

Collaborative Learning: A Qualitative Descriptive Study of Undergraduate Student Nurses' Experiences of Receiving a Group-Mark for Modular Assessment.

Deborah Keogh[†]

Veronica Lambert[†]

[†]School of Nursing and Human Sciences Dublin City University)

Abstract

Background: Over the last few decades, education, including nursing, has afforded considerable attention to collaborative learning. However, students can also sometimes find working in a group negatively impacts on their learning. Problems encountered with group work may be more upsetting when the student's grade depends on the work of the group. Successful collaborative learning requires students to have positive beliefs about collaborative learning. Few studies have examined student experiences of group work when a group mark is awarded. To motivate group learning, educators must better understand the effect a group mark has on student experience of group work.

Objective: To describe nursing student's experiences of receiving a group mark for collaborative learning modules and the impact this has on their learning and group work experiences.

Design and setting: A qualitative descriptive approach was employed. And the study was conducted in the higher education institution in Ireland in which nursing students undertake a primary degree.

Participants: A total of 14 undergraduate nursing students (across years 1, 2, and 4) who were completing a degree in children's and general nursing participated. These students were selected because they were exposed to problem based learning modules through which they receive a collective group mark for collaborative learning.

Methods: Individual and focus group interviews were conducted. Data were analysed thematically.

Results: Students reported binary dependent relationships; whereby each student was dependent on other group members and other group members were dependent on each student for their grade. This mutual dependency created an array of negative emotions which emerged across the three sub-themes of lack of controllability; challenges of co-dependency and invisible work.

Conclusion: Students must be taught effective group work skills to enhance learning and group work experiences. Further research is needed to examine the appropriateness of awarding group grades where results contribute to degree classification.

Keywords: Assessment, group work, group mark, undergraduate, student nurses

* (Insert Article type via "File|Properties|Custom Properties"). URL: <http://ojs.aishe.org/index.php/aishe-j/article/view/175>

1 Introduction

Nursing involves managing and co-ordinating care for both individual and groups of patients (Huff, 1997; Ali and Watson, 2011). Nurses must assess and define problems accurately; choose appropriate solutions from a variety of alternatives; safely implement a plan of care; and evaluate the effectiveness of their actions (Zafuto, 1997; Ali and Watson, 2011). To be able to do this, nursing students must develop analytic, critical-thinking, problem-solving and reflective skills (ABA, 2005; NMC 2010). Alongside working actively with patients and families, nurses are also required to effectively engage with multi-disciplinary team members in order to meet the holistic bio-psychosocial needs of patients. Consequently, nursing faculties need to foster collaborative behaviour among nursing students to enable them to develop an understanding of group work processes and collective problem-solving (Gallagher, 2009).

2. Background

Today's employers expect graduates to enter employment already possessing the skills to effectively work in teams including the ability to problem solve, resolve conflict and communicate effectively as part of a team (Thomas, 2014). In particular, most employers rank graduates communication skills highly on their list of required qualifications (Liao, 2014). Acknowledging the diverse learning styles of students and the fact that the traditional lecture based approach is not always the most effective way to transmit information or to foster the ability to think critically, collaborate with others, and engage in active problem-solving (Bose et al 2004), over the last few decades education, including business, law, engineering, science, medicine and nursing, has afforded considerable attention to collaborative student-centred forms learning including problem-based learning (Visschers-Pleijers et al. 2005; Bowman and Hughes, 2005; Klunklin et al. 2011; Thomas, 2014). With regard to nursing, due to the complexity of their role, nurses need to work collaboratively with a range of other healthcare professionals (Ali and Watson, 2011). The Peach Report (UKCC, 1999) recommended collaborative learning as a way forward in nursing and midwifery education, suggesting that it promoted interpersonal and practice skills and as such collaborative learning is becoming an

essential part of nursing students education (Souers et al. 2007).

In collaborative learning, students team up in small groups and help each other to learn to achieve common learning goals (Visschers-Pleijers et al. 2005). This proposed stimulating learning method has several reported advantages such as; teaching students to function as members of a team; enhancing students' social skills necessary to work cooperatively with others; and increasing students' accountability for their own learning as well as the learning of the group (Huff, 1997). Notwithstanding, the potential for positive group work effects on student learning (Dolmans et al. 2001), students may sometimes find themselves working in small groups that impact negatively on their learning. For instance, students often do not work productively, waste time, repeat old information, or become confrontational (Chen, 2011). Although students depend on each other when working on group projects (Orr, 2010), it is not uncommon for some students to neglect to actively participate in the group processes and/or for other students to complete all the work involved (Tully, 2010). Dolmans et al. (2001) found if group members who were initially motivated discovered that other group members were not completing the work, they themselves began to contribute less to the group activity.

