

Nursing students' experiences of practical teaching during pandemics

Experiências de estudantes de enfermagem sobre o ensino prático durante o período
pandêmico

Experiencias de docencia práctica de estudiantes de enfermería durante la pandemia

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Abstract

Objective: To analyze the experiences of nursing students in practical classes held in Primary Health Care during the Covid-19 pandemic. **Method:** Qualitative study. Twelve nursing students from a public federal university were interviewed. The narratives were analyzed using Content Analysis. **Results:** The findings portray the students' emotional state resulting from the interruption of face-to-face classes, in relation to the delay in the course and fear about their own health and that of their social peers; they explore negative and positive experiences; and, they denote the knowledge acquired, awareness of disease prevention, humanization, the development of an accurate look at the user, and the perceptions arising from socialization with professionals working in Primary Health Care. **Conclusions:** The pandemic has had an impact on practical teaching and has required adaptations. Obstacles and potentialities revealed challenges, but also strengthened knowledge and reflections on academic training.

Descriptors: Students, Nursing; Universities; Teaching; COVID-19; Primary Health Care.

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Resumo

Objetivo: Analisar as experiências de estudantes de Enfermagem nas aulas práticas realizadas na Atenção Primária à Saúde durante o período pandêmico da Covid-19. **Método:** Estudo qualitativo. Foram entrevistados 12 estudantes de Enfermagem de uma Universidade Federal Pública. As narrativas foram analisadas por meio da Análise de Conteúdo. **Resultados:** Os achados retratam o estado emocional dos estudantes decorrente da interrupção das aulas presenciais, em relação ao atraso do curso e ao medo com a própria saúde e dos pares sociativos; exploram as experiências negativas e positivas; e, denotam os saberes adquiridos, a conscientização da prevenção de doenças, a humanização, o desenvolvimento de um olhar acurado para o usuário, e as percepções advindas da socialização com os profissionais atuantes na Atenção Primária à Saúde. **Conclusões:** A pandemia impactou o ensino prático e exigiu adaptações. Obstáculos e potencialidades revelaram desafios, mas também fortaleceram conhecimentos e reflexões sobre a formação acadêmica.

Descritores: Estudantes de Enfermagem; Universidades; Ensino; COVID-19; Atenção Primária à Saúde.

Resumen

Objetivo: Analizar las experiencias de los estudiantes de enfermería en las clases prácticas realizadas en Atención Primaria de Salud durante la pandemia del Covid-19. **Método:** Estudio cualitativo. Se entrevistó a doce estudiantes de enfermería de una universidad pública federal. Las narrativas se analizaron mediante Análisis de Contenido. **Resultados:** Los hallazgos retratan el estado emocional de los estudiantes resultante de la interrupción de las clases presenciales, en relación con el retraso en el curso y el miedo sobre su propia salud y la de sus compañeros sociales; exploran las experiencias negativas y positivas; y, denotan los conocimientos adquiridos, la concienciación sobre la prevención de enfermedades, la humanización, el desarrollo de una mirada precisa sobre el usuario y las percepciones derivadas de la socialización con profesionales que trabajan en Atención Primaria de Salud. **Conclusiones:** La pandemia tuvo impacto en la enseñanza práctica y exigió adaptaciones. Obstáculos y potencialidades revelaron desafíos, pero también fortalecieron conocimientos y reflexiones sobre la formación académica.

Descriptores: Estudiantes de Enfermería; Universidades; Enseñanza; COVID-19; Atención Primaria de Salud.

