

한국에서 간호학생으로 살아가기: 포토보이스 시각에서

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Living as a Nursing Student in South Korea: Insights from Photovoice Study

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Purpose : In their journey to become professional nurse, nursing students experience significant stress and difficulties while balancing theory and practice during their university years. This study aimed to investigate the lived experiences of nursing students who had clinical practice to provide interventions tailored to their needs.

Methods : This study utilized the photovoice method to analyze nursing students' experiences in South Korea. Seven participants took part, capturing photographs, engaging in discussions to select themes, and sharing their opinions and experiences.

Results : Five themes emerged: "Financial burden due to excessive expenses," "The overwhelming amount of study," "Feeling nervous about clinical nursing practice," "Risk of health problems," and "Having dreams and hopes for the future." The study revealed that nursing students experience academic and practical burdens, financial strain, and health issues during clinical practice, yet they overcome these challenges with aspirations for the future.

Conclusion : This study verifies the effectiveness of a program to alleviate the difficulties faced by nursing students and overcome stress, thereby helping them grow into professional nurses, and suggests the need for research on program development.

Keywords: Clinical practice, Experience, Nursing student, Photovoice

핵심어: 임상실습, 경험, 간호학생, 포토보이스

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Received: 2024.12.03.

Revised: 2024.12.16.

Accepted: 2024.12.17.

Introduction

In Korea, university students undergo various changes, such as self-identity formation, academic and career choices, and interpersonal relationships, departing from the narrow entrance-oriented environment¹. Consequently, upon entering university, students implicitly receive freedom from academic constraints and time for relaxation and mental well-being, which contrasts with the fiercely competitive entrance examinations prevalent in Korean society.

For nursing students, the educational goal is to acquire the competency required for professional

nursing practice². Therefore, nursing students begin some major subjects in their first year of nursing to function as professional nurses in the field related to human life. They must withstand a vast amount of learning to achieve the task of passing the national examination. They live through an intensive education process that combines theory and practice under a rigorous evaluation system³. Therefore, this lifestyle has been shown to cause high levels of stress and anxiety among students⁴. In general, they may have lower happiness levels than students in general universities.

Moreover, nursing students should learn nursing duties by establishing interpersonal relationships

through contact with various people, such as patients, their families, and medical staff in hospitals, which serve as clinical practice sites⁵. They must collaborate with hospital department staff to provide adequate care⁶. However, they often bear the burden of tight schedules, and exams to be taken with each practical training session.

Clinical practice stress threatens an individual's well-being⁷. If not appropriately addressed, it is reported to negatively impact learning abilities and the capacity to carry out clinical practice⁸. Unmanaged clinical practice stress has been reported to lead to depression⁹, fatigue¹⁰, anxiety¹¹, anger¹², and academic burnout¹³, increasing the likelihood of nursing students struggling to adapt to university life¹⁴.

Photovoice, originally known as "photo novella," has surged in popularity since its inception in the early 1990s by Wang and Burris¹⁵. In this method, participants capture images of their daily experiences and engage in in-depth discussions to unearth social issues depicted in these photos. Through this process, participants gain valuable insights into their lives, develop critical thinking skills, and adopt diverse perspectives¹⁶. Photovoice is a participant-centered research method that allows participants to actively participate in the research process. It also effectively conveys difficult experiences or emotions through photographs, which are visual materials that directly represent the reality experienced in everyday life. This provides new insights to both participants and researchers and helps them understand specific situation more deeply. It is essential to consider their challenges and difficulties to understand the lived experiences of nursing students and provide interventions tailored to their needs. Therefore, this study aims to investigate the lived experiences of nursing students using the photovoice method

Methods

1. Study Design

The study utilized the photovoice method as a qualitative research tool, providing participants with a deep exploration and analysis platform in a way that sparked new interest and motivation among participants. Photovoice involves participants directly taking photographs relevant to the research theme using these images as a springboard to delve into their experiences, narratives, values, and perspectives¹⁷. This approach places a strong emphasis on self-expression, communication, and self-reflection, enabling participants to depict current situations and articulate their views and opinions through imagery¹⁶. By leveraging both visual and verbal language, photovoice allows participants to express critical issues from their unique perspectives¹⁸, making it a valuable tool for assessing subjective experiences.

