at work		
Rehabilitation during work career		
Preventive occupational health care		
Provision of sports vouchers		
Employer support for work wellbeing		
Leader support for employee family life		
Silent retreats to counterbalance the interactive nature of the work		
Workplace wellbeing activities		
Better work ergonomics		
Work supervision		
Regular shared time with colleagues	Promotion of collaboration	
Enabling collaboration		
Listening to and involving professionals		
Promoting multiprofessional collaboration		
Promoting collaboration with colleagues		
Promoting work in pairs		
Training leaders to understand grassroots work	Development of compassionate leadership	
Developing leaders' emotional intelligence skills		
Developing leaders' empathy skills and compassion		
Ensuring that staff are being heard		
Promoting open dialogue between staff and leaders		

Meaningful Work that Promoted and Made Use of The Nurses' Expertise:

First The participants agreed that meaningful work that promoted and made use of the nurses' expertise could make nurses remain in the profession. It was important that the work involved interesting assignments that corresponded to the nurses' qualifications, competence and expert knowledge. Career prospects, training opportunities and influence over the development of one's job description were further factors likely to increase nurse retention. To quote a participant, "You can achieve retention by increasing career advancement options".

Appreciation and Promotion of The Value of Nursing:

Appreciation and Promotion of The Value of Nursing was another factor that could help retain nurses, according to the study participants. The appreciation should take place at many levels; nurses appreciating their own work; immediate supervisors supporting their staff and appreciating their competence; the employer, the organization and society appreciating the work. The study participants suggested that nursing professions and clinical expertise should be made more visible in society, for example in the social media. They said, for example, "Appreciation; nurses are not maids to doctors", and "More visibility on national news channels about real nursing work".

Optimal Working Conditions:

Third The study participants stressed the importance of having nurse leaders ensure optimal working conditions, including adequate resources, support staff, facilities and equipment. The participants felt that flexible working hours, work rotation and remote work, when feasible, could be helpful in retaining nurses. An adequate pool of substitutes was needed, according to the participants. They also said that nurses would appreciate a chance to take time to attend to their patients without being constantly interrupted. Good working conditions would affect the daily routines, patient safety, and retention positively. To quote, "Enough time and resources, so you can do your work as well as you would like to".

Optimal Salaries:

In addition, optimal salaries were considered very important in the effort to retain nursing professionals. The salaries should correspond to the qualifications and work requirements. Assignments that require special competencies or increased responsibility should be compensated for.

Promotion of Wellbeing at Work:

Promotion of wellbeing at work was also considered important for nurse retention. The study participants mentioned extensive occupational health services, including preventive health care and rehabilitation. They also proposed measures to improve both physical and cognitive ergonomics, to "shape up the work ergonomics". An opportunity to have clinical supervision and having one's family life taken into consideration (work-life balance) were seen as effective means of retaining nurses in the profession.

Promoting Collaboration:

According to the study participants, employers could increase nurse retention by actively promoting collaboration at the workplace. This could involve better listening to employees and involving them in planning and decision-making. Nurse leaders could arrange those employees

meet and share time regularly. Other aspects of collaboration suggested included multi-professional teamwork, improved collaboration among peers and sharing of knowledge and skills.

Development of Compassionate Leadership:

The last suggestion to emerge was related to the development of compassionate leadership. The participants indicated that nurse retention could be increased if nurses were heard and supported effectively. This would require the development of leaders' emotional intelligence, empathy and situational awareness. The promotion of open dialogue between leaders and staff, especially, was seen as a factor that could increase the retention rate. The participants said, for example, "Leadership should be equal and competent. The employees should be trusted, they should be listened to and encouraged", and "Compassionate leadership, empathy and genuine dialogue instead of bureaucracy."

Professional Development and Wellbeing as Factors Increasing the Attractiveness of the Nursing Profession

The second research question dealt with research participants' ideas of factors associated with the attractiveness of nursing as a profession. Table 2 shows the nine generic categories (4.2.1 - 4.2.9) and the sub-categories that emerged in the analysis.