INTRODUCTION

In December 2019, the global population was struck by a pandemic caused by Covid-19.¹ In this context, prophylactic actions and strategies were implemented in countries across all continents to prevent and reduce the spread of the disease. The use of face masks and hand sanitizer, social distancing, and the

prolonged closure of places where large crowds could gather, such as schools and universities, were some of the measures adopted.²

The educational sphere was profoundly affected by this public calamity, as health restrictions made in-person teaching impractical and social distancing recommendations were established. To ensure the continuity of



educational services, several institutions adopted remote learning on an emergency basis to continue theoretical classes.³⁻⁴

In the health field, particularly in the undergraduate Nursing program, classes were allowed to be held online.⁵ However, some Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) gradually resumed practical activities and internships, as these are essential and mandatory requirements for the course in question.⁶

Many HEIs alternate theoretical classes with practical experiences at the primary, secondary, and tertiary healthcare levels. Thus, Primary Health Care (PHC) is a practical setting that offers an opportunity for pragmatic learning, aligned with the educational principles established by the Unified Health System (SUS) and the National Curricular Guidelines for Undergraduate Nursing Courses (DCNs/ENF) in Brazil. This occurs because PHC involves students in health services early on, in order to allow the integration of theory and practice, the development of technical, scientific, and humanistic skills, as well as the integration of teaching and service.

A study conducted at a university hospital in Madrid, Spain, aimed to explore nursing students' perceptions of their clinical practices in caring for patients affected by the novel coronavirus. The

results highlighted the challenges inherent in clinical practice classes, as they had to reframe and reinvent the teaching-learning process, coupled with the fear that the respective scenario created.⁹

Another study conducted at three colleges located in the Republic of Korea, in which third- and fourth-year nursing undergraduate students participated, highlighted deficiencies in self-efficacy in clinical practice, as the participants in the respective study expressed concern about not being able to fully exercise their competence in the workplace due to the lack of practical classes during the undergraduate course during the pandemic period.¹⁰

Given this context, this research is justified by the need to understand the experiences of nursing students in practical classes held within PHC during the COVID-19 pandemic. This study aims to foster creative and critical-reflective thinking in the health pedagogical workshop, from a futuristic perspective regarding the repercussions of this context on future nursing professionals who have experienced this scenario. Therefore, the question is: What are the experiences of nursing undergraduates regarding practical teaching in primary health care during the COVID-19 pandemic?



Therefore, the present study aims to analyze the experiences of Nursing students in practical classes held in Primary Health Care during the Covid-19 pandemic period.

METHOD

A qualitative and exploratory study that allows us to demonstrate and elucidate phenomena present in society through the analysis of the meanings of human relationships, using techniques based on scientific evidence.¹¹

The research was carried out at the Nursing Department of a Federal Public University located in northeastern Brazil.

Participants were selected based on convenience. Initially, contact was made via the Nursing Program Coordination's institutional email address to determine the current enrollment of 371 students. The email addresses of class representatives were also requested, and they were then contacted and instructed to forward the message to other students.

Nursing students participating in this study were invited to participate voluntarily via the WhatsApp messaging app. At this time, the research objectives were explained to them and their consent and digital signature on the Informed Consent Form (ICF) were requested.

Nursing undergraduates of both sexes and of any age who attended at least one semester of practical classes in primary care during the COVID-19 pandemic were included. Students who were absent due to health problems or on vacation or school break were excluded.

To define the study sample, the saturation technique was used to avoid redundancies or repetitions; therefore, the inclusion of new participants was suspended when a similar pattern of responses was observed and persistence in data collection no longer presented relevance.¹² Thus, 12 students participated in this research.

To characterize the profile of the research participants, a form developed on the Google Forms platform was distributed; it was later sent to the students' email or via WhatsApp, along with the TCLE.

After this first contact, a date, time, and virtual tool (Google Meet or WhatsApp) were agreed with the students for an individual interview, lasting approximately 15 minutes, which took place between January and March 2023 and was conducted by two of the authors of this study (a researcher and a student of the Nursing course at the time), with the support of a semi-structured questionnaire constructed by them, containing questions



about the students' perceptions of practical teaching in PHC during the pandemic period.

It is worth noting that the interviews, conducted online, were recorded using two of the researchers' own digital media and were later transcribed and validated by the interviewees.

