

**Original Article**

**Caring, Learning and Learning Environment in the Early Stage of the Pandemic**

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***“I want to become a nurse to contribute to society!”  
Nursing students’ experiences 3 months into a pandemic – views on study situation and thoughts on a future in nursing.***

**Abstract:**

**Background:** The ongoing global COVID-19 pandemic has caused different challenges in societies around the world. For educators, an increased focus on education of health personnel, defined as any form of learning and caring for students whom lockdown has sent into “home offices” and who need advice and support.

**Aim:** To describe nursing students’ experiences of their caring, learning and learning environment during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Methodology:** Four nursing students in their second year of the Bachelor programme in Oslo, the capital of Norway, participated in a qualitative study in June 2020.

A semi structured focus group interview was conducted, transcribed verbatim and analyzed using qualitative content analysis.

**Results:** Three categories emerged from the analysis: Experiences of concern for the study situation, Experiences of a Changing Learning Environment, and Motivation for a Future Role as a Nurse.

**Conclusion:** The nursing students reflected on the importance of participation and cooperation with teachers and fellow students in the ongoing digital and social learning process to reach the goal of completing a nursing education. Being included and supported by educators and fellow students in the study situation helped the students to stay on and master their educational and personal challenges.

**Keywords:** Caring, Learning, Pandemic situation, Nursing Students, Qualitative method

**Introduction**

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, Norwegian universities chose to start remote, digital teaching in March 2020. This study gives a «glimpse» of how second year students in the Bachelor programme in nursing experienced the situation, three months after the pandemic resulted in lockdown in Norway (Regjeringen 2020). The nursing programme in Norway is 50% practice and 50% theory. Adjustments were made so that the students would be able to keep up the planned study progression and complete the programme despite the pandemic (Kunnskapsdepartementet 2020).

The students were free to choose between “paid shifts”, meaning that they worked as assistants in practice, or working on written projects. Communication with teacher and fellow students was done remotely in a learning and caring perspective (Martinsen 2003)(Eriksson 1992). Of the essence is caring and a learning community based on a sociocultural perspective on learning (Vygotsky 1978), and the students were assigned to the same Zoom groups over time, and were supervised by their teachers. The purpose of the study is to gain knowledge on the nursing students’ experiences with their study situation during the period from March to June 2020.

**Methodology:** The study has a qualitative design (Kvale et.al 2015). Data collection was done in a focus group interview, using a semi-structured interview guide (Kruger 2014). The criteria of COREO have been observed (Tong et.al 2007). Throughout the research process the researchers, who are also teachers, researched in their own field close to the students. Perspectives such as caring, learning and learning environment are at the foundations of understanding the students’ situation.

**Participants:** The research context was nursing students in their second year of the Bachelor nursing programme, residing in the general area of Oslo. Two students completed the practice through taking “paid shifts”, while two worked on written projects.

Two women and two men aged 24 –35, with former education and experience from various professions, participated. Their background and experience deviate somewhat from the general, usually younger, student body. The sample may have been skewed as a result, but gave us access to other experiences in relation to the themes addressed.

**Data collection:** A focus group interview was carried out, based on a semi-structured interview guide with themes such as socio-demographics, experiences from the health services, the study

situation and future role as nurse in light of the pandemic. The focus group interview took place as a conversation on Zoom on 18 June 2020 and was audio recorded and transcribed verbatim by last author.

The interview lasted 1.5 hours. Four students and three researchers were present at the focus group interview. One of the researchers recorded the interview, another researcher moderated and a third acted as co-moderator. A semistructured interview guide with open questions and topics for discussion was used. The researchers were flexible with respect to including other topics that arose along the way. The moderator led the interview and encouraged the participants to discuss and to mention examples. Questions such as “could you say more about this” or “What do the rest of you think about this” were posed. The role of the co-moderator was to observe, take notes and ask questions towards the end.

**Ethical research issues:** The sample is small and easily recognizable and we have chosen not to describe the participants’ education, exact age or prior work experience. This has safeguarded their anonymity. The study has been reported to NSD (project number 203758). The participants have given informed consent after receiving information on all relevant preconditions for participation. All regulations related to security for storing data have been observed and the data will be erased following the completion of the study.

**Analysis:** The focus group interview was transcribed and analysed using the Kvale et.al

(2015) phenomenological-hermeneutic content analysis, analysing the text at three levels: self understanding, common sense and theoretical interpretation. Level one of the analysis entails gaining an understanding of how the participants themselves understand the text.

Level two entails a dialogical analysis between the researchers and the data from the text of the focus group interview, based on the researchers’ understanding and knowledge. Level three involves theoretical knowledge to aid the interpretation of the meaning of the statements.