While acknowledging the challenges inherent in student collaborative learning, problems encountered when working in groups may be more upsetting to students when their grades depend on the work of the group (Gallagher, 2009). In a recent study, Cooper and Carver (2012) discovered that students wanted their individual contributions to group work assessed as they believed this would motivate them to produce higher quality work, while also removing a major source of interpersonal conflict. Indeed, having compared individual and group marks in a collaborative learning module, Almond (2009) found that students with high individual marks received relatively lower marks for the group assessment component; while students with low individual marks received relatively higher marks for the group assessment component. Thus, an overall group mark for collaborative learning could cause a deserving student to fail a module or have an impact on their degree classification if they found

themselves restricted by an unproductive group on a crucial project (Nordberg, 2008). Successful collaborative learning situations require that students have positive beliefs about collaborative learning (Hijzen et al. 2006). Student's attitudes to group work are shaped by each group grade experience and can cause the student to look at each group assignment either favourably or unfavourably (Barfield, 2003). In order to motivate learning in groups, educators need to better understand the effects that a group mark has on the student's experience of working in groups.

While previous research has evaluated the use of collaborative learning, identified issues arising from group work and explored student experience of working within groups, limited research has specifically examined student nurse perspectives of receiving a group mark when engaged in collaborative learning. Hence, the purpose of this study is to describe undergraduate nursing students' experiences of receiving a group mark for modules that require group work and the impact this has on their learning and group work experiences.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research design

A qualitative descriptive approach was employed. Neergaard et al. (2009) contended that a qualitative descriptive approach is a useful method for many health care related research questions as not only can it help to focus on the experiences of individuals but it is also appropriate for a small scale study to gain insight into a specific topic, in this case receiving a group mark for modules that require collaborative group work. This view is supported by Sandelowski (2000) who recommends a descriptive approach when a straight description of the phenomena at hand is the primary intent.

3.2. Setting and sample

Student participants were purposively selected from one higher education institution in Ireland. The total population of seventy-nine first (n=30), second (n=27) and fourth (n=22) year student nurses undertaking an undergraduate degree in children's and general nursing were invited to take part. These cohort of students were selected because they were exposed to problem based learning modules for which they received a collective group mark for engagement in collaborative group activities (e.g. written and audio-visual scenario based problems/patient cases) and collaborative assessment processes (e.g. group verbal power-point presentations and written group assignments); thus they had the experience required to provide contextually rich information relevant to the study and answer the research question posed (Lodico et al. 2010). Previous research has shown that the identity that study participants attribute to the interviewer plays an important role in forming the data being collected and there is a risk of data being formed to meet a specific end when the researcher and the researched belong to the same group (Chew-Graham et. Al 2002). With this in mind, and as the student researcher was in the third year of the programme at the time of the study, third year students were not invited to participate. In total, fourteen students (n=8 first years; n=1 second year; n=5 fourth years) volunteered to participate. To recruit students, an independent gatekeeper, nominated by the higher education institution, distributed electronically (via email) a letter of invite (including an information pack and consent form) to each student cohort. Students had 4-6 weeks to consider whether or not they wished to participate. Students voluntarily contacted the primary researcher (first author - DK) directly if they wished to participate. All students that expressed an interest in participating were then contacted by the author to organise the interviews.

3.3. Ethical considerations

The Research Ethics Committee of the higher education institution approved the study and access was granted by the school head to invite students to participate in the study. Written student consent was obtained at the start of the individual/focus group interviews. It was emphasised to students that their decision to take part was entirely voluntary, they did not have

to feel compelled to take part and that their decision would in no way impact on their training/academic performance. All participants in the study were informed from the outset that their anonymity could not be guaranteed in the study, however, their identity would be known only to the researchers and other participants involved in the focus groups. For the purposes of data transcription and reporting all names were coded to protect identities.

3.4. Data Collection

Data were collected using individual (n=1) and focus group (n=2) interviews; both of these were appropriate for qualitative descriptive research to gain knowledge about a particular phenomenon, as only people who have experienced the phenomena can describe it (Mapp, 2008; Elmir et al. 2011). One focus group interview was held with the first year student cohort (n=8) and one focus group was held with the fourth year student cohort (n=5). The size of the focus groups was determined by the student response rate. We were also cognisant, however, of the theoretical guidance of having a group size which was not too small or big. Loeb et al. (2006) found that in groups of six to eight, participants remain interested and everyone has an opportunity to contribute. As only one second year student volunteered to participate, it was decided to conduct an individual interview with this participant. We decided to interview participants within their year of training groups as their experiences could vary depending on the stage of the programme they were at. The interviews were conducted at the higher education institution in which the students were undertaking their degree at a time convenient to them. Each interview (focus group and individual) lasted an average of 49 minutes. Data were collected by the primary researcher (first author - DK) because the second researcher/supervisor (second author - VL) was a lecturer on the students' programme of study and consequently it was considered that participants might be reluctant to speak freely and honestly during the interview if the second researcher was present. Interviews were conducted using semi-structured open ended questions (Table 1) and digitally recorded with student permission. Field notes were recorded immediately following each focus group interview.