Equipped with cameras, participants actively capture, and document aspects related to the chosen topic, thus becoming proactive contributors to problem-solving¹⁶. Photovoice provides participants with opportunities for introspection and can have therapeutic effects¹⁹, thereby enhancing their personal capacities. Consequently, photovoice can be viewed as a constructive method that empowers participants and fosters their engagement in the research process^{17,20}.

2. Inclusion criteria and recruitment

The study involved seven senior nursing students who had completed their nursing practicum. This selection aligns with Latz's^{17,20} recommendation that photovoice research, a form of participatory action research, is best suited for purposive rather than random sampling. Latz¹⁷ argued that focus group discussions offer advantages in generating data through group interactions, which individual interviews may not effectively capture. Moreover, this study followed the suggestion by Hannay et al²¹ that focus groups ideally consist of six to ten

participants. This rationale guided the methodology employed in this study.

3. Research process

The entire photovoice process involved active collaboration between researchers and participants. Data collection commenced in 2024 after obtaining approval from the Institutional Review Board (HIRB-2024-002). This process encompassed gathering photographs taken by participants in their daily lives and accompanying written statements and transcripts from interviews. The research methodology is summarized in Table 1.

Workshops were conducted every two weeks to allow participants to capture photos and attribute meaning to them. Before each workshop, researchers reviewed all materials posted on the online community, conducted pre-interviews with participants, and discussed the process of selecting photos and the reasons behind their choices, including feelings and concerns. Participants presented photos and shared their interpretations during the workshops, engaging in open discussions and providing feedback.

All participants' stories shared during the workshops were recorded with consent, and a research assistant transcribed them. Finally, the researchers evaluated and reviewed the appropriateness of categorized themes and

subthemes through discussions and consensus-building processes within the research team. Following the workshops, additional data on personal experiences and perceptions not shared during the photovoice sessions were collected through in-depth interviews with participants.

4. Ethical consideration

At the onset of the study, educating participants about the entire photovoice process was crucial, including their roles, responsibilities, and the potential benefits and risks involved in participation²². Throughout informing and recruiting participants, careful attention was paid to ethical principles regarding the study's nature, purpose, and methods. All participants provided written informed consent prior to enrollment in the study.

During the orientation phase, participants received a comprehensive explanation of the photovoice methodology to ensure their understanding. Consent forms for research participation and the use of photographs were obtained during this phase. Participants were assured that their pictures and text data would be treated anonymously and solely used for research purposes. Participants were also informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any point after submitting the research consent form. Further, they were assured that they could discard their submitted materials upon withdrawal.

Table 1. Research process

Step	Process	Contents
I	Orientation	• Sharing of the research purpose • Introduction of researchers and participants and participant roles • Explanation of the photovoice methodology • Instructions on how to take photos and the required number of photos • Writing the research participation consent form and addressing ethical issues
II	Workshop (2 times)	• Presentation and sharing of photos and their meanings • Feedback on presentations from other participants • Selection of photos
III	Group interview	• Recording and transcription of group interview data • Categorization of photo themes and subthemes • Sharing reflections on the process
IV	Photo and meaning analysis	• Researcher discussion and consensus-building

Table 2. General characteristics of participants

No	Sex	Age
1	Man	22
2	Man	23
3	Man	23
4	Woman	22
5	Woman	22
6	Woman	23
7	Woman	24

Table 3. Themes and Subthemes of the Photovoice

Themes	Subthemes
Financial burden due to Excessive expenses	Become tied to money Make money to alleviate financial difficulties Life to save money
The overwhelming amount of study	No time to rest Spending most of my time studying Tight daily schedule Fierce grade war
Feeling nervous about Clinical nursing practice	Preparing in advance Efforts assigned tasks well Trying not to make mistakes. Efforts to increase nursing competency
Risk of health problems	Become exhausted Poor health due to stress A strain on the body Feeling emotionally depressed Health problems to be accepted
Having dreams and hopes for the future	Confidence through commitment Strong support for the future Wishing for happiness Feeling proud

