

Student Engagement in Nursing Education: A Concept Analysis Using Walker and Avant's Method

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Abstract

To determine the concept of student engagement in nursing education using Walker and Avant's eight-step concept analysis framework and to provide a conceptual foundation for curriculum development and research. This concept analysis was guided by Walker and Avant's method. A comprehensive literature search was conducted in PubMed, CINAHL, Scopus, and Google Scholar for English-language publications between January 2020 and January 2026 using the keywords "student engagement," "nursing education," and "concept analysis." Relevant empirical and theoretical studies were reviewed to identify defining attributes, antecedents, consequences, and empirical referents. Student engagement in nursing education develops as a complex, active process comprising four fundamental components: behavioral participation, cognitive engagement, emotional dedication, and social connection. The study identifies multiple factors that lead to improved learning outcomes, including supportive learning environments, effective teaching methods, strong faculty-student relationships, student readiness, and institutional support. The study results in five positive outcomes, which include better academic achievement and improved clinical skills, the development of professional identity, and higher student retention rates and preparedness for safe patient care. The study uses validated engagement instruments and classroom and clinical participation indicators, and academic performance metrics as its empirical referents. The student engagement process requires both academic attendance and compliance with school rules because it demonstrates their complete development across all intellectual, emotional, and social aspects throughout both academic and clinical environments. Evidence-based educational strategies receive support from conceptual clarification, which guides upcoming assessment and nursing education research studies.

Keywords: Student Engagement; Nursing Education; Concept Analysis; Professional Identity; Clinical Competence

Introduction

Healthcare systems depend on nurses who possess competence, reflective abilities, and ethical principles. The nursing education process requires students to combine their theoretical learning with the development of their clinical reasoning, communication abilities, and professional

identity. The academic context of a classroom requires student presence because it serves as the main factor that determines both their academic performance and their ability to work in their future careers¹. Higher education literature contains extensive research about student engagement, yet nursing education fails to establish a clear definition of this concept. The term is frequently used interchangeably with motivation, participation, or involvement, resulting in theoretical overlap and inconsistent operationalization². Nursing programs require students to engage through classroom activities and their practical work in clinical settings where they implement theoretical concepts to provide safe patient care³. Recent studies show that students who engage in their studies demonstrate better academic performance and develop their professional identity while reducing their dropout rates and increasing their clinical skills⁴⁻⁶. The application of this method in curriculum development and research work is hindered by inconsistent definitions and measurement techniques. Concept analysis is an established method for clarifying ambiguous constructs in nursing science. The Walker and Avant framework established an eight-step process that enables users to identify all defining attributes, antecedents, consequences, and empirical referents of a concept⁷. Nursing education needs a complete understanding of student engagement because it helps to develop teaching methods, design curricula, and assess educational outcomes. Therefore, the objective of this study was to analyze and clarify the concept of student engagement in nursing education using Walker and Avant's method.

Methodology

This study employed Walker and Avant's eight-step concept analysis method, which includes: (1) selecting a concept; (2) determining the purpose of analysis; (3) identifying all uses of the concept; (4) determining defining attributes; (5) constructing a model case; (6) identifying additional cases; (7) identifying antecedents and consequences; and (8) defining empirical referents⁷.

Literature Search Strategy

A literature search was conducted in PubMed, CINAHL, Scopus, and Google Scholar for articles published between January 2020 and January 2026. Search terms included: "student engagement" AND "nursing education", "nursing student engagement", "engagement" AND "clinical learning", "concept analysis" AND "nursing". Inclusion criteria were: English-language publications, nursing education context, empirical, theoretical, or review studies, and peer-reviewed articles. A total of 59 articles were screened, and 29 highly related sources informed the synthesis.

Results

Uses of the Concept

The general education literature revealed that student engagement is the combination of time spent on learning activities and the physical effort and mental energy students dedicate to those activities. The measure indicates how much students take part in educational activities that lead to learning results. Nursing engagement requires students to participate in clinical work because they need to show their professional capacity through communication skills, reflection, and ethical practices. Engagement exists as a multidimensional construct that includes three distinct components: behavioral elements, cognitive elements, and emotional elements. The current research shows social aspects that demonstrate how people work together and feel included in clinical environments. The concept differs from motivation. Motivation exists as an internal force that drives people to act, while engagement shows the visible actions that result from that inner drive. Participation shows that people either attend events or take part in different activities, but without forming any real emotional or mental connection to those activities.

