LPN to RN Transition in Nursing Education

By

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[Signatures]

Chair
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ABSTRACT

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Increasing numbers of licensed practical nurses (LPN) are seeking further education in order to advance to registered nurse (RN) status. This is in part due to changes in the healthcare industry and the demand for more RNs in the workforce. This has created a need for more effective LPN to RN transition courses available within nursing education programs. Attrition rates are variable among existing transition programs and more evidence based guidelines are needed in order to create successful programs. In this paper, Knowles’ theory of adult learning is applied to a literature review resulting in proposed best practice guidelines facilitating the academic and role transition of LPNs to RNs within Associate’s Degree Nursing (ADN) programs.

Keywords: LPN, RN, andragogy, education
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STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The nursing shortage is summed up in the following quote, "even the most conservative estimates of the nursing shortage (285,000 RNs by 2020) is nearly three times larger than any shortage of nurses that has occurred in the past 60 years" (Buerhaus, 2009, p. 126). As the nursing shortage continues to increase, schools of nursing must respond to the demand by graduating higher numbers of students who will become licensed Registered Nurses (RN). Enhancing the career mobility of Licensed Practical Nurses (LPN) can help to alleviate this gap in the workforce. With advanced placement into Associate Degree programs, LPNs can achieve RN status more quickly than generic Associate Degree in Nursing (ADN) students, and help to fill the widening shortage. This can also contribute to cost savings for the student and the school of nursing (Seago, Spetz, Chapman & Dyer, 2006).

The increasing complexity of nursing care requires a better-educated nurse. In their report entitled The Future of Nursing: Leading Change, Advancing Health the Institute of Medicine (IOM) states that nurses must achieve higher levels of education and training while nursing education creates more opportunities for seamless transition to higher nursing degrees (Institute of
Medicine, 2011). It is our obligation in nursing education to provide more successful and accessible options for LPN career mobility including the education necessary to become a registered nurse.

The transition from LPN to RN presents special challenges. There are relatively few programs offering LPN to RN transition, and variable attrition rates have been experienced by the ADN programs that do. Some programs report that the LPN transition population has lower attrition than generic RN students, while others experience devastating attrition among the LPN population (Cook, Dover Dickson & Engh, 2010; Raines & Taglaireni, 2008). A variety of factors could be contributing to this variance. LPN transition students are a unique group, many of whom are returning to school after an extended period of time in the workforce. They often have financial concerns and are forced to maintain heavy work obligations while seeking further education. Many have taxing family obligations as well. There are wide differences in their academic backgrounds and abilities. (Cook, Dover Dickson & Engh, 2010; Institute of Medicine, 2011).

PURPOSE STATEMENT

Due to the need for an increased RN workforce and variable success rates
for LPNs transitioning to the RN role, a multi-purpose literature review was conducted searching for specific attributes of LPN to RN transition courses or programs that contribute directly to student success during the educational progression. First, the search examined programs or strategies being used by Associate Degree Nursing (ADN) programs to facilitate the progression from LPN to RN. The findings were then used to compile recommendations for facilitating the academic and role transition of LPN to RN within ADN programs.

**SEARCH STRATEGY**

Nine articles were chosen for review in this paper. Of those, six are research based, and three are program descriptions. The majority of articles chosen were obtained via electronic database searches. The Cumulative Index to Nursing and Allied Health Literature (CINAHL) and PubMed were used to complete the searches, and duplicate searches were attempted in each database. Searches were derived from combinations of the following terms: LPN, licensed practical nurse, education, advanced placement, LPN to RN, bridge, articulation, associate degree, registered nurse and transition. These searches resulted in hand sorting of over two-hundred articles. Two additional articles were obtained through bibliographic searches. Exclusion criteria included unpublished works and publication prior to the year 2000 in attempt to reflect relevant and current practice.
CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The conceptual framework for this literature review and the recommendations that follow is Knowles’ Theory of Adult Learning: Andragogy. Knowles’ model is made up of six core principles (Knowles, Holton & Swanson, 1998, p. 133). Each will be related to the LPN to RN transition student population in the following paragraphs.

The first principle is the learner’s need to know. Adults will not be motivated to learn unless they can apply their learning in a meaningful way. Knowles’ work suggests that the adult learner be a collaborator in the learning process and be informed about how learning will be conducted, what learning should occur and why the learning is of importance (Knowles et al., 1998). LPN transition students must identify a need for further nursing knowledge in order to be receptive and successful students.