5. Data analysis

Data analysis followed Braun and Clarke's²³ thematic analysis method, comprising six stages. First, the data were reviewed to become familiar with them, involving repeated readings of participant-submitted photos, their accompanying descriptions, and interview transcripts. Second, initial coding was performed, highlighting key concepts across the transcripts. Third, themes were generated from the collected codes, and photos were organized into sub-themes. Fourth, any unrelated content arising during participant explanations in interviews was excluded from the analysis. Fifth, codes corresponding to sub-themes

were grouped under overarching themes, and any discrepancies were reviewed. Finally, themes were defined, named, and clarified. Representative photos and interview sentences conveying each theme effectively were selected and summarized.

Results

1. Study participants

Table 2 presents the participants' general characteristics. The participants in the study included seven individuals, comprising three men (aged 22, 23, and 23 years) and four women (aged 22, 22, 23, and 24 years). The mean age was 22.7 (SD=0.74) years.

2. Photovoice Themes

Five themes and 16 subthemes were derived in this study (Table 3).

1) Financial burden due to Excessive expenses

(1) Become tied to money

"While attending nursing school in Korea, I often found the financial aspect quite challenging. Nursing students have the unique feature of needing to conduct practical training. This involves rotating through multiple hospitals for practical training, and most students live near the hospitals rather than commuting from home. Consequently, they seem to spend a lot on transportation, food, accommodation, and other expenses. I cannot help but think that the practical training period must be tough for struggling students."

**Figure 1.** Always think about money

(2) Make money to alleviate financial difficulties

"To participate in practical training, undergoing tests such as antibody and tuberculosis tests, as well as vaccinations, are essential, which can also feel burdensome as a student. Additionally, purchasing practice uniforms and nursing shoes, as well as expenses for textbooks, certifications like BLS, and fees for exams and classes required to obtain a test scores for graduation and job preparation, are all included. I have never taken a break from a part-time job during the semester."

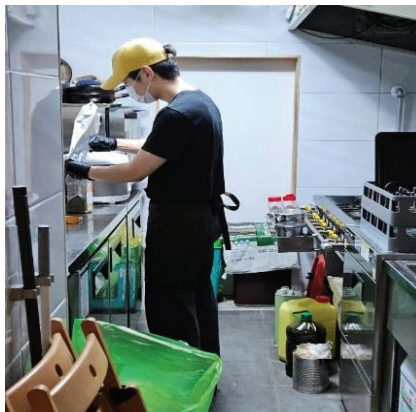


Figure 2. Part-time job even during the semester

(3) Life to save money

"Nursing students increasingly rely on convenience store food. Due to the low prices, the quality of convenience store food is often poor, with many items being overly processed, making it challenging to maintain a balanced nutritional intake. While students wish for better food options, financial constraints often limit their choices. Therefore, we rely on convenience store foods like triangular kimbap or sandwiches to save on food expenses"

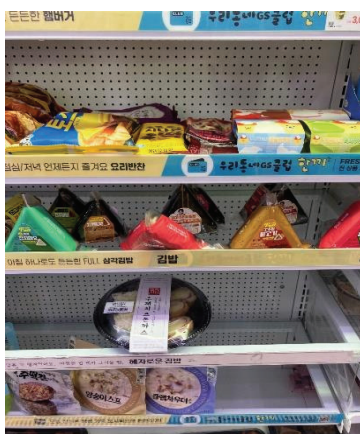


Figure 3. Grab a meal at a convenience store

2) The overwhelming amount of study

(1) No time to rest

"Among nursing students, you often hear the term 'death year.' This term metaphorically refers to the third year of university, which is considered the time when students are intensively preparing for employment. It is a neologism that describes the third year, with 'death year' pronounced when saying '3rd year.' Nursing students must complete 1,000 hours of practical training, so their campus life is relatively short compared to other majors. During the short theory period, they need to cover the entire syllabus for exams, sometimes covering as much as 50 to over 100 pages per subject per day. Students who stay up late or fail to get enough sleep often take naps during breaks in the classroom to make up for their lack of sleep."