**Findings**

The findings consist of three categories: The students’ experience of concern for the study situation, The students’ experiences with changes in learning environment and The students’ motivation towards a future career in nursing.

**The students’ experience of concern for the study situation**

The students expressed being concerned in relation to their socio-economic situation:

*Well, it was a bit like I said – that you could work a bit in addition to studying. And if it hadn’t been for this chance I had to work, I would have been in an economic squeeze later. So that was an important condition for me to continue. So that was quite decisive.*

The students gave the impression of having family responsibilities:

**Tabel 1 Qualitative Analysis**

<i>The students’ experience of concern for the study situation</i>	<i>The students’ experiences with change of learning environment</i>	<i>The students’ motivation towards a future career as a nurse</i>
Worrying about socio-economical issues	Missing campus life/losing a social life	Developing awareness of the nurse’s role in society
Worrying about progression of studies	Changing the learning environment to substitute a work and theory programme for planned practice	Confirmation of personal career choice
Worrying about the pandemic	Experience with digital learning/teaching methods (as a substitute for physical presence on campus)	Strengthened motivation for choice of career and further studies in health care

*I have children, bonus children and a husband – and I also work in the home services in .... And then you had to put all these pieces together - and then the theoretical race – that was just great. When I was able to structure things more, it worked out – it worked out quite well, actually.*

It seems as if a structured theoretical programme influenced the students' feeling of accomplishment. The students worried about personal economy and were anxious that they would be unable to complete their studies within the time prescribed, which made some of them choose the theoretical programme. Choosing a theoretical programme tailored to the students in this phase of the pandemic gave the students a feeling of control. This way they were able to work and make money alongside their studies:

*I was really all ready for it at first, really looking forward to it and, got a name tag with just my first name and was just really all set for just this practice. So it was a bit of a let down when she called and said it was cancelled. It was sort of ... but then that all started, what X says too – that you start worrying about the progression compared to the planned time.*

The students expressed feeling insecure about the pandemic:

*At the same time as corona – been somewhat aware of – feel people have been quite split about being considerate and people who are inconsiderate and won't follow the rules. That has become quite obvious around family and friends – who follows rules and who doesn't. People are just so different and take things so differently – maybe it is something else to live in a town in the periphery compared to in an urban area like here, there's been a lot of Covid here. Have reflected a lot on this. In that respect I feel it has been somewhat exciting to have been part of all this. And it isn't over yet – and that many behave as if the pandemic is over, which it isn't.*

Another student was anxious about the Covid situation she had to deal with in practice:

*What was more of a challenge.. was the unknown – we received information – is it really possible to catch Covid from – after four hours – makes us a bit anxious. The routines were in place. They work with contagions and hygiene anyway – so there was a bit extra attention to this. When this is over – it is good to have a bit more awareness of this – that was good.*

The findings show that the students experienced concern in relation to their study situation, socio-economic situation, family situation and the Covid situation.

### **The students' experience with a changing learning environment**

The change to digital/remote teaching and adjusting to that method, in addition to mastering the new work method in learning situations, the availability of the teacher and digital equipment, all contributed to give inner motivation to persevere in the challenging situation. Several students were without access to wi-fi and digital resources at the outset. They were used to meeting physically in study groups on campus, but lost this possibility for social interaction:

*It was challenging for me not to be able to meet, and not to be able to go to campus, and no access to a library. That's all part of student life that we still don't have now.*

About the digital programme one student says:

*It was fine, but hard to commit totally. I am not all that used to meeting on Zoom, the physical aspect is not there for me.*

Increased contact with teacher and fellow students gradually gave more predictability. The study progression and mastery of digital teaching tools were experienced as positive. Relevant professional discussions related to the pandemic, individual meetings with the teacher to map the students' individual needs for teaching, the support from the teacher when the situation was felt to be difficult were all experienced as positive by the students. They also describe a feeling of uncertainty, and several informants said they missed not being able to meet physically:

***I was alone at home like everybody – I felt a lack of motivation ... getting motivated was not easy. We had a really nice group and ... and that was the closest we could get to a real classroom – and meeting colleagues too.***

Despite the changes in the learning environment the students said they felt more included by teachers and practice supervisors. Some worked in practice and were included in the work community, while others participated in the digital programme:

***But once we got the theoretical project, where we were to write about Covid 19 and how that may influence my study situation, I saw that as an important motivational factor for me. For then I was able to be ... till it should be about doing one's part in making the best of the situation. And be able to focus and absorb as much knowledge as possible, based on what one had gained during earlier practice periods. Well, so I thought that was really nice.***

The students describe loss of life on campus and what that entails for their learning environment, changes in study plans and plans for practice as positive. These changes were experienced as positive, but the experience was to a great extent dependent on the students themselves – their own attitude towards making the best of the situation. They describe a positive development, starting in uncertainty, to greater security through participation in groups and working with study projects. At the same time several informants expressed missing not being able to meet physically.