The second principle is the self-concept of the learner. This is particularly important for LPN transition students entering ADN programs as advanced placement students because they are often entering a previously formed cohort of students and have a different background and experience level than the other students. This also involves the individual’s ability to be autonomous or self-
directed in their learning as opposed to all learning being directed by the educator (Knowles et al., 1998).

Prior experiences of the learner are the next principle to be considered when applying adult learning theory. An adult learner’s prior experiences are thought to increase individual differences, provide resources for learning, create biases that can impact new learning and provide a basis for the learner’s self identity (Knowles et al., 1998). While each of these is applicable to the LPN transition student population, one must pay particular attention to the biases that nurses practicing at the LPN level may have toward the RN role and the education needed to become a practicing RN. The learner’s experiences in the case of the LPN to RN student can also be an asset, and must be recognized as valuable by the nursing faculty.

Readiness to learn is another important principle in Knowles theory. This portion of the theory states that the learner’s life circumstances may create a desire or need to know. This highlights the importance of looking at why the LPN is seeking further education and the need to gain a better understanding of their life situation (Knowles et al., 1998).

The next principle to be considered is orientation to learning or problem
solving. Adult learners typically value a problem-solving orientation to learning in which the new information is related to real-life scenarios (Knowles et al., 1998). Especially for LPNs, this is an important aspect of their learning needs because they have some experience in problem solving patient situations in the clinical setting, and will have a stronger interest if the new information is related to real problems they will face in the future.

The final principle is motivation to learn, which states that adult learners are more motivated by intrinsic rewards such as quality of life, satisfaction and self-esteem rather than extrinsic rewards such as salary advancement (Knowles et al., 1998). In applying this to the LPN transition student population, we must consider from where the motivation to continue their nursing education comes. Some students may seek further education due to external pressures from employers or due to workforce changes. These students may have less motivation than those who are advancing their career for their own intrinsic satisfaction.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Collaboration

One strategy for facilitating the educational transition from LPN to RN is
through collaborative relationships at various levels. The following program
descriptions highlight some collaborative ways that nursing programs can
facilitate LPN to RN transition.

Collaboration between schools of nursing is described in a scholarly paper
by Brown, Falkingham, Fischbach, Nerud, and Schmidt. The authors discuss a
technical college and a university that have combined resources by sharing
curricula, faculty and physical spaces. A four week transition course is included to
help the LPNs develop a more active style of learning. An exam is administered
before the LPN enters the RN program to verify the student’s existing knowledge
base. Upon successful completion of the exam, the students are granted 15 credits
and allowed entry into the RN bridge program. The authors report successful
articulation between the two programs (2005).

Murdock, McMorrow, LaCoursiere and Scriven describe a collaborative
statewide articulation program for LPN to RN transition. The plan allows for a
standardized process for advanced placement and transfer of credits among all of
the participating schools. An asynchronous web-based transition course was
developed, and implemented in the Spring of 2000 to overcome barriers of
distance, small enrollment numbers and financial sustainability. This course was
developed from a collaboration of faculty from the participating schools and the
Connecticut League for Nursing (CLN) with a goal of providing maximum flexibility and student support. An orientation course is provided along with a practice web-based course to help with readiness for online coursework (2000). No evaluation data for the CLN transition program were published in the above article, however, the advanced placement program is still offered according to the CLN website. (Connecticut League for Nursing, 2011).

A more comprehensive collaborative effort is recommended by Rapson. She describes evidence-based efforts by the Colleagues in Caring: Regional Collaboratives for Nursing Work Force Development program. Her findings are based on two research studies that explored LPN to RN transition and the Achieving Continuing Career Education for Success and Satisfaction (ACCESS) program. One of the program’s focus areas is articulation in nursing education and elimination of system barriers for nursing career mobility. Rapson takes a broad look at the issue, and recommends involving statewide or regional stakeholders from all levels of nursing education and practice in order to remove system barriers. A system-wide articulation program can increase educational access at all levels, provide a consistent and equitable policy for advanced placement, and assure quality. Recommendations also include implementation of an oversight committee that will do evaluation and process improvement (2000).
Transition Courses

Transition or bridge courses for LPN students seeking an ADN degree are commonly used to help the advanced placement student through the transition into higher level courses with a previously developed cohort of students. Cook, Dover Dickson and Engh studied a transition program that has been incrementally increased in length to facilitate the LPN to RN students. Originally, the program used a ten week bridge course, and had a program completion rate of about 50 percent with 68-74 percent of graduates passing the NCLEX-RN. In response to this low success rate, the bridge course was incrementally extended. Eventually they developed a 15 week course with a 92 percent completion rate and a 90 percent NCLEX-RN pass rate (2010).