Table 1: Sample interview guiding questions

1.	1.	What are your experiences of working within a group when a group mark is awarded?
2.	2.	How has receiving a group mark impacted on your learning (positively & negatively)?
3.	3.	How has receiving a group mark affected your experiences of working in a group (positively & negatively)?

3.5. Data Analysis

Manual thematic analysis was conducted. Both researchers listened to the recorded interviews and collected data was then transcribed verbatim. Transcribed data was then read and re-read to identify key words and codes. Significant statements were selected and organised into categories using the scissors and sort technique which involves identifying important quotes or expressions, cutting them out and sorting them into piles of similar quotes (Ryan and Bernard 2003). These categories were then organised into groups of sub-themes and an over-arching theme. Themes and sub-themes were identified by repetition as the more times a concept appeared in the text the more likely it was considered a theme (Ryan and Bernard, 2003).

4. Findings

4.1. Mutual Dependency

The core theme to emerge was mutual dependency. Students spoke about their dependence on group members for their grade and how they had to trust that each student would do the work they were allocated to do.

“your trusting them that they’ve done enough work to have everything you need to know but if they leave something out...you’re losing out because your trusting that that’s everything when it’s not” {P2G1}

Students talked about feeling personal pressure within the group; especially if they perceived themselves to be of a different academic standard to other group members. Students worried about the impact they had on the group grade and felt responsible for other student grades. As a result of binary dependent relationships, students experienced a range of negative emotions such as stress, exhaustion and frustration.

“say you’re not the strongest member of a group...[will they] be looking back at you going it’s your fault...you’re feeling guilty, dragged them down or something...it mightn’t always be the case but you always have that fear...what if I’m not good enough for them” {P4G4}

Within these dependent relationships, three sub-themes emerged; lack of controllability, challenges of co-dependency and invisible work.

Figure 1: Themes and Sub-Themes

4.2. Lack of controllability

As a consequence of their feelings of dependency, students’ expressed a sense of loss of control over their own grade, learning and future when a group mark was awarded.

4.2.1. Control of own grade

Students spoke about having less control over their own grade and not knowing what grade to expect when working in a group.

“if I do an individual assignment...I'd have my expectations of what grade I was gonna get...in a group you're never really sure” {P1G2}

Some participants experienced receiving a lower grade for group assignments compared to individual pieces of academic work. Explanations for this centred on other group members operating differently or exerting less effort to contribute to the group project.

“if there is people slacking then your grade is gonna come down because the work isn't being put in” {P1G2}

Other students believed they were more likely to pass a module with a group assessment but achieving a high grade was more difficult. Students also comprehended their grades were affected when groups were assessed alongside each other; particularly if the assignment was to deliver a verbal group presentation.

“they'd be less likely to fail a whole group...so you're less likely to fail but at the same time are you less likely to get a really good grade” {P2G4}

“when there's only three groups it's tough...the lecturers are obviously gonna compare them...going this one stands out a mile...these just aren't up to the standard...yeah it does, it worries you” {P2G4}

Students conversed about different learning styles and qualities of group members' work; highlighting that often perceived weaker group members' labour had to be compensated for. This compensation usually took the form of some group members contributing more or checking and correcting written work submitted by other group members to ensure it conformed to a superior standard.

“some might...try to compensate for people...they might try to do more to cover for them and just give up on them” {P8G1}

4.2.2. Control over own learning

Students perceived they had less control over their own learning when functioning in a group. This was attributed to each student being assigned a specific subject area or segment to research. Despite the availability of face-to-face group sessions for students to feedback the knowledge they had acquired, students still focused only on their specific segment and paid little attention to other group members subject matter. There was consensus among students that they learned more when working individually because they felt they had greater control over what material they deemed important to investigate to advance their own knowledge base. The expanse of group work organisation was also viewed as impacting on the scope of student learning.

“you learn less... because you're sticking...only to your topic and they cover the rest...you just only concentrate on your bit..and kind of dismiss..their bit” {P2G4}

“I prefer..being able to look at the material myself and decide what I think is important to know for me, for my future career” {P4G4}

4.2.3. Controlling own future

Student attitudes changed as they transitioned throughout the degree programme. Early in the programme students expressed the value of skills they gained from engaging in group work such as communication, compromise, confidence building, self-development opportunities and learning how to work in a team.

“teach you how to work with other people...how to communicate...come to a compromise” {P3G4}

“you have to learn to get on with people and to be able to work with people whether your personalities clash or not” {P1G1}

Fourth year students reported that their perspectives changed as they advanced to year three and four of the programme when module grades began to make a difference (i.e. module grades contributed to overall degree calculation). As a consequence, students felt that group grades were unfitting at these junctures in their programme of study because of the potential impact on their future.