#### **The students' motivation for working towards a future careers as a nurse**

The students expressed what the pandemic has meant for their motivation with regard to a future career as a nurse. The situation had significance for their studies, the theoretical part as well as the practical part. The “digital” community with fellow students and teacher has been inspiring and they are motivated to complete their studies:

***I want to become a nurse to contribute to society!***

Due to the pandemic the university and the practice field together had to find other solutions than the ones originally planned, which gave the students other types of practice fields:

***I am one step further. And that's what counts all the way. It is of course a bit too bad to not get that practice. I was curious before, but now I am even more curious about taking that path – in psychiatry.***

A professional shall develop independence in order to fill the role of a responsible professional. The experience of independence is an element that probably strengthens an inner motivation for a future professional career:

***It is in fact difficult to point to something specific, what you have learned the most about in the situation, going from a kind of isolation, to something more positive – to independence – some autonomy, like doing something good, we are dependent on each other – we are completely dependent on collaboration in nursing. It was also an opportunity to be reminded of taking responsibility for independent learning. There is a lot in fact – which may depend solely on me.***

The study emphasises nursing as a meaningful profession in a society when handling a pandemic:

***An extremely important profession which one appreciates, but which Norway does not appreciate much – you can see that in the salaries and shifts***

The significance of the profession is emphasised but the students point to that it is important that more people recognise this and that the significance of the profession has become evident throughout the pandemic, in the media, i.e. They have experienced support for their own choice to train as nurses:

***I could finally – many people didn't understand why I made that choice? Now nobody asks me that question anymore.***

This is an issue related to a future in the nursing profession. If the economic incentives are most important for choice of profession, nursing students have other and stronger arguments for choosing the profession:

***For the population this is a novel perspective on the profession itself. I didn't need confirmation personally, but it is nice to get it anyway. To personally appreciate the profession and see that others – are beginning to gain an understanding and appreciation for the profession. That was really nice. It is just a confirmation that this is quite certainly the right choice for me – I am not going to regret this.***

The students' commitment to train as nurses is upheld and becomes evident to them:

***Then she said that at least you'll never be unemployed. No, that's for sure. But it is – I do think like that – I feel that it is not a job. I think about nursing – more on the basis of that it is the right thing to do.***

The students express increased awareness around the nurses' important role in society. The situation has given them confirmation of the choice they made to become a nurse. That is clearly expressed as strengthened motivation for choosing the profession, and they envision a further commitment to the health field, such as health politics.

## **Discussion**

The purpose of the study was to describe what nursing students in their second year of study experienced in the study situation during the first three months of the pandemic in 2020. The findings show that the students experienced concern for their study situation, experienced changes in the learning environment and became motivated to work as nurses in the future.

Following the acute phase of lockdown, the students gained a feeling of control of the situation through adapting to the possibilities. This is in line with the Lazarus & Folkman (1984) stress-mastery model. Cao et.al (2020) found that stress increased as a consequence of isolation, whereas social support lowered experienced stress. Gallego-Gomez et.al (2020) found that lockdown increased the stress level of students and influenced their economic situation, life situation and family relations, which is in line with our findings. The findings of Skogstad et. al (2021) show concern for society, health, social activity, personal finances and duration of the pandemic.

Young people in urban areas experienced health and quality of life more negatively than people in rural areas, and worrying had impact on their feeling of loneliness (Geirdal et.al 2020). Proper planning from the university with "remote learning" may lower the students' experience of stress (Savitsky 2020). The university these students attend tried to accommodate for the "sociocultural perspective on learning" (Dysthe, 2001). As a consequence of the pandemic the structural conditions changed and the students lead a fairly lonely existence in their rooms, alone with their computer and their books. To many, the so-called "campus life" offers a general feeling of well-being by being around other students and this again gives increased motivation for learning. This possibility was abolished as a part of the students' normal study situation.

According to Illeris (2004), the triangle of learning entails content, incentive and interaction, requiring input from both teachers and students. Baloran (2020) found that certain students did not enjoy digital teaching.

Our findings show, however, that the students adapted to the digital learning forms along the way. Masha et.al (2020) found that students that had computers and wi-fi access mastered the situation, whereas lack of privacy caused an increase in stress levels. Loss of wi-fi access, decreased contact with teacher and fellow students led to isolation, a feeling of lacking support, to frustration and a mistrust of digital teaching. Our findings show that having children in the household made participation in Zoom teaching somewhat difficult. It is possible to learn effectively with digital teaching (Owusu-Fordjour 2020).