The 15 week bridge course has greatly improved student success in this program. Strategies incorporated into the course include having consistent faculty teaching the bridge program as well as including the topics that were covered in the first year of the program for the traditional ADN students (Cook et al., 2010). This study also used a 22 item questionnaire during the last two weeks of the transition course to explore the challenges for the LPN to RN students. This was repeated in cohorts over a three year period resulting in a sample size of 79 students, which represents an 85 percent response rate. The survey data highlight
the importance of adult learning theory. The students have varied past experiences, and these are significantly different than those of the generic ADN students. The bridge course is tailored for the LPN population and takes their prior learning into account. A survey of the transition students found that many did not see the value of the math skills expected at the RN level. This also fits with the andragogical view. Their prior experiences did not allow them to see the need for that learning. Their past experiences had also shaped a perception for some students that they have less need to know than actually exists. Many believed they were already functioning in the same capacity as an RN, which can be a significant barrier to learning (Cook et al., 2010).

Jensen (2008) conducted a quantitative evaluation of a hybrid transition course that utilizes distance education in order to facilitate the transition from LPN to ADN student. Hybrid courses combine online curriculum with face-to-face sessions. In the development of this program, local hospitals collaborated in the process by providing incentives for LPNs to continue their education. The bridge course that had been used previously was modified from a two credit traditional course to a one credit hybrid course allowing more flexibility for both the students and faculty members. Much of the coursework was done asynchronously. Three face-to-face sessions were included. The course focused on the nursing process, the Neuman Systems Model (NSM), IV therapy and blood
administration. Students were required to write a formal nursing assessment paper (NAP). They struggled with this, especially with formatting (2008).

The course was evaluated using a survey developed by the instructor to assess LPN’s perceptions of their confidence to complete course content and assignments. This was given at the beginning and repeated at the end of the course. “Statistically significant items included confidence in completing assignments related to the nursing process as a whole and its individual components, applying NSM to patient assessment, NAP completion and central line IVs” (Jensen, 2008, p. 139).

Student satisfaction with the course was evaluated with “minute papers” at the first class meeting, as well as both formative and summative evaluations. Overall, the response to the course was positive. Of the 20 students who started the hybrid transition course, 19 successfully completed the bridge course, and continued in the ADN program. The transition course was intended to be followed by two semesters for the completion of the Associate’s degree program. One year after implementation of the hybrid bridge course 14 out of the 19 students were actively enrolled and progressing in the program. Six of them would be graduating in the three semester minimum timeframe allowed by the program. In conclusion, the author cites the hybrid course as successful, and recommends
incentives from employers for LPNs to transition to RNs, and for nursing faculty to utilize methods that will bolster student confidence and self-efficacy (Jensen, 2008). This work would be strengthened by comparing the hybrid course outcomes to those of the traditional course. Another limitation is potential for bias in the evaluation tool that was developed by the course instructor.

Mentoring

Mentoring is another common strategy used by ADN programs to facilitate the integration of LPN transition students. Sweet and Fusner (2008) discuss the use of a peer mentoring program to help advanced placement LPN students, who are entering an RN program and joining an already developed cohort of generic RN students. The authors use a 6-quarter ADN nursing program to explore this issue. LPNs are granted advanced placement into the fourth of six quarters in order to transition from LPN to RN. An 11 week bridge course is administered to the incoming cohort of LPN students, which typically has 15-26 individuals. In this course, the LPNs have an opportunity to socialize with each other. Past cohorts had expressed concerns about a lack of belonging to the RN student cohort, not feeling valued within the cohort, lack of entrée to already established study groups and lack of knowledge regarding program operation. Additional concerns include feelings of isolation, lack of involvement with
In response to these concerns, a pilot peer mentoring program was established and implemented. Each of the LPN students was paired with a generic associate degree student in the second week of the bridge course. Mentors were chosen on a voluntary basis. Two surveys were developed to explore social integration of the advanced placement LPN into the class, their readiness to enter the Associate’s degree program and to evaluate the peer mentoring program. Two cohorts of LPN transition students were surveyed prior to the pilot of the peer mentoring program, which resulted in 26 respondents. At the conclusion of the pilot mentoring program, the students completed the surveys, and the mentors completed the program evaluation survey. The responses of the 13 mentored transition students were compared with the survey responses from the control group. Based on t test scores, the most significant differences between the two groups were surrounding the topic of how the incoming LPNs fit into the existing cohort of students or social integration (Sweet & Fusner, 2008). “The LPNs who had mentors were more positive in their responses than were those in the non-mentored group” (Sweet & Fusner, 2008, p. 204). The mentoring program evaluation survey responses were positive as well. The authors emphasize the importance of considering social integration along with academic preparedness.
when developing transition programs for LPN to RN students (Sweet & Fusner, 2008). This study would be strengthened by using the program completion data as an additional measure. The data shows student satisfaction, but not necessarily their successful articulation.