Figure 4. Taking a nap 10-minute break during class

(2) Spending most of your time studying

"Study cafes are gathering places for people of various ages preparing for various exams. As shown in the photo, hanging a chair tag, commonly known as a 'seat tag,' with one's school and major written on it reveals the person's identity. During my third year, which consisted of double lectures for a year, I would attend lectures from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. and then return home for dinner before heading to the study cafe, usually around 8 p.m. Pressing the exit button in the deserted study cafe and dragging my tired body home was sometimes even heartbreaking."



Figure 5. Staying at a study cafe

(3) Tight daily schedule

"Due to the nature of nursing, students must complete more theory content and 1,000 hours of practical training within four years to be eligible for graduation compared to other majors. Even our exam schedules are typically accelerated, with midterms often scheduled just four weeks after the start of the semester. The planner photo depicts the daily routine of studying until dawn after waking up. In reality, studying all day long in that manner is still challenging to keep up with the progress of the lecture."

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Figure 6. A schedule that only includes studying except sleep and meals

(4) Fierce grade war

"Upon entering the nursing program, I realized something – sensitivity to grades. Most nursing major courses are graded on a curve. Therefore, even if I receive a high score above a certain level, my grade will be relatively lower if many others receive higher scores than me. I need to outperform others or hope others perform worse to achieve a high score. While curved grading encourages competition and fosters improvement through rivalry, it can also hinder peer collaboration due to intensified competition."

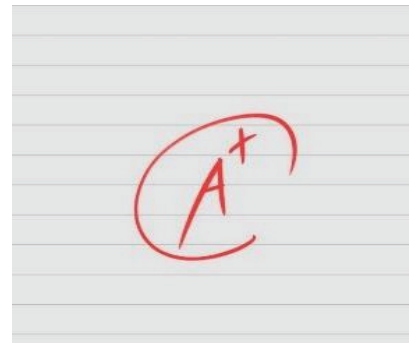


Figure 7. Studying hard to get an A+

3) Feeling nervous about Clinical nursing practice

(1) Preparing in advance

"One of the tasks nursing students can perform in their role as students during clinical practice is measuring vital signs. At first, measuring all the patients approximately 15 to 20 patients in the ward took over one hours because I was not familiar with the process. However, with repeated practice, I became more proficient, and now I can measure all the vital signs in about 30 to 40 minutes. Therefore, when measuring vital signs, if abnormal values are detected, they are immediately reported to the nursing instructor."



Figure 8. Practice before going to the field

(2) Efforts assigned tasks well

"During clinical practice, writing patient cases is a mandatory assignment. After finishing the practice session and feeling exhausted, I had to return to my accommodation and complete the assignment. Reviewing patient records to write cases can be challenging, especially interpreting orders in the ward's electronic medical record (EMR) system. Understanding the patient and determining the appropriate nursing care can be very difficult. Therefore, compiling lab data, nursing assessments, and processes takes a long time, often cutting into my sleep hours."

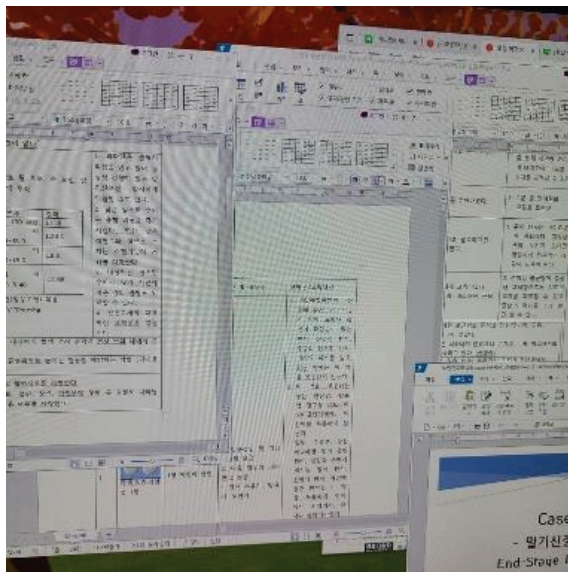


Figure 9. Complete all assignments

(3) Trying not to make mistakes

"While studying nursing, especially in the third and fourth years where the focus shifts to major courses and practice, alarms have become essential tools for me. I set multiple alarms because I worry about being late for practice if I do not hear the alarm. Even if I wake up on time, I set multiple alarms because I want to sleep more and keep saying, 'Just a little more, just a little more'."