“people that...really want to do...masters or maybe even a PhD after...they're really dependant on what they get marked” {P4G4}

“what’s the point, if you don’t have a 2:1...you can’t do whatever further studies you want to” {P4G4}

Students believed that if they received a lower degree calculation due to a group mark it would imprint a greater impression on them than if they received a lower calculation due to their own individual work.

“when you know it’s yourself...ok, this is the result of my work...if you worked to the bone for ...all your other grades...and you’re looking at that one group mark...one percent off what I needed or wanted...it would hang over me yeah...very hard to look at that piece of paper for the rest of your life and say if it wasn’t for that group work” {P4G4}

4.3. Challenges of Co-dependency

Dependent relationships can cause conflict within groups; thus it was not surprising that students’ spoke about disharmonies that arose within groups and how these were handled, or not. Students relayed that how disputes were dealt with differed depending on whether the group was composed of friends or strangers.

4.3.1. Dealing with confrontations

When a conflict arose between two or more group members, where the group constituted friends, other group members tended to just let them sort it out and not get involved.

“if it’s kinda just two people in the group have a disagreement...nobody else in the group really cares...they kind of just stay out of it...it’s basically who’s more headstrong” {P3G4}

Where some of the group were friends, and one or two other members were not, students relayed that friends tended to stick together and confront the other members if conflict arose.

“they didn’t know us, we didn’t know them...because then the rest of us all knew each other we were then nearly ganging up on them” {P6G4}

In relation to conflicts arising when group members neglected to contribute and submit the work, students imparted that the group had to decide if confronting the person was worth it. Usually, other group members took extra workload to ensure everything was completed.

“you’re kinda like well...the rest of the group is doing the work, we’re gonna get whatever sorta grade, this one person is gonna get this grade too even though they’re not doing anything but is it worth the hassle going to the lecturer...sending emails...doing all sorts of complaining...you could just get the grade and get on with it”
{P5G4}

4.3.2. Dichotomy of working with strangers versus friends

Participants dialogued about their preference for being assigned to groups rather than choosing their own group members because it removed the pressure of having to select friends as group members.

“they ask to be in your group and you can’t say no to your friend...you can’t be like no you’re not allowed in my group...you might fail me” {P3G4}

While some students felt it was easier to work within a group if all members knew each other, other students believed that knowing group members was an added source of conflict. Students spoke about how their judgement of their friends’ work ethic could change if they worked in groups together. Also, it was easy for work to be postponed when working with friends due to external commitments or for group members to take on extra work to avoid confrontation with friends.

“if you did pick your group...and went with your friends...you could have a totally different judgement of people...you could be like...oh we can be in a group together ‘cause we all...work really hard...then find out that they don’t...” {P8G1}

“if you got on really well with the person and you knew they wouldn’t like being told...you kinda try and sort it out as opposed to...causing conflict...you end up trying to sort it out and then taking on the extra workload...to avoid awkwardness and conflict”
{P1G1}

While participants expressed their preference to be assigned to groups and conversed about the challenges of working in groups with friends, there appeared to be a dichotomy in thinking because students stated they still preferred working with their friends over strangers. This was because students found it harder to co-ordinate group meetings and experienced greater difficulty depending on people they did not know.

“it’s harder ‘cause you don’t know the people you’re depending on...sometimes [they] can just be terrible for turning up to...meetings or even getting stuff into the group” {P2G4}

4.4. Invisible work

Invisible work refers to the volume of labour embroiled in group projects; which can often go unnoticed, in addition to, recognising group member’s individual contributions; which can be unequal depending on the efforts exerted by each group members. This inequity extended to the percentage weighted for group project elements of modules.

4.4.1. Organisation of group activities

Difficulty in organising times for the group to meet outside of timetabled sessions was discussed and all participants were in agreement that for groups to function effectively there had to be a leader. However, this presented its own challenges with some group members making less of an effort allowing the leader to carry a higher portion of the work.

“you can’t just sit down yourself and get the stuff done, you have to organise a time that suits everyone and there’s always someone that it doesn’t suit...there’s always difficulty trying to get your group together” {P1G1}

“there has to be a leader in the group, without that...it just won’t function...if there’s no leader it’s kind of up in the air and no-one knows what they’re doing” {P1G2}

“some people can sit back ‘cause someone takes charge...they like sit back and let that person take on most of the work” {P1G1}

Participants who had previously acted as group leaders relayed different views on this matter. These student ‘leaders’ did not necessarily perceive that they took on extra workload because the ‘leader role’ did not encompass completing other students work but rather embodied the organisation of group activities, meetings and deadlines. Participants also discussed how their attitudes to the person taking charge can vary depending on how well they know them.