It is worth highlighting that this research met the rigor for qualitative research, with the support of the Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research (COREQ)¹³ guide, in order to guarantee the reliability and credibility of the data.

The reports were aggregated and analyzed through Content Analysis, characterized as a method of systematic evaluation of the content represented in the various communication formats, through the grouping and categorization of relevant words, phrases and themes for later interpretation.¹⁴

Study participants were briefed on the research objectives and ethical guidelines. The research was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the signatory institution, under consolidated opinion no. 5,719,805, CAEE: 63214822.6.0000.5208. The participants' right to anonymity was guaranteed, and they were identified by an Arabic numeral

sequence after the letter 'E' for student (e.g., E1, E2, E3, etc.).

RESULTS

The majority of students were female; self-identified as white or mixed race; Christian and Protestant. They were between 18 and 29 years old, Brazilian, and all were in their eighth semester of nursing at the time of the study.

The interviews resulted in three categories. The first, titled "Perceptions and Feelings Regarding the Suspension of Practical Classes," portrays the students' emotional state resulting from the interruption of in-person classes, particularly due to fears of course delays.

I was very sad! I felt frustrated and uncertain about when I would finish the course. (E1)

I felt very sad, because I thought the course would be delayed a lot and it really was. (E2)

I felt distressed because, with the suspension of classes, I was disoriented, anxious to know how we were going to make up for it all, and I was worried about the delay in the course. (E3)

A mixture of sadness and despair, and anxiety about having classes interrupted and delaying the course. (E5)

I felt desperate, because I knew this would delay the course. (E7)



At first, they estimated that it would be suspended for 15 days, but time passed and we became scared, immediately thinking about the course being delayed. (E9)

At first, I was sad, anxious, thinking about when I would graduate. (E12)

Feelings such as fear and concern for one's own health and that of one's peers were revealed.

We weren't vaccinated, and even though we were very careful and wore masks all the time, it still wasn't that safe. (E4)

Initially, I wasn't so worried about classes, I was more worried because it was a new situation, afraid of infecting my family if I caught Covid-19. (E6)

I was very scared and apprehensive about what was to come because it was a new situation, in addition to the fear of contagion and the uncertainty of the future; I had to reinvent myself. (E8)

As everything got worse, I felt desperate and anxious. I was scared for myself, for my family, and for thinking that maybe we wouldn't return to the reality we had before. (E10)

At the moment, I wasn't even that worried about theoretical or practical classes, I just wanted to protect myself and my family. (E11)

The second category, called 'Experiences gained in practical classes in

PHC during the pandemic', explores the negative experiences experienced by Nursing students in PHC during the pandemic period.

Of all the theoretical topics we covered, in practice, we only covered vaccinations and one activity on arboviruses; so, practically everything was missing. Another issue was the location of the USF (Family Health Unit), which was difficult to find, and not even the people who lived nearby knew where it was. Furthermore, the unit's professionals didn't welcome us well. (E2)

I thought we would have contact with AB (Primary Care) users in general and not just vaccination. Other things that are also essential in PHC were missing, for example, the management part. (E4)

On the other hand, some of the research participants mentioned positive experiences related to practical classes during the pandemic period.

It was a very enriching experience, which also reinforced the issue of identification with the health field. (E3)

It was a good experience, I found the practice very complete. (E5)

It was the first curricular practice with a larger workload. I enjoyed everything about it, especially because I enjoy AB; but, at first, the organization of the practices was disrupted because of Covid-19. (E6)



I did the internship in two different locations. In the first, everything was very restricted, and we did it through insistence, as the professionals were very reluctant. In another unit, it was completely the opposite; the professionals were receptive and asked to do whatever came up. We made visits and applied dressings. (E7)

It was a good experience. I really enjoyed it! But at the same time, there weren't many patients. But it was good to get an overview of how the service works and the nurse's responsibilities within a UBS (Basic Health Unit). (E8)

I think that within the context it was very beneficial. The only thing I didn't do was the home visit, which was suspended at the time. (E9)

