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ORIGINAL PRACTICE DEVELOPMENT AND RESEARCH

Using poems to explore the meaning of compassion to undergraduate nursing students

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Abstract

Background: Compassionate care provision is an integral part of nursing practice, but the ways in which pre-registration nurses are enabled to explore the concept are less well understood.

Aim: The aim of this work was to consider how student nurses experience and understand compassion in the context of their education and clinical practice, using reflective poetry as a source of data.

Method: This study drew on reflective poetry writing, underpinned by an interpretive phenomenological approach. Poems authored by study participants were analysed to explore how compassion is understood and experienced by pre-registration nursing students.

Findings: Compassion was described and experienced by the students in many ways. It was discussed as a challenging aspect of practice, on an emotional and on a practical level. Feelings of vulnerability emerged through the data, often linked to the novice status of the students. Reflective poetry writing enabled students to write in a meaningful way about their thoughts and feelings, and offers educators a rich insight into the lifeworld of the student nurse.

Conclusion: Compassion is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon that can be difficult for student nurses to engage with in real world practice settings. Creative ways of working, including the use of poetry, can offer student nurses, and those who support them, valuable help in understanding the challenges they encounter and identifying working practices that can make a positive contribution to nursing practice and associated education programmes.

Implications for practice:

- Educators need to understand the meaning of compassion as it is lived by student nurses, in order to support their development
- Educators are required to develop their teaching practice to enable the exploration of thoughts and feelings about compassionate care provision
- Creative ways of teaching and learning can lead to a more unpredictable learning environment and ways to manage this need to be considered
- Poetry writing offers opportunities for educators to role model the personal behaviours expected of student nurses, as a way to help develop compassionate care provision

Keywords: Compassion, creativity, phenomenology, poetry, pre-registration, values

Introduction

Compassion and a caring learning environment are crucial but challenging aspects of nursing practice and educational preparation in the UK and internationally (Mannion, 2014; Shea et al., 2014; Mikkonen et al., 2015). More specifically in the UK, the Nursing and Midwifery Council (2010, p 13) states that: 'safe, compassionate, person-centred, evidence-based nursing' is an essential requirement for students before registration. This has led to curricula development based on the values needed to become more compassionate (McLean, 2012). Compassion is one of the core values that form the Six Cs of nursing – the vision for the future launched by the Chief Nursing Officer for England (Cummings and Bennett, 2012). Despite the aspirations to high-quality compassionate care, it is recognised in the UK and in the wider international nursing community that compassion in care can be negatively affected by the physical and emotional stressors encountered in the environments where care is delivered (Firth-Cozens and Cornwell, 2009; Coetzee and Klopper, 2010). From an educational perspective, despite compassion being identified as a core attribute of good nursing practice, less is known about how student nurses understand and experience compassion in the context of their pre-registration education and practice (Bramley and Matiti, 2014).

As a concept in practice, compassion has been described as 'intelligent kindness' (Cummings and Bennett, 2012, p 13) and is regarded as central to the ways in which people perceive the care provided (van Leishout et al., 2015). However, there remain multiple interpretations of compassion, and how it relates to practice can be unclear (Olshansky, 2007). To some, compassion remains a highly subjective value (Dewar et al., 2011), to be defined by those who receive care and also caregivers themselves (Dewar, 2011). But in nurse education, which is based on a 50/50 split of theory and practice, it is important that student nurses know what compassion means and can engage with it intellectually, emotionally and practically (Curtis et al., 2012). For this to be achieved, more creative ways to support teaching and learning could be used (Crawford et al., 2014). Reflecting this, the findings reported in this paper demonstrate how reflective poetry writing can be a creative way to support the development of compassion in nurse education.

Aim

The overarching aim of this work was to understand how student nurses experience and understand compassion in the context of their education and clinical practice. As educators, if we can better understand the meaning of compassion to our students, we can develop our educational practice to support their learning and development in this area. This paper presents findings from a study that set out to explore the lifeworld of our students in the context of compassionate practice, using reflective poetry writing to enhance our understanding.