“mostly its just a matter of saying a day and a time...you can say do this but you’re not doing it for them...they still have to go and do all the work” {P4G4}

“if it was a group of strangers and there was one person constantly emailing and texting, saying do this by then, you would get really annoyed” {P2G4}

Fourth year participants discussed how the extra workload and stress of group work added to their already tightly packed schedule. The fact that fourth year students spent half of their college semester out in clinical placement meant they had less time in college to work on all the different modules which added extra pressure and stress. Due to the short time they spend in college, personal commitments outside of college, and as group work takes up so much of their time, participants felt that other modules suffered.

“we’ve so little time in college and to co-ordinate so many groups, it’s hard...there’s so much work to be done and it’s stressful” {P2G4}

“you have so many other things, like people...are working or people...have family, they’re so worried about making sure that they have everything done for their group work that they forget all their other assignments” {P4G4}

4.4.2. Recognition of individual contribution

Students asserted that sometimes the final product of their group work was not reflective of the amount of work involved. For instance, where the assignment was a group presentation, participants talked about how they felt that it was unfair to be graded on the amount of information they could provide in such a short time span. Students also affirmed it was often difficult to recognise each student’s individual contribution to the overall final product. Interestingly, students highlighted that they did not place the same importance on a group grade as the work was not their own, and essentially, not recognised as such.

“I don’t think that the amount of work that you need to put in reflects the group, your overall grade or even what you produce...I don’t think you reflect the amount of hours that you actually end up having to put in” {P4G4}

“I just don’t think that marking someone on the amount of information they manage to verbalise in two minutes is in any way fair...it doesn’t demonstrate anything that I’ve learned from that module, it doesn’t show what I’m capable of producing at all” {P3G4}

“the lecturer won’t know what you contributed to the work...if everyone’s doing it together and you get a group mark for it you can get...really low...say you did whatever portion of the work but that doesn’t show sometimes...it always seems like it’s evenly divided but sometimes it just ends up being a couple of people” {P5G1} *“when you’re doing individual you pay more attention to the mark you get...the group one is kind of like oh we passed... it wasn’t all your work like say an individual one...it doesn’t mean as much really ‘cause it wasn’t all your work” {P5G1}*

4.4.3. Assessment weighting of group work

Students felt the percentage of grade assessment weighting applied to group projects, versus individual assignments, was unbalanced. For instance, it was often the case that 20-30% weighting would be applied to the group work element of a module with the balance of 70-80% of the weighting applied to an individual assignment. Students recounted that group work projects required a lot more effort than individual assignments and they valued when this extra workload was reflected in the group work grade assessment weighting. Students relayed that the group work grade weighting impacted on the amount of effort students would contribute to group projects.

“there was eighty percent for the assignment which was a couple of weeks work and there was twenty percent [for the group work] that was the entire...ten or twelve weeks...it was most of the module anyway...I know a lot of people were...frustrated at the amount of work for...very little...especially when we're on placement aswell” {P1G2}

“sixty five percent is a lot...we were doing it every week, it's always on our minds, it's something that we did...constantly so if it was lower I would be...a bit disappointed...you'd have felt like you did all the work for nothing” {P2G1}

“if you're gonna work so much for twenty percent...why bother...prioritise what you're gonna do...I imagine most people would be like ah it's grand...I'm not gonna put any other work in” {P1G2}

Students expressed lack of enjoyment for group projects when a group grade was awarded; with a sense of relief when the module was completed. Students deemed that groups would function better when no group grade was awarded because group dynamics would change with the removal of the pressure of depending on others and being depended on by others for a grade.

5. Discussion

Successful collaborative learning has two essential facets - positive interdependence and individual accountability (Johnson et al. 2007). Positive interdependence involves the group recognising they need each other to achieve success and individual accountability refers to each group member taking responsibility for and being accountable for their own participation

within the group. Students in this study raised issues of dependency; with negative interdependence featuring more strongly than positive interdependence. The students had previous experiences where not all group members participated wholly in group work. Where a group grade was awarded this raised negative emotions resulting in an aversion towards group work. Barfield (2003) discovered that where students once approached group work with enthusiasm, the more experiences they had of receiving group grades the less enthusiastic they became and instead felt anxiety and ambivalence towards the project. In theory, group goals and individual accountability should motivate students to work together for the benefit of the group. However, this is often not the case. Orr (2010) unearthed that when students are depending on other group members, who neglect to engage with the group, they approach the project cautiously because they do not trust their group-colleagues to deliver on the final project. This behaviour does not foster true collaborative learning but rather individual learning in the guise of a group; with some group members shouldering extra workload in order to achieve their own individual goals (i.e. the grade they want) (Burdett and Hastie, 2009).