Figure 10. Set a wake-up alarm not to late

(4) Efforts to increase nursing competency

"Nursing theory and practice are separate entities. Practical skills require not only specialized nursing knowledge but also manual dexterity. To excel in practical exams, one must possess quick reflexes and the ability to adapt to unexpected situations. Building on what we learned in on-campus practice, we move on to clinical practice in the third and fourth years. Clinical practice involves working directly in hospital settings, requiring much more focus and attention than on-campus practice."



Figure 11. Continuous and repetitive practice

4) Risk of health problems

(1) Become exhausted Poor health due to stress

"As we entered the third year and started clinical practice, our schedules became much tighter. Adjusting to this demanding schedule was physically and mentally challenging. Due to poor physical fitness, I often found myself suffering from headaches, lowered immunity, and frequent colds. To cope, I had to put in extra effort in studying, which further strained my body. It became a vicious cycle where pushing myself too hard led to more health issues."



Figure 12. Taking medication for health problems

(2) A strain on the body

"When we go to the hospital for clinical practice, we must stand continuously for 9 hours. There is no designated seating area, and we can only briefly sit down. Even then, if we sit for too long, we feel like we are being watched and afraid of disturbing the nurses' work. Thus, we cannot sit for long. Consequently, standing for long periods causes swelling and pain in our legs and feet, making compression stockings essential."



Figure 13. Wearing compression stockings

(3) Feeling emotionally depressed

"On the way to school, I saw the sign of depression on the subway, and I thought about myself. The sign represented my heart."



Figure 14. Depression sign hanging inside subway

(4) Health problem to be accepted as nursing students

"During clinical practice, frequent hand sanitization and hand hygiene are essential, and learning about hygiene habits tends to make individuals more conscious of their everyday hand hygiene practices. Frequent and increased contact with water, leading to eczema. Therefore, when I developed eczema, I was even more surprised. However, I could not reduce my hand hygiene practices or quit my part-time job. Thus, I felt like I had to accept eczema as an inevitable fate."



Figure 15. Eczema caused by frequent handwashing

5) Having dreams and hopes for the future

(1) Confidence through commitment

"The Nightingale Pledge ceremony is a significant event for third-year nursing students before they embark on their clinical practicum. This ceremony is considered one of the most important events in the nursing program, where students gather together, light candles, and recite the Nightingale Pledge. Before starting clinical practicum, this ceremony instills a sense of pride and responsibility in us. Moreover, during the ceremony, congratulations and encouragement from senior and junior nursing students instill confidence in us before embarking on our clinical practicum."



Figure 16. Nightingale pledge

(2) Strong support for the future

"My classmates and I spend the whole day together such as attending classes, eating meals, and going to the library after lectures. Naturally, I have come to rely heavily on my peers, and whenever I felt overwhelmed, I received encouragement and support from them. I would not have made it this far without my classmates or completing my nursing school journey. Moreover, during hospital practicum, there is a lot of tension and pressure to perform well. At such times, coming together with my classmates, we unite and fulfill our roles as nursing students, supporting each other."



Figure 17. Bond with classmates

(3) Wishing for happiness

"In a major elective course, nursing students engaged in an activity where they wrote down their goals. While on the surface, these dreams may seem unrelated to nursing, I believe they encapsulate the happiness that students aspire to find in their future lives."



Figure 18. Write down wishes on a card

(4) Feeling proud

"The above image captures the questions I received from my friends. The questions showed in the picture, many friends ask me questions like, 'I have this symptom. What should I do?' or 'Is it okay to take this when I am sick?' When I receive such questions, although I am still a student and may not be an expert, I try to look up and provide information based on what I have learned. When friends respond with 'Thank you' or 'I feel better now thanks to you,' it gives me a warm feeling as a nursing student and motivates me to study harder."