I have nothing but good things to say about my work at PHC. We learned a lot about vaccination; we went door-to-door vaccinating the elderly during the influenza campaign. We provided bandages and health education to local motorcycle taxi drivers about STIs (Sexually Transmitted Infections) and drugs. (E10)

I had dressings done, I attended preventive exams, prenatal care... I really enjoyed it. (E11)

The unit was very far away, but it was a time when I was able to get a lot of vaccination practice. [...] We did prenatal care, health record monitoring, rapid HIV testing, and well-child visits. Although we were in the PHC discipline focusing on adults and the elderly, we didn't get to see much, and we ended up having advanced practice in women's health. (E12)

The third category, entitled 'Learning for the personal and professional future', comprises the knowledge acquired in the APS during the pandemic reported by students, both from a personal point of view and in future professional performance.

The importance of raising awareness and raising awareness of practices related to preventing COVID-19 and other diseases was highlighted. I think masks are here to stay. In the past, we ended up not taking as much care as we did after the pandemic. We saw how important handwashing is, as well as using hand sanitizer. These days, I don't enter a primary care unit or hospital without a mask. (E8)

Always wear a mask in health services. I think I'll carry that with me for life, because it wasn't a habit we had. (E9)

So many myths were created that we were able to debunk them in the PHC, explaining to patients the importance of vaccination and hygiene, not only for the transmission of Covid, but for several other diseases. (E12)

Humanization was highlighted as an important act for self-knowledge and the development of benevolent skills.

I will bring all the technical-scientific knowledge and experiences into the curricular practice, especially about knowing how to make the most of the experience we are having, regardless of the circumstances. (E6)



I hope a pandemic doesn't happen again. It was a unique experience that will be remembered. On one day of practice, we witnessed the vaccine being released for the 18-year-old age group, and a girl started crying as she was about to be vaccinated because she wanted her grandfather, who died of Covid, to have this opportunity. (E7)

I learned a lot about humanity, about looking at others with love, about compassion. I learned to appreciate the little things more, because it was a time that helped us rethink many things. I missed doing things that we used to think were boring, but actually weren't. (E11)

I learned to value life and the time I have with people more, because it was a disease that came out of nowhere, suddenly everyone was locked at home, many people lost relatives, friends. (E12)

An accurate look at the user was mentioned as a driving force behind healthcare.

The highlight was the vaccination, which I'll never forget. Also, the dynamics of home vaccinations and health education provided at the primary care unit. (E1)

More user-focused care, a closer look at information from the multidisciplinary team, and the importance of community health workers. (E3)

Another point listed was the perceptions arising from socialization with professionals working in PHC.

Practice showed me the nurse I don't want to be. It was our first contact... arriving this way, we didn't understand the role of the nurse in PHC in practice. (E2)

What I will learn is the respect I need to have for other professionals, health agents, everyone who makes up the team. (E10)

DISCUSSION

The first category, 'Perceptions and feelings regarding the suspension of practical classes,' indicates that most students felt sadness, fear, frustration, despair, anxiety, and worry; these feelings were linked to the delay in progress in the undergraduate course.

A study of nursing undergraduates at a public university in Kelantan, Malaysia, upon returning to clinical training found high levels of fear, particularly among female students. This fear was linked to the understanding of the high lethality, morbidity, and mortality of COVID-19.¹⁵ Another similar study conducted in Israel found high levels of anxiety among nursing undergraduates, particularly due to the fear of infecting themselves and others.¹⁶

Similarly, a study conducted in the United States with nursing students during the transition from an in-person to an



online learning platform in the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic identified difficulty concentrating and feelings of anxiety or overwhelm as the most common symptoms among students. Most respondents reported pandemic-related anxiety, concern about a friend or relative contracting COVID-19, and fear of becoming infected.¹⁷

In the second category, "Experiences gained in practical classes in PHC during the pandemic," it was noted that students were exposed to both positive and negative experiences. These perceptions were strongly shaped by the unique circumstances, as well as by the feelings they developed regarding the healthcare setting. These perceptions were also influenced by a series of variables related to each PHC unit used as a field of practice, such as: location, the professors/preceptors involved, and the multidisciplinary team working there.