While theoretically, student learning should be maximised as all group members take a specific topic and feedback to the group; thereby facilitating shared learning, the student participants in this study reported learning less from their peers than if working individually. These findings are consistent with previous studies which found that student learning is not always enhanced through collaborative working. When working in groups, students are dependent on each other to fully research topics and feedback to the group. The divided workload often results in students learning one particular feature of a topic in detail, but merely gaining superficial knowledge of other facets of the topic researched by other group members (Slavin, 1996; Kooloos, 2011; Hamilton et al. 2012). Lack of participation by some group members can affect student learning because when certain group members neglect to perform the work required the rest of the group misses learning opportunities (Platzer et al. 2000; Glasper, 2001; Bacon, 2005). Difficulties with group work logistics – organising meetings, dividing up work - contributes further to student workload and consumes time that could be spent learning (Bacon, 2005; Brown and McIlroy, 2011). Reasons given by students, in this study, for lack of participation included time constraints, work and personal commitments; added to an already

heavy workload. Previous studies cite similar reasons for limited/non-participation (Ashby et al. 2006; Jepson, 2008; Tully, 2010); however the outcome is frequently that certain group members assume extra workload because their grade is dependent on it. This becomes a source of conflict within the group, leading to dissatisfaction with group work and causes once motivated students to lose interest and lower their standards because they either deem the extra effort required by them unfair or they become wary of contributing to the grade of group members who fail to participate (Burdett and Hastie, 2009; Moore, 2012).

6. Implications

As third level adult learners, students are not only encouraged, but expected, to accept responsibility for their own learning (Dolmans et al. 2001; Papinczak et al. 2007). Indeed, it has been reported that students have more positive experiences when they perceive they are taking responsibility and control of their learning and academic achievement (Ashby et al. 2006). However, when students are assigned into groups and compelled to depend on others for their learning outcomes and grades, their control over their own learning and academic achievement is removed from them. Often educators are under the impression that designating students work to be completed as a group is utilising collaborative learning (Barfield, 2003; Johnson et al. 2007; Jepson, 2008; Coers et al. 2010). However, successful collaborative learning involves skills such as leadership, decision-making and conflict resolution; nursing students need to learn these skills as they would any other skill (Johnson et al. 2007). Student collaboration should be carefully planned and structured to ensure collaborative learning is effective (Liao, 2014), thus, a period of teaching students how to effectively work in groups could enable them to see the benefits of group work, empower them to take responsibility for their actions and enhance student learning (Gillies, 2008; Eng, 2009).

Previous studies have identified that students believe they learn more content and reduce their workload when working individually (Bacon, 2005; Neus, 2011). Students who feel they participate more than others express dissatisfaction that the amount of effort required is often

not reflected in the weighting of the assessment grade nor do they feel that it is fair for all group members to get the identical grade when the workload is not equally divided (Burdett and Hastie, 2009; Orr, 2010). Jepson (2008), Moore (2012) and Ohaja et al. (2013) suggest grades should reflect individual contributions in completing group projects, rather than the final project output. If this approach to group work assessment was adopted students might feel the process would be fairer in that their own contribution would be recognised and they would not be contributing extra labour than some group members for less reward. Unfortunately, the participants in this study had primarily negative perceptions and experiences of group work. However, if students perceived the method of assessment to be fairer their perceptions and experiences of group work might improve; as students with positive experiences of group work have higher perceptions of learning (Burdett and Hastie, 2009).

7. Limitations

This study took place in one Irish higher education institution with a small cohort of student nurses undertaking one specific branch (children's and general integrated) of an undergraduate nursing degree programme; thus potentially limiting the value of the findings. Our low student response rate (17%) could be attributable to many factors such as semester timing; student assessments and workloads, student relentless pondering about impending clinical placements and calendared internship, student and family life outside college and/or because the second researcher was a lecturer on the degree programme from which students were recruited (although was directly involved in lecturing and/or assessing these student cohorts at the time of the study). Furthermore, it is possible that students were reluctant to participate due to their dislike of group work. The study may also be limited because the primary researcher was a third year student on the degree programme and from her own past experience of engaging in collaborative group work for which a group grade was awarded had a personal interest in the topical issue of group work grading. In an attempt to minimise subjective bias, especially as the student was also a novice researcher, a semi-structured, open ended interview schedule (Table 1) was prepared and practice runs were conducted with the primary researcher with

particular attention given to the danger of leading or influencing participant responses. Following data collection, digital recordings were listened to by the second researcher and coded transcripts, categorisation and thematic formation were examined at different junctures of data analysis. Despite these limitations, the findings of the study offer valuable insights into student perspectives of receiving a group mark for modules that require group work and the impact this has on their learning and group work experiences.

