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The hand that rocks the cradle - professional generosity in nursing academia

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In the UK and the Republic of Ireland the preparation of nurses within universities is a relatively new and welcome phenomenon. In this context over the last three decades nurses have navigated the university setting for the first time. Certainly the university sector has provided a wealth of opportunities and rewards in terms of the development of the profession. Indeed many individuals progressed to previously unimagined heights (Watson et al 2017). However, many left a senior or advanced clinical career where they felt respected and found themselves in an academic role experiencing “self-doubt, anxieties about competence and a fear of making a mistake—feelings which may not have been experienced with such frequency and intensity since the individual’s time as a student nurse” (Massey et al 2019: 3371). There was for many the experience of an exposure, for the first time, to the pursuit of scientific endeavours and scholarship without necessarily understanding or valuing the role that nursing research has in terms of its enormous potential to create the knowledge that will drive service improvement and benefit people and communities. Although the discoveries that emerge from research are usually team based, for some, the experience of the university promotional systems appeared to reward individual performance solely, thus creating a competitive, and perhaps divisive environment whereby helping others is not necessarily recognised, and individual achievement becomes paramount. This can lead to a type of professional narcissism, among a few, where attributes that permit rising to the top, such as arrogance, competitiveness, self-centeredness and keeping others back, are not only rewarded but applauded (Thompson & Clark 2018; Thompson & Darbyshire 2013a, 2013b). Two linked behaviours have been observed: firstly, “professional stinginess” when:

“people take credit for work that others have done, when they hoard resources that could be better used when shared broadly, when they withhold information that could benefit the work of others, and when they consistently reserve key opportunities for themselves (e.g., first authorship, attendance at meetings, and participation on prestigious committees)” (Disch 2013:195).

Secondly, professional incivility, described by Disch (2013:195) when individuals “denigrate the work of others, are mean-spirited, or speak condescendingly” This latter has been of concern in the university setting for some time (Darbyshire & Thompson 2021; Darbyshire et al 2020a, 2019; Thompson & Clark 2018). Incivility also occurs in the healthcare settings. Keller et al (2020) for example identified

predictors and triggers of incivility in healthcare teams, noting the impact of professional discipline, a higher occurrence among nurses, and the influence of workplace culture. Factors linked to higher incivility include high workload, communication or coordination issues, patient safety concerns, lack of support and poor leadership (Keller et al 2020). If this occurs within university settings where the drive of the singular academic on a mission to succeed this creates a challenging environment in which to flourish.

For a majority, nurses are used to expecting team working, solidarity and mentorship, even in the absence of formalised mentorship systems (Jackson 2008), and therefore expect this in the university. Early on, Debra Jackson (2008), reflecting on her own career both as a nurse and academic, highlighted how pivotal “professional generosity” was to her personal and professional development. Disch (2013:195) describes this as:

“a spirit of willingness, openhandedness, magnanimity, and collegiality. People who are professionally generous are benevolent, bighearted, and unselfish”.

Indeed this presence of key personnel who are willing to spontaneously guide and direct, take you under their wing, is demonstrated as pivotal to achieving one’s full potential (Jackson 2008). Debra Moser similarly applauded Kathleen Dracup as a “mentor extraordinaire” and wrote explicitly about how the most subtle acts of support fostered an exceptional career (Moser 1998:11). Similarly one of us, David Thompson, acknowledged Dracup’s contribution to his exceptional career noting that progression does not emerge without such “nursing heroes” (Thompson 2019). Others too have acknowledged a debt of gratitude to supportive and generous nurses and cited examples of nursing heroism (Darbyshire 2011; Darbyshire & Thompson 2014). There are many nurses who have spoken of the need for such sharing (Morris et al 2021 Horvat (2021), Darbyshire et al 2019, Thompson 2019, Smith et al 2016, Disch 2013, Lin 2000). Darbyshire et al (2020b), for example, refer to “collegial oversight” to create an environment whereby faculty are aware of pitfalls in academia such as predatory publishing. Morris et al. (2021:50) highlight this need for professional generosity for example by sharing grants, authorship, resources and ideas with others so that the profession as a whole, rather than individuals, advances.

More recently it has been observed that nursing is now entering a critical phase whereby succession planning for nurse educators is at risk (Sheerin et al. 2021). The low numbers of nurses undertaking PhDs means that few are prepared to take on the mantle (Watson et al. 2021). Professional generosity is needed now more than ever to cultivate the environments needed for growth and development but also to enable and prepare nurse educators for the future. As Disch (2013:195) outlines:

“Schools of nursing and health care delivery systems play a significant role in fostering a culture of professional generosity. In these institutions, there are clear expectations of behavior, rewards that reinforce the behaviors, open communication, and mutual respect. There are opportunities for interacting, for sharing, and for celebrating the accomplishments of all members of the team”

What is needed is the development of an organisational culture that promotes and acknowledges professional generosity (Disch 2013). This would include developing a sense of collegiality and sharing; support, guidelines and reward for collaboration and methods of evaluating these (Disch 2013). Horvat’s (2021:56) recent qualitative study substantiates this need and confirms themes associated with professional generosity such as feeling valued, developing core relationships, reciprocity, and “growing our profession through connectedness”.

Nursing school heads, senior nurse academics and those in positions of power, responsibility and influence have a pivotal role in guiding and developing supportive structures for the future (Darbyshire et al 2019). This will involve inculcating an ethos of openness and transparency in which trust, honesty, integrity and mutual respect flourish, supporting cultural and contextual change, as many or all of these factors have been in limited supply. Given that many of the experiences related to lack of career progression within universities, limited opportunities, lack of professional mentors, and skewed perspectives of achievement that nurses experience, it is important that efforts to ensure transparency in terms of gender equality, diversity and inclusion are fully realised. It is paramount that efforts extolling change in support for professional generosity are tangible, and embedded in international best practice to drive a positive cultural change (Athena Swan 2021).

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