The students' experience of the teachers' supportive function along the way in the pandemic emerges in our findings, along with a change in the learning environment. In a caring and learning perspective this may be compared to learning under changing conditions where learning, despite changing conditions, became an important dimension with caring in the front seat (Eriksson 1992). In practical pedagogy this was seen in that the students experienced being included and having influence (Vygotsky 1978). Their motivation was also influenced by what happened both within and outside of the study situation. The outbreak of COVID-19 was a unique and unexpected event that resulted in the

students gaining a good impression of the nursing profession. They became aware of the importance of the role of the nurse. That gave an extra dimension to the reflection over the choice of career and the incentive to master the study situation.

The interaction between student and learning experiences has given positive incentives for a future professional role, as one grows as a human being. The experience of learning about the profession despite all the restrictions, and succeeding in the study progression, became an external source of motivation for continuing the study programme. Motivation may be triggered by either internal or external factors. Students with inner motivation have the necessary attitude to learning, working and accomplishing the learning goals (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Inner motivation contributes to conquering challenges, improves self-image, creativity and pedagogical performance (Khalaila 2015). That the society in general acknowledges nursing as valuable is of positive significance (Dadgaran et al 2013). Nurses have been in the front lines of saving patients who have fallen seriously ill. The participants in our study show great interest for and commitment to the profession and have inner motivation to complete their studies. This has been strengthened throughout the practice period despite that the preconditions for completing the clinical practice period having changed and become more challenging. Students may on a general basis seek SOC (sense of coherence) according to Antonovsky's theories on salutogenesis (Eriksson & Lindström 2006). There is probably a strong relationship between mastery and the experience of meaning of what one is doing, and being of help is deeply meaningful. Grandinetti's (2013) study of motivation shows that feedback and active dialogue between teachers and students increase the students' motivation for a future career as nurses. Society's positive attitude to nurses will likely strengthen the nursing students' acknowledgement of the value of nursing as a profession that focuses on other people's life and health, on caring and being moral. This may improve their professional identity (Heung et al., 2005) and choice of career (Chen & Zhang 2015)(Wu et al., 2015).

Knowledge on COVID-19 has given the nurse students a deeper understanding of the importance

of the nursing profession in fighting the pandemic. This gives the nursing profession more prestige. Efficient mastery strategies and realistic understanding of the nurses' important work in relation to the pandemic strengthens the belief that the profession is the right choice and increase their motivation and commitment to become nurses.

The supportive factors included satisfaction with the practice and suitable work requirements, which made the students feel understood by teachers, practice supervisors and the community. The teachers' caring relationship entails emotional support, which has a positive influence on the students' well-being and learning (Semmer et.al, 2008). Ideas from positive psychology suggest that supportive teacher behaviour when relating to students makes the students feel included (Vygotsky 1978, Semmer et.al, 2008). In a pandemic we consider a caring perspective to be of great value for those concerned (Martinsen 2003, Eriksson 1992).

According to the students, emotional regulation was positively impacted by the supportive learning environment. This included practical skills training, well organised learning plans and supportive feedback. Nurse students and recent graduates often suffer from lack of motivation due to a high level of stress during the programme (Bartlett, Taylor, & Nelson, 2016; Flinkman & Salanterä, 2015; Riley, Collins, & Collins, 2019). Motivating factors have greatest effect on completing an education (Buchan, Shaffer, & Catton, 2018; Efendi, Kurniati, Bushy og Gunawan, 2019). Motivational regulation is necessary for meeting the challenges, developing professionalism and completing higher education (Linnenbrink - Garcia et al., 2018). Assuming responsibility for own learning presupposes good motivation and is decisive for completing the education by actively participating (Sulosaari et al., 2015).

**Methodological considerations:** The number of participants was small, but the data are representative and rich as a result of the participants' eagerness to discuss the themes in the focus group interview. In line with the Declaration of Helsinki (2008) we reflected on the research process and have attempted to ensure reliability and validity.

In the analysis we have tried to reveal new knowledge based on what the participants

communicated. We have shown the steps in the analysis through pointing to the findings and accounted for our roles as teachers and researchers in own field. This may have influenced the research process, and also have contributed to increase understanding and perspective within the context.

**Conclusion:** An important result of this study is that students communicate strong motivation despite studying to enter into a low-salary profession – that it is almost a mission, which seems strongly anchored in the person. That it is possible to motivate choice, studies and future profession in this way, in a pandemic, shows in a particular way meaning and relevance for the profession. Future research should focus on how universities may support and accommodate students who are caught in the tension between study situation, family life and professional life, considering the likelihood of future pandemics.

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