Defining Attributes

There are four defining attributes that consistently emerged:

1. Behavioral Involvement

Behavioral involvement refers to active participation in academic and clinical activities, including attending lectures, contributing to discussions, completing assignments, participating in simulations, and performing clinical procedures³. Students reveal behavioral engagement, invest time and effort in structured learning experiences.

2. Cognitive Investment

Cognitive engagement involves critical thinking, reflective practice, self-regulated learning, and sustained intellectual effort². Nursing students who are engaged with their studies examine patient data, combine theoretical knowledge with practical application, and pursue an advanced understanding of complicated clinical situations.

3. Affective Commitment

Affective engagement occurs when students develop emotional ties to their learning, display enthusiasm for nursing practice, experience a feeling of belonging, and take pride in their professional work⁴. Students who demonstrate affective commitment to their studies will show educational motivation, together with their capacity to keep studying and their positive attitude toward learning.

4. Social Interaction

Social engagement describes three activities, which include collaborative learning, peer interaction, and faculty and clinical mentor communication. The program develops essential teamwork abilities that help nursing practitioners to establish professional relationships. The two characteristics create an active process that develops through both academic and clinical assessment settings.

Model Case

Sara, a third-year nursing student, attends all lectures and clinical rotations punctually. She takes part in class discussions and simulation exercises through her active participation. She examines patient conditions during clinical practice and documents her findings in her journal through critical thinking. She demonstrates her passion for nursing through enthusiastic nursing practices while she requests feedback to enhance her skills. She works well with her classmates while showing polite communication to both her teachers and patients. The case provides complete evidence that defines all student engagement characteristics.

Borderline Case

Ali regularly attends classes and completes his assignments, yet he shows little interest in classroom discussions. He demonstrates behavioral involvement but lacks affective and social dimensions.

Related Case

A student who is highly motivated to succeed academically but avoids collaborative learning or clinical interaction demonstrates motivation but not full engagement.

Contrary Case

A student who misses classes with frequency, avoids clinical rendering of more clinical responsibilities, or shows interest in education, and has all the inherent characteristics of disengagement.

Invented Case

The student needs to demonstrate exceptional academic success while directing research activities and tutoring fellow students, and showing superior performance in all clinical tasks without any signs of stress.

Illegitimate Case

The term “engagement” used to describe employment contracts or marital commitment represents misuse unrelated to the educational context.

Antecedents

Antecedents are conditions that must exist before engagement:

1. Supportive Learning Environment: Inclusive, respectful, and psychologically safe academic settings⁵.
2. Effective Teaching Strategies: Simulation, problem-based learning, flipped classrooms, and active learning techniques¹¹.
3. Faculty–Student Relationships: Constructive feedback, mentorship, and approachability⁴.
4. Student Readiness: Self-efficacy, intrinsic motivation, and preparedness¹⁰.
5. Institutional Support: Academic resources and sense of belonging.

Consequences

1. Academic Outcomes: Improved GPA and reduced dropout rates⁸.
2. Professional Outcomes: Development of professional identity and ethical responsibility⁶.
3. Clinical Outcomes: Enhanced competence, critical thinking, and patient safety awareness³.
4. Psychological Outcomes: Increased confidence, resilience, and satisfaction with learning.

Empirical Referents

Empirical referents include measurable indicators such as: Utrecht Work Engagement Scale–Student Version (UWES-S), National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), Classroom Engagement Inventory, Clinical evaluation tools, and Attendance records and reflective journals. These tools operationalize behavioral, cognitive, emotional, and social dimensions of engagement.

Discussion

The analysis shows that nursing education student engagement operates as a complex system that depends on different circumstances and includes four types of student mental activity. The research supports current studies, which show that student engagement leads to improved academic performance and the development of professional identity and clinical skills assessment. The research shows that people need to show their physical presence and participate through mental work and emotional commitment to achieve full engagement. Students need to develop their engagement skills because they must connect theoretical knowledge with actual patient care duties in clinical environments. Educational institutions need to implement interactive teaching methods together with helpful mentorship systems and university policies that create a sense of community. Designers of curricula need to design programs that include hands-on learning experiences together with opportunities for students to think about their learning processes, because this will help students connect more with their studies. The study has limitations because it depends on existing published research and does not contain any empirical evidence to support its findings.

Future research should create cultural engagement assessment tools that nursing professionals can use in their specific work environments.

Conclusion

Nursing education student engagement functions as a dynamic multidimensional framework that includes four elements. Students achieve academic success and develop professional identities and clinical skills through educational environments that provide them with essential support. The theoretical base of this concept becomes stronger through the process of clarification, which also enables educational innovation based on evidence to advance.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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Ethical Approval

Not applicable. This study involved analysis of published literature only.

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