Background

The authors of this paper have recently worked with other nurse educators to identify how promoting a values-based culture in nursing can be part of everyday working practice (Tetley et al., 2015). More specifically, one of the authors (KJ) has worked over the past four years to explore how reflective poetry writing can support students in identifying and understanding their thoughts and feelings about emotionally sensitive issues such as caring, compassion and empathy. The use of reflective poetry writing has supported students in the development of self-awareness, confidence and creative thinking. The development of the poetry website [Caring Words](#) has supported the creation of a poetry community, where students can read the work of their peers and contribute their own poems, in order to reduce the isolation often felt when dealing with difficult issues in the practice setting (Jack, 2015). Creating poems offers students a different way to reflect on practice issues, and often encourages them to focus more on feelings and the relational aspects of practice, rather than task completion, which can be the favoured way of thinking in practice (Williams, 2013). Rolfe (2014) suggests that the educational preparation of nurses needs a more 'rounded' approach, potentially including subjects that at first glance might not seem relevant at all – for example, the arts and humanities. Engaging with poetry provides one such approach.

Creative approaches that include the use of the poetry reading and writing have been used effectively in nursing research (Hopkinson, 2015). The reading and subsequent discussion of poetry can have a positive effect on self-esteem and self-growth (Mohammadian et al., 2011) and support our understanding of the needs and feelings of others and therefore the development of empathy (Davis, 1997). Reading poems with others supports the sharing of feelings, helping students to feel less alone and misunderstood and addressing feelings of isolation (Osmond et al., 2012). Hunter (2002) suggests that poetry is a unique medium for human expression as it allows thoughts and feelings about everyday experiences to escape the unconscious workings of the mind. Poetry increases the understanding of the lived experience – for example, that of patient and nurse and their relationship with each other. Schwind et al. (2014) suggest that creative learning involving arts-based approaches increases understanding of self and others, and that there is great benefit to be derived from engaging in these activities:

‘.... the time and space to share their practice out loud with one another. They learned that they do some of the same things, that they could try something different and understand the foundations of their practice’ (p 1170).

Writing poetry slows down the thinking process, giving students time to consider and make meaning of their thoughts and feelings (Jack, 2015). However, a disadvantage of this process (both reading and writing poetry) is that engaging with it can lead to unpredictable outcomes. For example, each person may interpret a poem in a different way, leading Pickering (2000) to suggest that poems should be enjoyed for what they are, rather than as a learning resource. Not all students feel creative enough to write poems; indeed, the worry of the writing process can outweigh any potential learning benefits (Threlfall, 2013; Jack, 2015). Students can feel vulnerable when asked to expose themselves through their poems and educators need to be sensitive to their emotional needs (Gallagher and McKie, 2010). However, as Speare and Henshall (2014, p 811) suggest, poetry offers students an ‘...external voice, encouraging thought in areas that the student might not venture to without prompting’. This can lead to a cathartic experience for students, often helped by the use of metaphor, which enables them to say how they feel using imagery. Metaphor can help students to find clarity of expression and support an in-depth understanding of their experiences. As Barker (2000, p 98) says:

‘We can lose ourselves in an experience, when metaphor... helps us “see” something for what it really is, by using a phrase or image which clearly belongs to something else...’

Approach

An interpretive phenomenological approach was used to explore how our students experienced compassion personally and in the context of their educational practice. This style of phenomenology has been described as an approach to undertaking research, rather than a fixed method (Dahlberg, 2006). It can be used as a way to understand others’ experiences, making it well suited to research in nursing practice (Cohen, 2000). This style of research goes beyond the description of thoughts and attempts to uncover hidden meanings behind the stated words, meanings that might not always be clear, even to the participants (Lopez and Willis, 2004). This leads to a different understanding of the phenomenon being studied; indeed the main focus of hermeneutics (interpretation) is related to understanding (Annells, 1996). Understanding and interpretation are closely linked (Gadamer, 1960) and based on our historicity (Heidegger, 1926/1962, p 191) or in other words, something that has gone on before:

‘In every case interpretation is grounded in something we see in advance – in a foresight... An interpretation is never a pre suppositionless apprehending of something presented to us.’

This style of phenomenology is in contrast to the Husserlian descriptive approach, which is that of the researcher acting as a detached observer, so that the ‘true’ untainted meaning of issues can