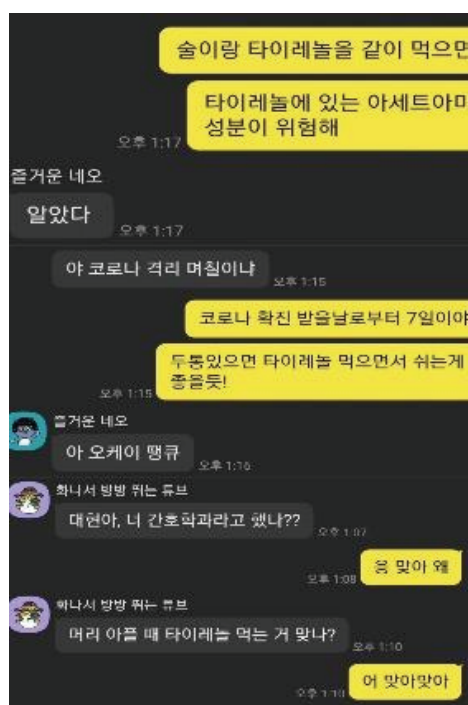


Figure 19. Answers to friends' simple health problems

Discussion

Nursing students experience various stresses, including the psychological burden of balancing academics and clinical practicum, fear and anxiety about practicum, the unfamiliar and daunting environment of clinical settings, the gap between theory and practice, interpersonal relationships with patients and their families^{9,24}. Improperly managed stress during clinical practicum increasing the likelihood of them struggling to adapt to university life¹¹. This highlights how stress during clinical practicum can negatively affect nursing students' growth into competent nurses in clinical practice settings. Therefore, this study aims to vividly elucidate the lived experiences of nursing students through the photovoice method.

The first topic is "Financial burden due to excessive expenses." The proportion of college students who have part-time jobs is increasing. A study conducted at one university regarding part-time job experiences found that 91.7% of nursing students had experienced part-time work²⁵.

Many nursing students face increased financial burdens due to several factors. First, there are practical training requirements that students must fulfill. Nursing students are required to complete over 1000 hours of clinical practicum, which can incur additional costs. Hospitals, in efforts to prevent infection spread, often require students to undergo various vaccinations and antibody tests before commencing practical training. The extent to which students are financially responsible for these requirements varies depending on the school's budget and policies. Medical institutions conduct vaccinations and require antibody tests for hepatitis B, tetanus, diphtheria, pertussis, measles, mumps, rubella, chickenpox, and influenza. During the COVID-19 pandemic, COVID-19 diagnostic tests were also required, and costs for these tests ranged from 20 to 80 US \$. Such high costs for pre-practicum vaccinations are typical nationwide among nursing schools, indicating a need for measures to support students in covering these expenses to ensure they can engage in practical training and receive adequate education.

Furthermore, when students conduct their clinical practicum in hospitals located in different regions from their university, this situation requires them to cover the accommodation expenses for their life, resulting in a double financial burden²⁶. Such economic difficulties can negatively impact students' academic performance and career prospects²⁶. Therefore, there is a need to implement policies and support measures to alleviate these financial burdens. Providing scholarships or financial support for students who struggle to concentrate on their studies can alleviate the economic burden. These approach can help students focus more effectively on their academic studies and practical training.

Measures such as expanding scholarships and support programs tailored to students facing economic challenges and providing relevant information to students are necessary to address these issues.

The second theme is the overwhelming amount of

study. Nursing students have to digest more coursework and practical training than other majors. The heavy academic workload of nursing students often leads to stress, feelings of depression, and sleep deprivation^{27,28}. At nursing colleges, students need to learn various theories related to medicine and nursing²⁹. Furthermore, nursing students need to apply theories to real-world nursing practice^{14,4}. Consequently, understanding the connection between the theories learned and their application in reality can be challenging. For this reason, nursing students experience stress related to theory classes.

One of the main reasons for the high level of stress among nursing students is academic issues, primarily because academic performance directly affects employment prospects after graduation³⁰. Moreover, habits such as consuming stimulants such as caffeine or nicotine or engaging in screen time with smartphones or computers can disrupt sleep³¹.

