




## Transformative Learning: Changing Nurses' Perceptions About People in Poverty

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### Abstract

**Background:** Meaningful learning experiences with clients in poverty may help nursing students change their perceptions towards those experiencing poverty and, thus, provide unbiased, nonjudgmental care when they become nurses.

**Purpose:** The purpose of this research was to understand what learning activities and experiences nursing students found meaningful and led to a change in prior perceptions of people in poverty.

**Methods:** Guided by Mezirow's Theory of Transformative Learning, accelerated BSN students enrolled in a mental health nursing course ( $n = 14$ ) were assigned reflective journals throughout the semester on their assigned clinical experiences, which were analyzed for emergent themes.

**Results:** Three themes emerged showing that students overwhelmingly found the new clinical site meaningful and demonstrated transformation through this experience.

**Conclusion:** The community-engaged learning experience described demonstrates a meaningful clinical experience that helped future nurses transform their perspectives while building their professional identity.

**Keywords:** *poverty, meaningful learning, Mezirow, community-engaged learning, clinical education*

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### Introduction

One of the five social determinants of health is economic stability (CDC, 2024). Regardless of the medical setting, nurses care for people of varying financial resources (economic stability), including those with limited financial resources—or people who might be considered living in poverty. Clients who experience poverty may receive inadequate care from nurses with biases and negative stereotypes towards people in poverty and who often attribute client circumstances to personal choices rather than structural barriers (Wittenauer et al.,

2015). Meaningful learning experiences, including working with clients in poverty, may help nursing students change their perceptions towards them and, instead, provide unbiased, nonjudgmental care as nurses. But how do nurse educators know what learning experiences are meaningful? The purpose of this research was to understand what learning activities and experiences nursing students found meaningful and led to a change in prior perceptions of people in poverty.

Simulation is an effective way to teach nursing students about poverty (Garrett-Wright et al., 2021; Kruse & El-Khoury, 2022; Meaux et al., 2019). Sometimes simulations can be limited in their authenticity, so there was an effort made to design a new clinical experience. Using the improved simulation, students could interact (rather than merely have a simulated experience) and care for clients experiencing poverty and other conditions impacting their social determinants of health.

A partnership for this study was formed with a community transitional housing agency, which provides basic health screenings and teaching to those experiencing homelessness. The partnership became part of the clinical requirements for a mental health nursing course during the semester, but in building the community-engaged experience, a concern arose that perhaps students would only have negative stereotypes reinforced about people experiencing poverty, such as “poor people are dirty” and “poor people act differently” as Jarrell et al. (2014) found when nursing students participated in service-learning activities in a low-income housing facility.

Another concern for the study was its non-traditional clinical setting. There was no opportunity to perform technical skills, such as IVs, catheters, and dressing changes, so it was concerning that students would find no value in the experience. Monson et al. (2021) found that nursing students only felt confident with technical skills when performed in a clinical setting instead of a lab setting. Emphasis was placed on the importance of providing students with acute care experiences.

## Theoretical Framework

Mezirow’s theory of transformative learning was chosen to guide this study primarily because it was found useful in studying attitudinal changes in learners (Chua et al., 2021; Mastel-Smith et al., 2016; Thompson et al., 2016). Mezirow’s theory (1997) posits that for learning to occur, a learner’s *frame of reference* must change, which he defines as, “the structures of assumptions through which we understand our environment” (p. 5). Frames of reference include habits of the mind that encompass complex feelings, beliefs, judgments, and attitudes toward individuals or groups.

The initial step in the transformation is what Mezirow (1991) termed a *disorienting dilemma* (p. 68), as it challenges a learner’s frame of reference. For this study, the dilemma was the clinical site, as it was undeveloped and required a great deal of relationship and trust building with residents and staff of the housing complex. Students were tasked with taking the ambiguous clinical site—where there had never been a group of students of any kind—and creating health promotion activities for the residents, while incorporating the desires of the community.