8. Conclusions

Collaborative learning requires students to have positive beliefs in group work. However, students can often experience problems in group work which can negatively impact on their learning; especially when student grades depend on the work of the group. With few studies examining student experiences of group work when a group mark is awarded, this study set out to describe nursing student's experiences of receiving a group mark for collaborative learning modules and the impact this has on their learning and group work experience. Core findings of this study centred around dependency; with negative interdependence featuring more strongly. Students expressed loss of control over their own grade, learning and future when working in groups with a group mark award. Students referred to the conflicts that arose within groups and how these conflicts were dealt with differently depending on whether the groups were composed of friends or strangers. The invisibility of the volume of student labour and individual student contribution and how this labour and unequal individual student contribution was reflected in the percentage weighting of group project elements of modules was also mentioned by student participants. These results illustrate that consideration needs to be given to how group work grades can reflect individual student contribution in completing group projects because if students perceive fairer methods of assessments their experiences of group work might be enhanced which in turn may contribute to higher perceptions of learning. Further research is also needed to examine the appropriateness of awarding group grades

where results contribute to degree classification. Students must be taught effective group work skills to enhance learning and group work experiences. This could enable them to see the benefits of group work, empower them to take responsibility for their actions and enhance student learning.

9 References

- Ali, P.A., Watson, R., 2011. The case for graduate entry to the United Kingdom nursing register. *International Nursing Review* 58, 312–318
- Almond, R.J., 2009. Group assessment: comparing group and individual undergraduate module marks. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education* 34 (2), 141-148
- An Bord Altranais (ABA)., 2005. Requirements and Standards for Nurse Registration Education Programmes, 3rd Ed. An Bord Altranais, Dublin
- Ashby, J., Hubbert, V., Cotrel-Gibbons, L., Cox, K., Digan, J., Lewis, K., Langmack, G., Matiti, M., McCormick, D., Roberts, L., Taylor, D., Thom, N., Wiggs, M., Wilson, L., 2006. The enquiry-based learning experience: An evaluation project. *Nurse Education in Practice* 6 (1), 22-30
- Bacon, D.R., 2005. The Effect of Group Projects on Content Related Learning. *Journal of Management Education* 29 (2), 248-267
- Barfield, R.L., 2003. Students' Perceptions of and Satisfaction with Group Grades and the Group Experience in the College Classroom. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education* 28 (4), 355-369
- Bose, M.J., Jarreau, P.C., Lawrence, L.W.L., Snyder, P., 2004. Using Cooperative Learning in Clinical Laboratory Science Education. *Clinical Laboratory Science* 17 (1), 12-18
- Bowman, D., Hughes, P., 2005. Emotional responses of tutors and students in problem based learning: lessons for staff development. *Medical Education* 39 (2), 145-153
- Brown, C.A., McIlroy, K., 2011. Group work in healthcare students' education: what do we think we are doing? *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education* 36 (6), 687-699
- Burdett, J., Hastie, B., 2009. Predicting Satisfaction with Group Work Assignments. *Journal of University Teaching & Learning Practice* 6 (1), 59-71
- Chen, J., 2011. Problem-based learning: Developing resilience in nursing Students. *Kaohsiung Journal of Medical Sciences* 27 (6), 230-233
- Chew-Graham, C.A., May, C.R., Perry, M.S., 2002. Qualitative research and the problem of judgement: lessons from interviewing fellow professionals. *Family Practice* 19 (3), 285-289
- Coers, N., Williams, J., Duncan, D., 2010. Impact of Group Development Knowledge on Students' Perceived Importance and Confidence of Group Work Skills. *Journal of Leadership Education* 9 (2), 101-121
- Cooper, C., Carver, N., 2012. Problem based learning in mental health nursing: The students' experience. *International Journal of Mental Health Nursing* 21 (2), 175-183

Dolmans, D.H., Wolfhagen, I.H., Van Der Vleuten, C.P., Wijnen, W.H., 2001. Solving problems with group work in problem-based learning: hold on to the philosophy. *Medical Education* 35 (9), 884-889

Elmir, R., Schmied, V., Jackson, D., Wilkes, L., 2011. Interviewing people about potentially sensitive topics. *Nurse Researcher* 19 (1), 12-16

Eng, T.T., 2009. Exploring cooperative learning (CL) in out of class academic collaboration (OCAC) to promote active learning among nurses at the clinical area. *Singapore Nursing Journal* 36 (3), 7-8, 10-11

Gallagher, P.A., 2009. Collaborative Essay Testing: Group Work That Counts. *International Journal of Nursing Education Scholarship* 6 (1), 13p

Gillies, R.M., 2008. The Effects of Cooperative Learning on Junior High School Students' Behaviours, Discourse and Learning During a Science-Based Learning Activity. *School Psychology International* 29 (3), 328-347

Glasper, E.A., 2001. Child health nurses' perceptions of enquiry-based learning. *British Journal of Nursing* 10 (20), 1343-1349

Hamilton, C., Yearley, C., Boyle, S., 2012. Evaluating enquiry-based learning in a new pre-registration programme. *British Journal of Midwifery* 20 (2), 129-134