The third theme is “Feeling nervous about clinical nursing practice.” Clinical practice is an educational process where theoretical knowledge and skills acquired in school to enhance practical clinical competence³². Clinical practice provides nursing students with a positive experience of confirming and developing their nursing identity and maturing in a growth-oriented manner. However, despite recognizing the importance of clinical practice, most nursing students often experience significant challenges during their clinical placements³.

Changes in the clinical practice schedule, adapting to new patients and clinical settings, and aligning with shift work for clinical practice can induce excessive fatigue among nursing students¹⁰. The stress and fatigue experienced during clinical practice may potentially leading to chronic fatigue syndrome can diminish interest and ability in nursing, thereby reducing satisfaction with the clinical experience⁹. Furthermore, this could lead to doubts about their major and even cause some students to consider abandoning their studies³³. Therefore, strategies are needed to reduce clinical practice stress among nursing students and enhance

satisfaction with their clinical experiences. This constitutes an ongoing challenge that nursing education institutions must continuously contemplate and address.

The fourth theme is the “risk of health problems.” Nursing students experience more stress than regular university students due not only to concerns about employment but also to establishing professional values and ethics as nurses, preparing for the national licensing exam to obtain a nursing license, and performing clinical practice. They face the challenges of a rigorous curriculum and heavy workload, leading to academic stress. Some students express psychological stress due to emotional burdens²⁷.

Chronic stress can adversely affect the physical health of nursing students. It weakens the immune system and increases the risk of developing chronic diseases. Prolonged periods of sitting can also lead to physical discomfort, such as lower back pain. The health burdens experienced by nursing students in modern society manifest in various aspects, such as academic pressure, employment concerns, clinical practice, and university life³³.

The pressures of clinical practice and employment significantly impact students’ mental and physical well-being. Therefore, comprehensive support is needed to promote a balance between academic achievement and health, along with strengthening health support and stress management programs in the future. Therefore, it is essential to introduce health management programs or provide health-related services to support students in maintaining their well-being. The extensive support is expected to assist nursing students in achieving healthy academic growth and fulfilling their professional responsibilities.

The fifth theme is “Having dreams and hopes for the future.” Nursing students receive theoretical education at school and undergo clinical practice training. They must navigate relationships with various medical professionals, including nurses, doctors, and patients and their families, in an

unfamiliar hospital environment. There is a need for universities or schools to strengthen support systems for students. It is crucial to assist students in seamlessly continuing their academic studies and practical training.

Despite these challenges, they exhibit resilience by holding onto their dreams for the future. To support nursing students in pursuing their dreams for the future, universities or schools need to strengthen career and employment support programs. Helping students realize their aspirations is crucial. Therefore, universities or schools should consider offering psychological counseling services or implementing psychological support programs to assist students in overcoming their burdens.

Limitations

This study uses a photovoice methodology to explore *Living as a Nursing Student in South Korea*. The findings may be influenced by specific contextual factors relevant to the participants and the South Korean healthcare and educational systems. These factors may limit the generalizability of the findings to other cultural or institutional contexts. Thus, it is essential to exercise caution when generalizing the research findings to all situations. Moreover, this study may not fully encompass all types of accidents, potentially resulting in incomplete exploration of specific types or conditions.

Future research

The study “Living as a Nursing Student in South Korea” uses the photovoice research methodology to shed light on nursing students’ challenges and coping mechanisms. In building upon these insights, future research endeavors can focus on evaluating the efficacy of interventions, such as programs or policies, to alleviate the identified challenges. By systematically assessing the effectiveness of these initiatives, we can determine which types of support

are most beneficial and pinpoint areas that require further improvement.

Additionally, it is essential to evaluate the long-term outcomes of nursing students beyond their academic years. Conducting longitudinal studies to track nursing students’ experiences over time would offer a more comprehensive understanding of how their challenges evolve throughout their educational journey. This longitudinal approach enables researchers to assess the long-term impacts of support programs and interventions, providing valuable insights into their sustained effectiveness.

Assessing factors such as career satisfaction, retention in the nursing profession, and overall well-being can provide crucial insights into the lasting effects of their experiences during nursing education. Understanding these outcomes can inform the development of tailored support systems to enhance nursing students’ overall success and well-being.

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