## Methods

Prior to the start of the semester, approval was requested and granted by the university’s institutional review board for this study. After being faced with a disorienting dilemma, students must use critical reflection to transform their frames of reference (Mezirow, 1991). Therefore, accelerated BSN students enrolled in a mental health nursing course ( $n = 14$ ) were assigned reflective journals throughout the semester on their assigned clinical experiences. Of the 14 students, 12 were female, two were male, 13 were White, and one was Black. All students had a bachelor’s degree, two had master’s degrees, and one had a doctorate. For the community

engaged learning experience being described, students had two journals to complete, and the prompt was the same for both. This prompt read:

Was this clinical experience meaningful to you? Why or why not? What did you learn, if anything? Did this experience change your perceptions of people living in poverty?

The journals were submitted to the university's learning management system. The journals were then "blind graded" as either complete or incomplete. After the course was completed, the journals were downloaded into one file to be coded using content analysis. The actual words of the participants were used to create the coding scheme (Creswell, 2005).

## Results

"Help Us Become Nurses" was the themed approach that the nursing students took when developing the clinical site. This sentiment was communicated to residents through fliers and verbal communication when they visited the wellness clinic. Students acknowledged to residents that they played a role in helping them become nurses and that they appreciated letting them "practice" on them. The residents embraced this sentiment. One resident even gathered the students around her to teach them about a new medication she had been prescribed.

The students reported having positive experiences through this clinical opportunity. They overwhelmingly reported that the new clinical site was meaningful. In addition, students demonstrated transformation through this experience—whether it be an attitude change towards people in poverty or a change in their own self-perceptions. The themes that emerged from this study are discussed below.

### Finding Meaning Through Skill Acquisition

Research Question #1 asked if students would find the clinical experience meaningful. Student reflections proved it was meaningful to them because of the skills they acquired. Several subthemes emerged as students relayed the skills they learned.

#### Health Promotion and Education

Students found meaning in client education, particularly because it made them realize they knew more than they thought they did. This finding contrasted with Chua et al. (2021), who studied medical student perspectives on interviewing hospitalized children and their parents. Medical students reported feeling uncomfortable due to a lack of knowledge to answer family questions. Additionally, students were able to practice health literacy principles in a real client situation. Students mentioned that they were able to apply what they learned throughout the program. The following statements were extracted from student journals:

I learned that I truly love the aspect of teaching. It was a great experience today being able to answer the questions because it helped me see that I know a lot of information more than I think as well as comforting their needs.

The importance of patient education and having the patient relay, in their own words, their understanding of the prescribed medical treatment was highlighted when we spoke with a resident about their recent COVID diagnosis.

My favorite part of my day was always teaching, and I can see teaching in my future as a nurse.

#### Management of Care Through Critical Thinking

Student descriptions of their clinical experiences demonstrated that they benefitted from the opportunity to

manage the care of clients in the apartment complex by being able to see them on more than one occasion. They also benefited from encounters without time constraints, as they seemed to foster student critical thinking, which seemed to foster an empathetic attitude. These findings align with the work of Ward and Hober (2020). They also used Mezirow's theory in a similar nursing student study and also found critical thinking to be a theme. Here are two examples:

One experience I had at [agency] was both meaningful and bothersome—very bothersome. I voiced this during my visit—my concern is how some that are living in poverty and low income are victimized by companies—specifically pharmacies. This poor individual has to coordinate public transportation, pay the bus fare, and walk on her crepitus, painful knee joints to pick up a prescription that she does not need.

It was great to be able to see the changes that have been made since my first clinical there. I noticed that there were residents who seemed to have become more comfortable with coming in to have different health screenings done. This was meaningful to me because it showed me how over time, being present in a community and being an available and trustable resource can allow the members of the community to become more comfortable with your presence.

