



Effective Outreach Strategies for Introducing Middle School Students to Careers in Nursing

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Summary

As Middle school students, approximately ages 11-14, prepare for daily opportunities to learn and grow as humans, what methods are most effective in helping them navigate those opportunities? After research and exploration to answer this question, a single factor stands out as primary to success—activities should consistently remain interactive and engaging. Learning environments must provide middle school students with the autonomy to create their ideal outlook on what career choices they want to pursue. From ages 14-18, students develop ideas about work that mesh with their existing self-concept. Knowing when students retain information during their growth can allow nursing programs to affect changes in perceptions and attitudes that will influence their considerations for nursing as a career. As the nursing shortage is examined and attempts to combat shortages explored, the need to introduce the nursing field to middle school students escalates. Robin E. Matutina (2008) argues, “...although nursing may not be rejected during the middle school years, without recruitment efforts in place, nursing may not be considered”. This paper examines middle school student learning methods, explores past nursing outreach approaches, and discusses the need to reach more diverse and marginalized students in these efforts to strengthen future nursing workforce diversity.

Keywords: middle school students, introduction to careers in nursing, learning environments, nursing shortage, learning methods, increasing diversity

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Before creating a program to introduce nursing to middle school students, we must first identify the most effective learning and retention techniques for this age group. To acquire firsthand insight on effective methods for engaging middle school students, Thomas Longmire, a 25-year middle school science teacher, was interviewed over the phone. The information gained from Longmire produced the awareness of the most critical component of middle-level education—worksheets and tests do not necessarily translate into successful learning. Instead, activities that require hands-on participation with follow-up questions result in improved retention of information due to the physical knowledge that has been obtained (T. Longmire, Personal phone interview, April 12, 2021). For this age group, creating opportunities for learning through physical engagement is crucial to expanding their awareness about the world around them. (Knight et al., 2011).

At Keithley Middle School in Tacoma, WA, the CHAMPS after-school program aims to give drop-in academic support to students. The program offers enrichment classes giving special attention to specific curricular subjects, and students can choose what class they want to attend for the afternoon. Program focus groups asked students what their favorite enrichment class was and why. Mathletes was the most common answer provided. And for why, this was because concepts taught proved to be retainable through the engagement of physical activity. Reading, answering questions on a worksheet, and videos were all learning methods that disinterested students, and the information presented was not well retained.

While exploring methods for introducing careers in nursing to middle school students, there are also nursing outreach approaches that have seen promising results. It is worth recognizing that successful nursing outreach programs also included “...engaging, active, and hands-on” (Knight et al., 2011) activities. Equally important to the success of these programs is that information shared with students is accurate. Programs also need to educate young students about opportunities in nursing beyond the bedside. Furthermore, the field of nursing should not be sugar-coated with its large income and rewarding days spent in service to others while challenges in nursing are omitted.

Margaret Knight and colleagues (2011) discuss a pilot project implemented by the UML Graduate School of Education aiming to inspire middle school students in nursing as a career. The three-hour pilot program featured activities such as "...measuring vital signs, calculating and preparing simulated medications, working with simulation mannequins, and listening to heart and lung sounds using a stethoscope" (Knight et al., 2011). Students were surveyed both before and after the program. Results showed an overall increase in the attraction to nursing after the opportunity to learn through these activities.

Matutina (2008) sites several successful platforms for introducing nursing as a career to middle school students. To do this, Matutuina (2008) reviewed the findings from seven different studies focusing on nursing recruitment efforts towards middle school students. Matutina (2008) found that "To educate and attract middle school students, programs such as prenursing clubs, scholars programs, career awareness projects, and health career initiatives should be implemented". An example of an effective outreach program shared in Matutina's (2008) paper is the Inova Nursing Exploration Summer Camp. In this program, 20 middle school students, from ages 12-15, traveled to a hospital where they participated in activities such as watching operations through the hospital surgical dome and learning CPR. Student surveys of the program "... showed that the likelihood of students' considering nursing as a future career increased from 70% before the camp to 90% after the camp experience". Matutina (2008) states that recruitment efforts should focus on creating a shift in the overall attitudes that middle school students have towards nursing, a shift from little knowledge on the role of a nurse to a more informed one.

The Significance of Engagement

The Self Concept Theory articulates behavioral attitudes in developing teens and young adults. This three-pronged approach identifies the influences of attitudes, beliefs based upon external information, and a sense of control over behavior (Hoke JL, 2006). This theory also suggests that middle school students are in the developing stage of their career decision-making process. From middle school to high school, young people experience two developmental stages known as 'crystallization' and 'specification'. Crystallization occurs in ages

14-18, where they develop ideas about work that mesh with their existing self-concept. Specification occurs in ages 18-22, where they begin to narrow down career choices and initiate behavior that enables them to enter their preferred career (Hoke JL, 2006). Knowing when young people form ideas about potential careers allows nursing programs to initiate activities that influence changes in perceptions and attitudes that can impact a middle school student's consideration for nursing as a career.

Clearly, middle school is when students learn and grow through participation and physical involvement more than traditional learning methods. As seen above, when discussing the Keithley Middle School's CHAMPS after-school program, the most sought-after activities included the combination of learning and physical activity. But, according to Knight et al., (2011), there is another crucial element that cannot be overlooked, "Creativity is essential in developing a program that will stimulate student interest in nursing as a career choice." Creativity is the keyword here. Successful programs peak student interest through activities that are fun and engaging. When informing and inspiring the youth, it is imperative to keep in mind the value of initiating entertainment to facilitate the process of learning and retention.