Hijzen, D., Boekaerts, M., Vedder, P., 2006. The relationship between the quality of cooperative learning, students' goal preferences, and perceptions of contextual factors in the classroom. *Scandinavian Journal of Psychology* 47 (1), 9-21

Huff, C., 1997. Cooperative Learning: A Model for Teaching. *Journal of Nursing Education* 36 (9), 434-436

Jepson, J., 2008. Facilitating student nurses' learning using online enquiry-based activities. *Journal of Children's and Young People's Nursing* 2 (2), 90-93

Johnson, D.W., Johnson, R.T., Smith, K., 2007. The State of Cooperative Learning in Postsecondary and Professional Settings. *Educational Psychology Review* 19 (1), 15-29

Klunklin, A., Subpaibongid, P., Keitlertnapha, P., Viseskul, N., Turale, S., 2011. Thai nursing students' adaption to problem-based learning: A qualitative study. *Nurse Education in Practice* 11 (6), 370-374

Kooloos, J.G.M., Klaassen, T., Vereijken, M., Van Kuppeveld, S., Bolhuis, S., Vorstenbosch, M., 2011. Collaborative group work: Effects of group size and assignment structure on learning gain, student satisfaction and perceived participation. *Medical Teacher* 33 (12), 983-988

Liao, H., 2014. Examining the Role of Collaborative Learning in a Public Speaking Course. *College Teaching* 62 (2), 47-54

Lodico, M.G., Spaulding, D.T., Voegtle, K.H., 2010. *Methods in Educational Research: From Theory to Practice*, 2nd Ed. John Wiley & Sons Inc, USA

Loeb, S., Penrod, J., Hupcey, J., 2006. Focus Groups and Older Adults: Tactics for Success. *Journal of Gerontological Nursing* 32 (3), 32-38

Mapp, T., 2008. Understanding phenomenology: the lived experience. *British Journal of Midwifery* 16 (5), 308-311

Moore, S., 2012. Is it time to blend student learning? *British Journal of Midwifery* 20 (11), 812-816

Neergaard, M.A., Olesen, F., Andersen, R.S., Sondergaard, J., 2009. Qualitative description – the poor cousin of health research? *BMC Medical Research Methodology* 9 (52), 1-5

Neus, J.L., 2011. Peer assessment accounting for student agreement. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education* 36 (3), 301-314

Nordberg, D., 2008. Group projects: more learning? Less fair? A conundrum in assessing postgraduate business education. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education* 33 (5), 481-492

Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC)., 2010. *Standards for pre-registration nursing education*. Nursing and Midwifery Council, England.

Ohaja, M., Dunlea, M., Muldoon, K., 2013. Group marking and peer assessment during a group poster presentation: The experiences and views of midwifery students. *Nurse Education in Practice* 13 (5), 466-470

Orr, S., 2010. Collaborating or fighting for the marks? Students' experiences of group work assessment in the creative arts. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education* 35 (3), 301-313

Papinczak, T., Young, L., Groves, M., Haynes, M., 2007. An analysis of peer, self, and tutor assessment in problem-based learning tutorials. *Advances in Health Sciences Education: Theory and Practice* 12 (2), 169-186

Platzer, H., Blake, D., Ashford, D., 2000. Barriers to learning from reflection: a study of the use of groupwork with post-registration students. *Journal of Advanced Nursing* 31 (5), 1001-1008

Ryan, G.W., Bernard, H.R., 2003. Techniques to Identify Themes. *Field Methods* 15 (1), 85-109

Sandelowski, M., 2000. Whatever Happened to Qualitative Description? *Research in Nursing & Health* 23 (4), 334-340

Slavin, R.E., 1996. *Research on Cooperative Learning and Achievement: What We Know, What We Need to Know*. *Contemporary Educational Psychology* 21 (1), 43-69

Souers, C., Kauffman, L., McManus, C., Parker, V., 2007. Collaborative learning: A focused partnership. *Nurse Education in Practice* 7 (6), 392-398

Thomas, T.A., 2014. Developing team skills through a collaborative writing assignment. *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education* 39 (4), 479-495

Tully, S.L., 2010. Student midwives' satisfaction with enquiry-based learning. *British Journal of Midwifery* 18 (4), 254-258

United Kingdom Central Council for Nursing, Midwifery and Health Visiting (UKCC)., 1999. *Fitness for practice: The UKCC Commission for Nursing and Midwifery Education*, UKCC, London

Visschers-Pleijers, A.J.S., Dolmans, D.H.J., Wolfhagen, I.H.A., Van Der Vleuten, C.P.M., 2005. Development and validation of a questionnaire to identify learning-oriented group interactions in PBL. *Medical Teacher* 27 (4), 375-381

Zafuto, M.S., 1997. Cooperative Learning: A Means to Promote Metacognitive and Collaborative Skills in Heterogeneous Nursing Students. *Journal of Nursing Education* 36 (6), 265-270