### **Therapeutic Communication**

The opportunity to practice therapeutic communication was found to be meaningful to the students. Even if students acknowledged that communication isn't as exciting as other nursing skills, they also acknowledged that it is a nursing skill that requires practice. This finding is important for nurse educators who may struggle to find ways to teach therapeutic communication. Additionally, a search using CINAHL revealed that, in the last 7 years, 10 studies were published on teaching therapeutic communication to nursing students. All used simulation to do so. Students wrote:

Effective communication may not be as exciting as an invasive procedure, but similarly, it can't be learned from a book, and I'm grateful for the opportunity to practice this skill in different settings.

It felt to me as if they really enjoyed speaking to someone in the healthcare field about what they had been experiencing. It seemed to be cathartic for them, and it was wonderful to be able to practice both therapeutic communication and patient education in the same conversation.

### **Opening Eyes and Changing Perspectives**

Research Question #2 asked if the clinical experience changed student perspectives toward people in poverty. Students did find that the experience changed their perspectives about people experiencing poverty. For some, the change in perspective was to realize the obstacles that people in poverty face, such as lacking transportation. Quite a few students were surprised by how interested the residents were in learning about their health. Some of the student comments were:

Opened my eyes to the road blocks that people in poverty face.

I have caught myself defending the population by remarking "a lot of them are sick and need assistance" whereas before I wasn't so warm to them. After all, they are people who need love, a smile and a listening ear."

What hit me the most was how hungry the people were for knowledge about their health. It occurred to me later that they probably don't get that one-on-one time with their doctors and nurses at the clinics because they are poor and might not know how to ask for assistance or extra time/extra explanations.

These statements support the work of Masse et al. (2020) who used Mezirow's theory to guide a community-based clinical experience for medical students. Masse et al. (2020) found that the experience transformed future doctors to increase their commitment towards client advocacy and social justice. Additionally, these findings negate the concern that negative stereotypes would be reinforced, as these students were surprised that these clients were not only interested in learning about their health but "hungry" for information.

### Positive Feelings

The third theme that emerged was that students overwhelmingly found this experience to be positive. They seemed inspired by the clients they met, proud of themselves, and grateful for their own lives. Some excerpts from their journals are:

This has undoubtedly been my favorite rotation, because even though our skills as nursing students aren't fully developed yet, we've still been able to make a significant impact on the community there.

Allowed me to self-reflect and be very grateful. Growing up I did not have to worry about access to healthcare, access to transportation, access to safe living conditions, etc.

These findings can lead one to ask the question: does a disorienting dilemma have to be negative?

Thompson et al. (2016) used medical student reflections to understand what constituted a disorienting dilemma. They found that students used words like *shock*, *lonely*, and *uncomfortable* to describe them. Conversely, the nursing students in this study used extremely positive words to describe their experiences that seem to relay evidence of transformation. Perhaps the difference maker was that the nursing students were self-directed in this learning experience. While they didn't initiate the partnership, they took ownership of making it work. Ward and Hober (2020) found that when nursing students were allowed to be self-directed in their clinical experiences, they became better at critical thinking and self-efficacy.

## Discussion

This experience demonstrates the importance of community-based learning and alternative clinical site placement for nursing students to promote learning about financial insecurities and how they impact their patients. Student reflections demonstrated the benefits of a student-led clinical experience, especially in the development of foundational skills in professional nursing. Faculty reflection has shown that more teaching is needed on the breadth of the causes of poverty, to include more than just financial insecurities but also structural determinants of health.

## Conclusion

Preparing future nurses to provide unbiased client care, including health promotion and teaching, to those living in poverty should be a priority for nurse educators. The analysis of the critical reflections of nursing students can help guide the creation of future learning activities for students caring for vulnerable populations. The community-engaged learning experience demonstrates a meaningful clinical experience that helped future nurses transform their perspectives while building their professional identity. Ultimately, healthcare will benefit from having nurses who have transformed their perspectives about clients living in poverty.

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