Table 2. Professional Development and Wellbeing as Factors Increasing the Attractiveness of the Nursing Profession

Sub-category	Generic category	Main category
Positions for advanced practice nurses	Advancement of professional development	Professional Development and Wellbeing as Factors Increasing the Attractiveness of the Nursing Profession
Chance to combine work and studies and being allocated duties that correspond one’s education		
Designing a career path model		
Equal educational opportunities		
Enabling work rotation		
Good orientation		
Developing student supervision	Development of students’ clinical practice	
Improving the condition in work practice		
Appreciation students as equals		
A mentoring model for graduates		
Enabling work during studies		
More practically oriented education	Attention given to the needs of practice in education	
Giving attention to worklife challenges during education		
Developing combined study programmes		
Enabling further training		
Improving peer relations among nurses	Increasing the appreciation of nursing professionals	

Involving leaders in clinical nursing		
Bringing leaders closer to employees		
Support and encouragement from leaders		
Appreciation from leaders to all employees		
Concrete acknowledgement for a job well done from the employer		
Listening to employees		
Taking employee opinion into account		
Matching the salary with work requirements	Aligning salaries with education and work requirements	
Rewarding competence		
Higher salary		
Personal bonus for competence and education		
Reward for a job well done		
Reward for special competence required in the job description		
Compensation for extra assignments		
Developing the compensation system for extra hours		
More humane working conditions	Improvement of working conditions	
Chance to influence working hours		
More attention to employees' rota wishes		
Increasing permanent positions		
Stopping consecutive short contracts		
Better treatment of substitutes		
Increasing the availability of substitutes		
Better care of equipment		
Increasing equipment, technology and robotics to facilitate work		
Providing shared activities to promote coping		
Work supervision		
Providing physical exercise opportunities		
Shared sports and cultural activities	Promotion of Work Ability	
Work supervision		
Vouchers to support staff wellbeing		

Empowering reflection after stressful situations	Increasing employee influence	
Influence over one's working hours		
Influence over one's duties		
Influence over one's working conditions		
Chance to develop one's competence		
Improving the image of nursing	Increasing appreciation of nursing through positive communication	
Positive marketing		
Improving the reputation of nursing together		
Sharing positive experiences of daily nursing work		
Advertising nursing in media		
Increasing leaders' appreciation of nursing		
Increasing the government's appreciation of nursing		
Positive descriptions of hospital and health centre operation		
Use of celebrities in recruitment		
Use of grassroots employees in recruitment		
Visiting school to inform pupils of nursing		

Advancement of Professional:

According to the study participants, advancement of professional development was one of the factors that could make the nursing profession more attractive to potential candidates. In concrete terms, this would involve high quality orientation, work rotation and equal educational opportunities. A participant wrote, "A proper orientation period, time to learn the practices, not just going into the lion's den". Being allocated duties that corresponded to one's education, for example in advance practice nursing, could increase interest in the profession, according to the participants.

Students' Clinical Practice Periods Should Be Developed:

Nursing students' clinical practice periods should be developed to achieve positive learning experiences and to make the profession more appealing. In the opinion of the study participants, the working conditions and supervision of students in clinical practice should be improved. Students should be encountered and appreciated as equals. At graduation, they would benefit from mentoring. To quote, "A mentoring model, a promise that when you arrive as a fledgling you are not left alone".

Nursing Education Should Be Based on The Needs of Nursing Practice:

The study participants suggested more practically oriented education starting from current real-life challenges. Combined study programmes and various further training opportunities could be provided to create specific expertise tailored to the needs of practice.

Increasing The Appreciation of The Nursing Profession:

emerged as an important mission in the study participants' contributions. This could be achieved through leaders' presence in practical nursing work, where they should express interest in how the staff were coping and provide support and encouragement. The staff would thrive if they felt that all employees' experiences were equally interesting to the leaders. Equal appreciation and concrete acknowledgement of good performance were mentioned. In the words of one participant, "Leaders should be seen in the field sometimes, many of them are estranged from everyday life. Appreciating grassroots level workers, seeing that nurses are more than just names on the rota".

Aligning Salaries with Education and Work Requirements:

The study participants further suggested aligning salaries with education and work requirements to improve the attractiveness of the nursing profession. Special competence, special work requirements and good performance should be rewarded. The job descriptions of some employees involved special assignments requiring specific competence, and personal bonuses should be paid for extra training and expertise. As one of the participants said, "When the salary matches the requirements, the profession will become a potential option alongside other, better paid professions".