be uncovered. Edmund Husserl was viewed as a key figure in phenomenology, its 'acknowledged founder' (Crotty, 1996, p 29). He was concerned with the 'reality' of things as they present to human consciousness, stating: 'We must go back to the things themselves' (Husserl, 1913/1970, p 252). Originally a mathematician, he was interested in the truth of things, without presupposition. This is in contrast to the interpretive way of thinking, which acknowledges our prior knowledge and uses it within the research endeavour. Based on our own nursing experiences, both authors of this study have a lot of pre-understanding of the concept of compassion, which will influence our current understanding. The potential of our own consciousness supports a different understanding when fused with that of another (Gadamer, 1960) – in this case, when we engage with the poetry written by the students in this study. In line with this thinking, we agree with Finlay (2002, p 12), who suggests that a researcher is a 'central figure' in the research process and the research is a combined product relating not only to the data collected, but to the relationship between researchers and participants. The ways in which we as researchers have experienced and understand compassion can support a different way of thinking about the data, and it is important that we examine our understanding before continuing with the research. This might be represented as 'the whole – the parts – the whole' (Dahlberg et al., 2008, p 236). Exposing our pre-understandings in relation to the phenomenon is advantageous in that it can add to the credibility of the research (Koch, 1996). Unless this stage is completed, the reader is unable to view the potential influences on the interpretation. Therefore, the researcher involved with collection and primary analysis of the data (KJ), wrote her own reflective poem so that her pre-understanding of the phenomenon of compassion would be revealed. However, from the perspective of both educator and researcher, this poem was also shared with the students during a class-based session, where the students read and discussed their poems to encourage understanding of compassion. KJ's poem (below) was not shown to the students in advance of their writing their own work, to avoid any potential influence on their writing.

How am I supposed to feel?

*You were there in the bed, all skinny and pale
I am not sure where to look, as your body is exposed for all to see
With all my learning and concentration, I should be able to help you
but this isn't how it sounded in the book*

*I suppose you are what would be called a difficult patient
Thrashing around and not lying still
A cause of hilarity for some of the staff.
But not for me.
I just want to cry, and I do go home that night and cry.*

*I want to help you in so many ways,
but you are too agitated and confused
'Let's put a tube in him' they say,
But that just made things worse... of course*

*I came back from days off and you were gone.
I asked, and it wasn't what I wanted to hear
Gone to a better place they say
Well that's fine but what am I supposed to feel now?*

*'Well, you need to get used to this' they say
'You will see a lot more before you are through'
Yes I have seen more. But I never get used to it.
And I never have forgotten you. And how I was supposed to feel?*

Method

In light of the evidence to support more creative ways to enter the lifeworld of others, we used student-authored poems to understand how our students live compassionate practice in the clinical setting. Poetry writing helps us to understand the unique nature of nursing practice; poems often act as 'containers of emotion', (Fox, 1995) and when the emotion surfaces, we are more easily able to process and understand it. Poems can be packed with insight and meaning to the reader and the author, and experiencing poetry helps us to value the unique nature of nursing practice, and supports our understanding of person-centred care delivery. Rolfe and Gardner (2005) argue for an emphasis in nursing research on valuing the individual nature of others, and we suggest that using student-authored poems as data supports our understanding of the 'particular unique interactions between particular unique individuals in particular unique settings' (p 302). We suggest that this type of understanding is helpful when attempting to explore a concept such as compassion. Supporting the use of poems in a research context, Kendall and Murray (2005, p 746) suggest that data presented as blocks of text are likely to be 'skim read', in contrast to a poem, which might be approached more slowly:

'... expecting to hear them in their heads and being more alert to their patterns of sound, image, and ideas and more willing to engage emotionally with what is being said.'

More specifically, Speare and Henshall (2014), drawing on their work using poetry as a tool to facilitate reflective practice, identify that participants' own poetry can be used as qualitative data and auto-ethnographic poetry can be used to explore personal experiences. In understanding why and how poetry is so effective as a data source Raingruber (2004, p 14) makes the point that it is:

'... poignant, memorable, and allows both the writer and listener to familiarize with an emotional climate.'

Sample

A whole cohort of 42 first year nursing students on the BSc (hons) adult nursing programme at a UK university were asked to write and submit poems to the [Caring Words](#) website. The content of the poems was to reflect an important nursing issue – for example, communication or compassion. A total of 24 poems related to the concept of compassion. The poems could be written using the voice of the patient or based on the students' thoughts and feelings about compassionate practice. Poems were submitted anonymously over a period of two weeks. Students were required to submit one poem only, although some continued to write and submit further poems, as part of their own self-development. Students were shown examples of poems written by peers in previous groups, in order to whet their appetites for writing. However, no formal definition of compassion was given to the students, as we wanted them to consider their personal meaning without its being greatly influenced in advance. Poetry has been described as a debatable term (Andrews, 1991) and can be developed in various ways. Furman et al. (2007, p 302) suggest that it can be used as a way to communicate 'powerful and multiple "truths" about the human experience'. Our primary aim was not to develop creative writers but to uncover the 'truths' about compassion, as experienced by the students. For the purposes of this research, the emphasis was placed on the process of poetry writing as a way to explore important aspects of nursing practice and not on judging the poems in terms of 'good' or 'bad' pieces of work. It is important to adopt a nurturing approach to facilitation, recognising the vulnerability of students during a time of personal and professional growth.