Miller and Leadingham also incorporated mentoring into a transition program for LPN to RN students. They developed an orientation program consisting of six phases. In the first phase, students were introduced to the services offered at the school. The aim was to foster integration into social and academic systems. In phase two, the students took a self-assessment inventory assessment and their entry exams for math and reading are reviewed. The third phase began the formalized mentoring program in which students voluntarily met with assigned faculty mentors. The next three phases involved development and implementation of individualized plans created in the initial mentoring meetings. A quasi-experimental study was conducted to determine whether the faculty driven mentoring program promotes student success and progression (2010).

Data were collected for four terms and yielded a 62 percent overall participation rate which included 31 respondents. The student responses were generally positive regarding their experience with the program. Success of students who participated in the student success program was compared with
those who did not participate. No significant difference was found in the pass rates for the transition course or progression to the next course in the nursing program, however, the mentored group was more likely to achieve graduation from the ADN program (Miller & Leadingham, 2010).

Other Approaches

Suttle and McMillan (2009) evaluated two LPN to RN program options within an Associate degree nursing program. The first option was developed in the 1980s, and allows qualifying LPNs to challenge the courses in the first two semesters of the program by taking the midterm exam, final exam, math proficiency exam and pass a skill validation. This option has been kept small, and a total of 64 students have begun the process. Nine students dropped out very early. Of the remaining 55 students, 71% or 39 students successfully completed the challenge process. Of those, 87% (34 students) graduated from the program, and had a 94% NCLEX-RN pass rate on the first attempt. (Suttle & McMillan, 2009).

While the LPN challenge program remains an option, a second pathway was developed in 2005 in order to provide increased flexibility throughout the program and to speed up the process of completion. The “Fast Track” option was
developed based on the standardized LPN curriculum used in Mississippi. This compressed the five semester Associate degree program into three consecutive semesters for the transitioning LPN students. At the time the article was written, the fast track option had completed two classes of ten students each. Of the 20 admitted, there is a 55% graduation rate. Among the students who withdrew from the program, most cited personal reasons, such as finances, relocation, lack of interest or personal and family issues. The first-time NCLEX-RN pass rate for the graduates was 91%, which is equal to about ten students. The authors consider this program a success and conclude that ADN programs must be innovative in order to meet the demands of health facilities (Suttle & McMillan, 2009). While the authors described the LPN fast track option as a success, further evaluation of this option should be conducted due to the graduation rate of only 55%.

Coyle-Rogers (2003) looked at LPN development of adaptive competencies, which are defined as the skills required to effectively complete tasks. Kolb’s theory of experiential learning and the concept of adaptive competencies are used to aid in career mobility and transition to the RN role. A quasi-experimental design was used to determine adaptive competencies developed by LPNs to aid in their transition to RN. Kolb’s Adaptive Competence Profile (ACP) was administered to 29 LPN students from two different community colleges near the completion of their programs. Both groups were
found to have developed competencies at comparable levels. These competencies are thought to be needed for the LPN students to be successful in their transition to the RN role. The author states that these findings support articulation models that allow nurses to move from one level of practice to a more advanced level including LPN to RN. These adaptive competencies should be incorporated into any transition or bridge course to facilitate educational mobility for nurses. (Coyle-Rogers, 2003).