Among the negative aspects, we highlight the lack of practical experience with theoretical topics related to PHC; the impact of the pandemic on the resistance of health professionals, as well as the lack of management; the reduction in the number of patients in the primary care units; and the distance from available practice areas. On the other hand, positive aspects were observed, such as

identification with the PHC field, practical experiences that covered topics covered in theory, and the implementation of various characteristic actions and procedures such as health education, nursing consultations, vaccinations, rapid STI testing, home visits, among others.

A study conducted in Turkey highlighted the lack of clinical practice classes for skill development as one of the main challenges faced by nursing students in their training. On the other hand, positive reports were also obtained regarding self-awareness and better time management by students during the pandemic period.¹⁸

The third category, 'Learning for the personal and professional future,' presented students' reports on the knowledge acquired for personal and professional growth during the pandemic period.

One of the points highlighted by the students concerns hygiene and precautions to prevent COVID-19. The use of masks in healthcare settings, as well as regular hand hygiene through washing and/or using alcohol-based hand sanitizer, were highlighted as ways to reduce the transmission of infectious diseases.

Perceptions related to humanization also stand out, as the advent of the pandemic allowed us to reflect on the importance of enjoying life's simple



moments and knowing how to value them, awakening feelings of compassion and empathy for others, in addition to dealing with the grief left by so many people who died as a result of Covid-19.

The principles of universality, equity, and comprehensiveness of health care for the Brazilian population enshrined in the SUS were evident to some students during practical classes in the PHC, which demonstrate the importance of offering care focused on health promotion and prevention.

A study conducted in the United States addressed the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the future of nursing education by demonstrating the changes and lessons learned resulting from the weaknesses exposed by the pandemic context in undergraduate programs. By improving nursing education and practice, it is hoped that students and professionals will be better qualified to respond to emergencies and pandemics, as well as the needs of vulnerable populations.¹⁹

From another perspective, a study conducted in Brazil concluded that the scenario presented by Covid-19 enabled the development of critical thinking, leadership, protagonism, and empowerment in nursing. The challenges of this context, such as the scarcity of material resources, prompted reflections on

possible improvements in the work process and the valorization of the professional category.²⁰

CONCLUSION

This study analyzed the experiences of nursing students in practical classes held in PHC during the Covid-19 pandemic period, which highlighted the changes imposed by the pandemic in practical classes in several aspects, influenced by individual variables and the nature of the health scenario.

Obstacles to resuming practical training were observed, related to fear of infection and difficulties accessing healthcare facilities. The suspension of some PHC activities and the reduced patient count in the units resulted in fewer opportunities to develop clinical skills. Furthermore, factors such as healthcare professionals' resistance to the health context and the distance from practice sites also contributed to a challenging training environment, potentially affecting the quality of learning.

However, despite the effects of the pandemic, the potential analyzed included the practical application of theoretical knowledge and the implementation of activities that characterize Primary Health



Care. Furthermore, the pandemic scenario sparked reflections on the importance of hygiene measures, reinforced concepts such as humanization and empathy in healthcare, and highlighted fundamental principles of academic training.

In conclusion, the findings of this study demonstrate the impact of the pandemic on the dynamics of practical classes in PHC, which required a readjustment of services and students themselves. Thus, it contributes to the redesign of practical activities, the redirection of the Pedagogical Political Project's actions, the readjustment of the teaching-service process, and the readjustment of health education interventions in the primary healthcare setting.

The main limitation of this study was that it was conducted in a specific location at a university in Northeastern Brazil. We suggest that further research with the same focus be conducted in different contexts to explore other perceptions of practical nursing education during the pandemic.

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