Ethics

Ethical approval was gained from the university ethics committee. Consent was given by the students during submission of their poem to the Caring Words website. There was also an opportunity for students to be acknowledged as the author of their poem, although none of our students took this up.

Analysis

Fitting with a phenomenological process, a narrative coding and theming approach was used, which took account of individual experiences and perspectives (Sutton and Austin, 2015). This approach enabled us to use the poems as whole datasets, while also looking for thematic links and connections. We read the poems several times to gain an understanding of the ideas within. Consideration was given to the notion of breaking up the content of the poems into emergent themes, as quotes and short exemplars, as this could promote ease of presentation and understanding of the major findings. However, we recognised here was a danger that the meanings and expressions within a single poem could be lost and lead to a fragmented understanding of the data. We considered the view of Shapiro (2004, p 176) that breaking poems up into thematic categories 'smacked of aesthetic murder', and decided to present a selection of whole poems as exemplars. Including some poems in their entirety to report the findings has the added benefit of enabling the reader to be a co-researcher, and interpret the meanings for themselves. However, to present a larger amount of data, and to support greater understanding of the phenomenon, a compromise was reached and lines from other poems are presented in addition to the main exemplars. The reader may choose to explore the exemplar, then revisit the shorter extracts, and in doing so reach a better understanding of compassion as it is lived by our students. This process is akin to the hermeneutic circle, as it invites the reader to undertake the cycle of whole-parts-new whole, in order to reach a different understanding (Heidegger, 1926/1962). The decision to include some poems in their entirety, as exemplars, was reached through joint discussion between the two researchers. The criteria for inclusion of the exemplars was based on their ability to convey emotion, the amount of context provided and the way in which they conveyed strength of meaning. Based on these criteria, our aim was to invite readers into the lifeworld of the students so that they feel part of it. We wanted to invoke the 'phenomenological nod' described by van Manen (1997, p 27), which is when the reader nods in agreement, in recognition that they have experienced a similar phenomenon to the one described.

Findings

Through formal cohort written evaluations, students reported that the activity of writing poetry afforded them time to think about their practice, something they might not otherwise have done. The request for poems encouraged further time spent thinking, as many students reported using a drafting and redrafting process until they were happy with the result. Overall, the tone and style of the poems reflected how the student nurses had experienced what it meant to be compassionate, and how they wanted to be caring. However, they also reflected the emotional and practical challenges that they encountered.

Poetry writing enabled our students to reflect in a different way. It offered a freedom to explore thoughts and feelings without the requirement to fit thinking into pre-fashioned 'boxes', a common complaint among nursing students who might suffer from 'reflection fatigue' (Coward, 2011, p 883).

Five overarching themes emerged from the data:

- Advocacy
- A difficult and upsetting process
- Empathy for others
- A practical process
- Being with another

The way the poems related to these themes is now demonstrated using student poems as exemplars.

Advocacy

Many students described compassion in terms of support, guidance and advocacy, and offering strength to the patient – for example: 'We support, we advocate and we cherish, so that others will benefit...'; 'The nurse is by your side, again and again...' The following poem depicts compassion as a strength and illness as a battle, one in which the nurse stands 'shoulder to shoulder' with the patient in a time of need. The nurse is depicted as a guide and healer, using powerful imagery such as, 'I will be

the lighthouse' and 'mending wings fractured in the rain' as a way of showing compassion in difficult circumstances.

Dear Patient

*I want to be the difference, to be at the front line,
Standing shoulder to shoulder, buying you time
I will hand you your shield, when you have no power
I will be that nightingale, in your twelfth hour
When you're stood in the dark, no end in sight
I will be the lighthouse, which guides you in the night
I will align the path which separates
Mending wings fractured in the rain
Restoring life's symphony, I will heal the scars which remain*

A difficult and upsetting process

A second theme identified depicts compassion as a 'suffering with', a heartfelt process conveyed by the students through many of the poems. For example: '...deep down in my heart, I very much care...'; 'How can I rest when I am clearly devastated?'. The poem *How am I supposed to feel?* written by the author KJ related most closely to this theme, which describes the helplessness often felt when trying to care for another in difficult times.