This literature review highlights the need for further development of quality nursing research on this topic. Several of the articles used in this review have small sample sizes and used convenience sampling. Some of the program reviews lack evaluation data for approaches that seem promising, while others report success, yet others have completion rates far below optimal. Some of the program evaluation data are based on student satisfaction rather than other measurable program outcomes.

**RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRACTICE**

Promising approaches for the transition from LPN to RN are beginning to emerge in the literature. Collaboration at the institutional level is one strategy that is supported in the literature and has been successful in making this transition
more accessible for LPNs. Murdock et al. and Rapson describe state-wide collaborative programs which offer the advantage of pooling resources and a more consistent approach to LPN to RN transition (Murdock et al., 2000; Rapson, 2000). Jensen mentions collaboration with the LPN’s employers (2008). These methods should be considered by programs developing transition offerings for LPNs in the workforce.

The use of bridge or transition courses for LPN students being admitted as advanced placement students in RN programs is a widely utilized strategy. The optimal length of the course is not clearly determined. However, most of the successful programs in this review offer bridge courses that are close to the length of one academic term (ten to fifteen weeks). They are designed to highlight those concepts the generic students are introduced to in the first year of an ADN program as well as provide opportunities for social integration. This is a logical approach because the LPN transition students have typically been out of school for a length of time, and have had varied academic experiences prior to entering an RN program. This approach will give students a common basis on which to build as they enter the higher level RN courses, as well as introduce methods of learning used in the nursing program. This strategy reflects Adult Learning Theory because it offers an opportunity for the incoming student to experience some of the instructional methods that will be used in the remainder of the nursing
program. If needed, the student can make a transition from thinking of school in a teacher driven model to a more active, learner centered framework (Cook et al., 2010; Sweet & Fusner, 2008).

Mentoring is another theme present in the literature. Some programs have implemented peer mentoring and others rely on faculty mentors. The LPN students have socialization needs related to entering a program midstream. They benefit from the welcoming and supportive environment created by mentoring (Miller & Leadingham, 2010; Sweet & Fusner, 2008). This approach is consistent with Knowles’ theory in that it supports a positive self-concept of the learner which is needed for success as an adult learner. (Knowles et al., 1998).

Another important aspect of the transition is to highlight the differences in the role and scope of practice between LPNs and RNs. As discussed by Cook et al., the students may perceive that they are already working in the RN role which diminished their sense of the need to know, a core principle of Knowles’ theory. This mismatch in perception of the role difference can set up an attitude of resistance to learning new ways of thinking and carrying out nursing care, which can create unsafe situations as the student’s responsibility level increases (Cook et al., 2010; Knowles et al., 1998). The inclusion of the RN scope of practice in the transition course with opportunities for the students to apply their learning is one
strategy for helping the LPNs see the differences and value the transition they are undertaking.

Accessibility must be considered when designing programs to support the LPN to RN transition student. These are students who have multiple demanding roles. Designing online or hybrid (part online and part face-to-face) curriculum for the transition or bridge course is a recommended strategy. This will also facilitate the development of learner autonomy or ability to be self-directed prior to the student’s entry into the rigorous RN courses (Jensen, 2008; Knowles, et al., 1998; Murdock et al., 2000).

Additional high-quality research on this topic is needed. Several of the articles included in this review describe promising practices, however, many lack strong evaluation data. Some of the articles involved small sample sizes, usually made up of convenience samples. In order to continue to move toward best practices in nursing education, a broad body of ongoing research is needed. Follow-up data regarding the transition to practice for LPN to RN graduates is another area of research needed in order to best evaluate nursing program success.

Related topics of research that will give a fuller understanding of the problem should be developed as well. These might include analyzing the impact of mobilizing LPNs to the RN level. The impact on our ability to staff long-term
care facilities if more LPNs progress to the RN role is an area of concern. The impact for generic ADN applicants if more LPNs are allowed advanced placement into RN programs should also be considered. Additionally, we must consider the shift toward more community-based care in the modern healthcare system. Perhaps the acute care focus in our current ADN and therefore LPN to RN programs will need revision.

**CONCLUSION**

The rapidly changing healthcare environment will continue to drive the demand for a nursing workforce with a higher proportion of registered nurses. These factors along with intrinsic motivators will increase the need for successful LPN to RN transition programs. Nurse educators involved in this area of practice must continue to research their program success and publish their findings. This paper contributes to the state of the science on this topic by compiling the available data and distilling it into some practical strategies for ADN programs offering LPN to RN transition options.
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