Improvement of Working Conditions:

According to the participants, improvement of working conditions would make nursing a more interesting choice to students. The working conditions should be more humane, with the opportunity to influence one's working hours and to gain a permanent position sooner, instead of consecutive work contracts. Better treatment of nurse substitutes would make them more readily available. One of the study participants wrote, "Optimal nurse-to-patient ratio; if the number of nurses were expanded, nursing would become more appealing, with less stress and better coping". Furthermore, it was mentioned that the development of working conditions through fully functioning equipment, technology and robotics was linked with improved patient safety and occupational safety.

Promotion of Work Ability:

More systematic promotion of work ability was suggested to increase the attractiveness of nursing. This could include various shared activities, for example sports and cultural events. The participants proposed returning the earlier practice of handing out vouchers, which could be used for cultural events or services (massage, gym etc). Work supervision and shared, empowering reflection sessions after stressful situations were considered important for the promotion of employees' work ability. Leaders, psychologists or psychotherapists could assume the role of facilitators in such sessions. To quote, "Supporting wellbeing at work, investing in coping and resilience building".

Increasing Employee Influence:

Increasing employee influence was also suggested by the study participants to promote the attractiveness of nursing. Optimally, nurses should have more influence over their working hours, duties and working conditions. The opportunity to develop further professionally was considered essential.

Increasing The Appreciation of Nursing Through Positive Communication:

Finally, the study participants proposed increasing the appreciation of nursing through positive communication. A better image and reputation of nursing was required through positive marketing and advertising. The public should learn about successes in daily nursing practice, and nursing organizations should be described in more positive terms, possibly with help of grateful patients or celebrities. Besides media publicity, visits of nursing professionals in educational institutions could be useful in promoting the appreciation of the profession. Words of appreciation from higher authorities, for example the government, were also needed.

DISCUSSION

This qualitative study presents experienced registered nurses' ideas on how nurse retention and the attractiveness of the nursing profession could be improved. The participants provided extensive and varied suggestions. The findings were similar to recent international literature [8, 33, 44]. As might be expected, the factors that were thought to increase nurse retention and the attractiveness of the profession were mostly the same or similar. What was different was that, in the section on attractiveness, the topics of more practice-driven nursing education and improved clinical practice experiences were brought up from the perspective of potential nursing students.

The results reveal a need to improve the attractiveness and retention both at the level of individuals (nurses and students) and in society, politics and social media through promoting the general appreciation of the profession. Appreciation from leaders has been shown to motivate staff and to promote engagement and wellbeing at work [14, 45, 46]. Support from colleagues also affects job satisfaction positively [19, 47].

According to the results, the appreciation of the profession should be reflected in employee influence, working conditions and remuneration. The study participants found, in agreement with earlier studies, that flexible work arrangements and employees' influence over their work content and work conditions affected autonomy, motivation and wellbeing positively, increasing retention and making the profession more appealing. As in previous studies, professional development and career paths were considered essential [6, 33, 35, 48].

The promotion of work wellbeing, collaboration and supportive (compassionate) leadership were further significant themes that emerged in the results. Although nurses in Finland seem to find their work meaningful, thousands of nurses have left their profession due to experienced stress and coping problems [35, 36]. Positive communication and feedback and encouragement can help nurses cope better [49], and an ethical and supportive work climate may decrease turnover intention [7]. A significant relationship has been established between ethical climate and job satisfaction, with implications for nurse retention [50]. Similarly, leader support and a collaborative climate have been found to shape nurses' perception of the attractiveness of their

organization [12]. Open communication and nurse-leader dialogue was emphasised by the participants in this study.

CONCLUSION

Further work is required to increase the appreciation of nursing in order to retain nurses and attract new applicants. Professionalization, or establishing nursing as an independent and appreciated profession still needs to be promoted, despite the decades of efforts to achieve this. The measures suggested in this research include professional development options and optimal conditions to ensure wellbeing at work. Nurses also appreciate supportive, compassionate leadership, educational and career opportunities and influence over their work.

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