The following poem conveys sadness and concern for a dying patient and a sense of helplessness about the situation, giving a bleak feel to the work. The author of this poem is distressed, saying 'I am heartbroken', and there is a sense of frustration that she could not do more to alter the outcome: 'I was just one of those student nurses...'

Dear Compassion

*Dear compassion, I hope you know I tried my best to give you a comforting send off
I know it probably got annoying, me sticking that thermometer in your arm pit
Please get better! Please. Just a little bit...
I will never forget you, my heart aches for your loved ones, what you and they must have been going through
I'm crying for fear that you left in some sort of discomfort, or pain or loneliness
I hope with every ounce of my being you were not in distress
Dear compassion, I am heartbroken.
Never has a truer word been spoken
I was just one of those student nurses that kept hanging around you those last moments
I hope you
Are in peace. Sleep tight now.*

Empathy

In the third theme, many students depicted compassion as a process with similarities to empathy, trying to understand how the patient might be feeling. For example: '...completely imagine yourself in their place...'; 'I always stop and think, it could be me on the receiving end...'. The author of the following poem describes time spent with the patient, giving them time to talk, as she appreciates how difficult it must be to be away from familiar people, surroundings and pets. The student tries to imagine how she would want her own family members to be treated in a similar situation.

A hand to hold

*Today though I was busy I saw you were in need
I came to reassure you and diminish any fear
I hope I was a hand to hold, a friendly face to see
I hope I gave you time to chat and let you chew my ear
It must be hard for you to be so very far away
From your friends and family, and even your small pet
In surroundings unfamiliar, in each and every way
I hope we make you comfortable and give you no reason to fret
I see you and think about all those I love
And hope that should they be in fear
Someone will comfort them and care for them
And wipe away their tears
I know it must be hard for you, you used to laugh and run
You once were young and healthy and always having fun*

A practical process

Reflecting the fourth theme, many students described the ‘small things’ that help the patient and constitute a compassionate approach, such as: ‘I remember just last week, playing cards and cracking jokes’; ‘Playing crosswords, word search and puzzles too...’ Initially describing compassion as ‘caring, looking at the small things’, the following poem depicts compassion in practical ways, such as giving support, offering tea, chatting, learning more in order to ‘help and support others’ and being ‘honest and empathic’. The tone of the poem is optimistic, depicting compassion as something we can all do easily when, in fact, the behaviours described might be viewed as difficult to accomplish.

Compassion

*Compassion is caring, looking at the small things
Supporting a person through hardships
Offering that late night cup of tea, as they watch their loved one ill
Or finding time to chat, to understand your poorly patient
Compassion is pushing yourself to learn more
Which in turn can help and support others
To be that person who your patient or their family can confide in
And to always be honest and empathic*

Being with another

Finally, the fifth theme drew in poems that embraced critical thinking about care from an older person’s perspective. The poems here illustrate how students are able to use poetry to take a more empathic and practical stance from their experiences. More directly, the example of ‘I’m still here, so please be kind, though there is a mist within my mind’ illustrates how the poetic notion of being with another can resonate with, and conflict with, compassion in the real world of practice. In terms of links to other themes – ‘I need to maintain my personal hygiene, having to ask fills me with dread’ – many of the poems revealed a concern that older people do not get the time and attention they require in the clinical setting.

Compassion in the following poem is depicted as a form of ‘companionship’ viewed as a ‘privilege’ and the focus is on older people. Due to the nurse being ‘rushed’ it is acknowledged that ‘these poor patients don’t get much attention’ and there is a reminder that ageing is an inevitable process.

Compassion

*Companionship is sometimes all people need but a privilege not everyone receives
Older people are often alone, as they potter around in their once family filled home
Members of family who have now passed away, they too are now nearing this day
Pleased by a friendly wave or conversation, it doesn't seem hard if it brightens someone's day?
As we know, nurses are rushed, so these poor patients don't get much attention
Say hello, or, say, how has your day been?
Its little things like this that really get seen
Older people were once young too you know... never forget, it's the direction we all go...*

Discussion

The students' poems offered thoughts, feelings and practical knowledge and helped us understand differently the meaning of compassion as lived by them. Multiple meanings of compassionate practice were offered, reflecting unique ways of being in the clinical setting. Exploring the poems supports our development as educators by making us ask how we can inform our teaching based on what we have read. Unless we understand our students' lifeworld, we will be unable fully to meet and support their emotional needs. Many of the poems represented the need to be 'better', to perform well, and perhaps it is up to educators to support students in understanding what they can actually achieve – and what may be impossible.