Additionally, when it comes to careers choices for their future, students have several influencing factors including, parents, the media, and even misconceptions about nursing. The influence of parents and guardians on young people plays a major role in guiding them towards potential careers. Therefore, a parent or guardian's lack of knowledge regarding a profession can hinder recruitment (Knight et al., 2011). Nursing recruitment programs need to be aware of these influences and, where possible, address and remove negative misconceptions from the students' view. Hoke JL (2006) states that addressing and changing negative perceptions and attitudes about nursing can positively influence the potential of students to consider nursing as a career.

In 2008, Mentoring in Medicine, Inc., supported by the National Library of Medicine, conducted a qualitative research methodology with six focus groups of educators, students, and their parents. The inclusion of parents was rare in a study like this. However, it proved to be insightful. The study found that parents significantly impact their child's decision to pursue

healthcare as a profession. Furthermore, the study found that parents often did not understand how to get their child into a pipeline program. And that they often overestimated the difficulties and financial burdens of these programs when many programs were free or offered financial assistance to candidates who qualified. But the most notable barrier for parents was that they simply did not have the time or the resources to advocate for their child. According to Holden et al.- (2015), involving parents in pipeline programs is crucial to a student's long-term success.

After-school programs, career fairs, summer camps, health weeks, and even on-site interactive learning opportunities are all effective ways of introducing middle school students to nursing. But, in all cases, careful consideration of the material presented to students is crucial in influencing them to engage fully, learn, and narrow their career options. If programs can accurately share positive examples of a nurse's role in a variety of environments (e.g., school nurse, public health nurse, IT nurse, etc.) along with some of the real challenges present in these roles, it can eliminate misconceptions and allow for students to retain an authentic interest in nursing as a career.

Successful STEM Approaches as Models

Though not nationally recognized as a STEM career, the nursing curriculum does include science, technology, and math, if not engineering. And high school students considering a career in nursing are encouraged to study these courses early to facilitate their acceptance into a nursing program after graduation. Current STEM models expose students to medicine, pharmacy, and surgery, but not nursing through programs that engage and educate youth (Williams C, 2018). It would be beneficial if current STEM outreach efforts did include nursing in their programs. However, STEM outreach programs are good at educating students about the importance of academic preparedness as they pursue a STEM career. Any middle school-focused nursing outreach program should do the same.

Reaching Racial and Ethnic Minorities

According to a report on Washington State's 2019 registered nursing workforce completed by the University of Washington Center for Health Workforce Studies and published

by the Washington Center for Nursing (2020), just over 20% of the RN workforce represented diverse populations including Hispanic or Latino, American or Alaska Native, Black or African America, Asian, Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander, or two or more races, while nearly 33.5% of the state's population is from these underrepresented groups. A nursing workforce that reflects the state's population is a known strategy for cultural competency, which is essential to preventing and addressing health inequities. To begin addressing these inequities it is crucial to implement nursing outreach programs that reach these underrepresented groups and bring more diversity to the nursing workforce.

With diversity being the predominant issue within healthcare outreach programs, many states have partnered with pipeline programs designed to provide education and career support for diverse racial and ethnic communities to encourage students to pursue a career in healthcare (Miller, 2016). These programs typically offer testing preparations alongside healthcare-related academic courses, parent-student academic and career counseling, and shadowing experienced healthcare professionals.

A summer camp in North Carolina called Camp BONES aimed to "Introduce underrepresented middle school students to a career in nursing with a long-term goal to address the current nursing shortage both in numbers and diversity of our workforce" (Pollard et al., 2009). The camp "...[provided] a select group of 7th and 8th-grade middle school minority students with the opportunity to be introduced to professional nursing roles and requirements for admission to a program, practice life study skills in the foundational science and math content areas, practice critical thinking skills in the learning of nursing practice skill sets using human patient simulation, and be exposed to real-life clinical practice by shadowing a practicing nurse."

The program results showed that face-to-face communication with healthcare professionals provided the necessary framework for encouraging engagement that sparked interest in nursing. Specifically, a program evaluation demonstrated that 70% of the 160 students who participated in the program chose to pursue a career in healthcare. And of those who went into healthcare, 50% chose a career in nursing (Pollard et al., 2009).

Knight and colleagues (2011) worked with the Bring Diversity to Nursing program, teaming up with city schools to create an after-school program for middle school students showcasing nurses as the stewards of health and prevention. Bring Diversity to Nursing is another example of a program developed to support greater diversity within the nursing workforce by encouraging nursing as a career within diverse populations.

Conclusion

Middle school students have the world before them. Yet, they are in a stage of development between childhood and young adult. Helping them form ideas about potential careers could help them down a path of future success. To do this well, the best model for middle school outreach about careers in nursing should be interactive, engaging, and involve physical learning--as well as be fun. But that is not all. A program that truly aims to support middle school students not only to choose a career in nursing, but to succeed in navigating down the path to becoming a nurse, must also engage primary family members, address misconceptions about nursing, expand awareness about overall opportunities in nursing, and include STEM model approaches for educating on academic preparedness.

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