Poetry writing enables feelings to emerge in ways that other methods, such as reading published poems, perhaps do not and we suggest this is an advantage of this approach. The act of writing poems exposed feelings of vulnerability and questions about self-worth among the students. This has implications for educators and our practice needs to acknowledge this finding to inform our interactions with students. Role modelling positive behaviours, such as critical reflection, the ability to deal with uncertainty and belief in the self, could have a beneficial effect on students' ability to cope with the challenges of practice. Adopting a facilitator role such as that advocated by Mezirow (1997) might be beneficial. Using a transformative approach, learning takes place on both sides of the student/teacher relationship, with the facilitator acting as co-learner. The facilitator does not have all the answers but models behaviours that can promote healthy coping. This approach could be further developed if educators write and share their own poems with the students. Sharing experiences, emotions and associated ways of coping has the potential to impact on students in ways that reading and sharing published poems might not. Co-learning in this way can support student nurses' understanding of the risk factors that impact on their compassionate practice. This is an important process and can provide them with knowledge and skills that can help avoid compassion fatigue (Coetzee and Klopper, 2010). As educators, writing our own poems can assist us in sustaining our own empathic understanding of our students' experiences; KJ's poem referred to a caring encounter from her own experience as a first year student nurse and this stirred a similar level of emotion to that felt at the time of the event, 28 years earlier. Writing poems helps educators get back in touch with the anxieties and vulnerabilities they felt themselves as students and refocuses thinking back on the clinical setting and away from administrative tasks (Kidd and Tusaie, 2004). By helping educators relate to students and their experiences of compassionate practice, this can strengthen the student/teacher bond.

Compassionate care provision is an important part of nursing culture in the UK but the successful development of such a culture in practice might depend more on what compassion means to nurses, rather than what they are told it means. This reinforces the need for a 'two way' approach to teaching, and the need to continue to recognise that nursing practice holds different meanings for all who experience it.

More importantly, the poems highlight the challenges of providing compassionate care in the real world of practice. These concerns are reflected by Crawford et al. (2014, p 3589), who identify that:

'... when considering compassion, we should consider not only the compassion qualities of individual practitioners, but the overall design of healthcare systems as a whole.'

Facilitating and disseminating poetry from the lifeworld perspectives of student nurses is also important in this respect, as it helps put into context the wider value to health and social care. More specifically, other work using poetry has demonstrated how the process and outputs from creative writing can provide powerful, new and more person-centred insights for practitioners and service providers (Brown-Wilson et al., 2009). Other examples of using poetry across a range of education and clinical settings illustrate how writing and reading poetry helps clinicians, students and clients give voice to situations that touched their hearts in ways that they were not otherwise able to share or express (Raingruber, 2004). Following on from this Raingruber (2004) argues that poetry and literature should be used more extensively in clinical and educational settings to support the development of compassion in care. The use of more creative and narrative ways of working, including poetry, is important as the work produced through these processes can identify how wider life experiences, including those that are unanticipated and challenging, can affect how people respond when they are involved in the delivery, or receipt, of health and social care services (Raingruber, 2004; Tetley et al., 2009).

Limitations

While the work presented in this paper highlights the positive ways in which poetry can contribute to the exploration of compassion in pre-registration nurse education, there is a need to understand the benefits and limitations of using creative ways of working in nurse education. Poetry writing can lead to the release of emotion and educators need to be prepared to support students who might become upset. The unpredictability of the learning environment might be challenging for educators, who might need to adopt a more pastoral role in the classroom than usual. In addition, there are no guarantees that students will change their practice based on engagement with arts-based approaches such as poetry writing. However, in a profession that prides itself on valuing the unique nature of individuals, and the concept of person-centred care, poetry writing provides a way to engage with and understand the individuality found in others and ourselves.

Conclusion

This work was prompted by concerns about compassionate care in nursing, and the need to support student nurses in thinking about compassionate practice. As educators, if we can understand how students experience compassion, we are more able to support them in offering compassionate care. Compassion is a multifaceted phenomenon that can leave student nurses feeling vulnerable and inadequate when providing care for others. Creative ways of working, specifically the use of poetry, can make an important contribution to how they think about compassion in the context of their lived experiences, personally and professionally.

While the authors recognise that the findings from this work are drawn from one UK-based university, the examples show how the concept of compassion is experienced by student nurses in ways that can resonate in wider UK and international contexts.

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