

## ORIGINAL RESEARCH

# The lived experience of new graduate nurses successfully completing NCLEX-RN

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## ABSTRACT

**Background and objective:** The NCLEX pass rate is considered the primary indicator of program quality. Much literature exists regarding pre-graduation efforts aimed at aiding students to prepare for the NCLEX-RN exam, while there is little available on post-graduation efforts. This project was conducted to identify the post-graduation experiences of successful NCLEX-RN test takers as they prepared to complete the exam.

**Methods:** This was a qualitative descriptive study utilizing a phenomenological framework to determine the lived experience of new graduates preparing to complete the NCLEX-RN exam.

**Results:** Four main themes were identified as relevant to post graduation experiences including: (a) Finding Motivation, (b) Study Tactics, (c) Taking a Break, and (d) The Testing Experience. Additionally, few of the participants took it for granted that they were going to pass the exam, they reported wishing they had spent more time preparing, and with regard to studying, several described wishing they had started earlier.

**Conclusions:** It will be beneficial for faculty to discuss potential strategies for success to utilize after graduation, including expectations of testing day, setting a realistic timetable to test, overcoming lack of motivation to preparation for the exam, and careful scheduling of coaching and study sessions.

**Key Words:** NCLEX-RN exam, Baccalaureate, Nursing education, Test taking preparation

## 1. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Both nursing programs and nursing students find it discouraging when graduates fail the NCLEX-RN exam. Success on the first attempt is important to both for a variety of reasons. For students, the motivation for passing the NCLEX-RN is to obtain the required professional credentials ensuring their ability to work as a registered nurse. First-time pass rates are considered a major indicator of program quality and effectiveness and are utilized as a key measure for program accreditation making it a vital concern for nursing faculty to prepare graduates to perform well on the exam.

There is an abundance of literature published on the NCLEX-

RN pass rates and efforts to identify academic predictors necessary for student success.<sup>[1-3]</sup> The literature is replete with studies attempting to identify and share the most effective strategies to assist students in preparing to pass the NCLEX-RN on their first attempt. Such strategies include coaching programs, use of standardized exams to identify at-risk students and provide feedback, remediation courses, faculty development programs, and curriculum revisions.<sup>[1-5]</sup> Additionally, there is literature identifying academic variables including grade point average, standardized exam scores, and the number of course failures and their association with NCLEX performance.<sup>[6]</sup>

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While the bulk of nursing literature regarding NCLEX-RN performance reports on pre-graduation strategies, post-graduation mentoring programs have been described as effective in aiding students to be successful on their first NCLEX-RN attempt.<sup>[7,8]</sup> These post-graduation programs include ongoing communication, faculty support, and tutoring during the period immediately after graduation. Conklin and Cutright<sup>[9]</sup> reported that graduates developed a plan for post-graduation study and test preparation. Faculty followed-up weekly with students until they had successfully completed the NCLEX-RN. Adjustments were made to study plans as needed to meet progress goals and to help students stay on track. Unfortunately, there remains limited literature describing the preparatory experiences of graduates who passed on the first attempt.

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this study was to gain a deeper understanding of the lived experience of graduates passing the NCLEX-RN exam on the first attempt. Much has been written about the pre-graduation experiences, including program interventions and student preparation essential for passing the NCLEX-RN exam, but little about the ongoing exam preparation during the period immediately after graduation.<sup>[1,4]</sup> Due to the paucity of information on this topic, this study explored the lived experience of graduate nurses preparing for the NCLEX-RN.

## **2. METHODOLOGY**

### **2.1 Design**

This was a qualitative descriptive study utilizing a phenomenological framework to determine the lived experience of new graduates preparing to complete the NCLEX-RN exam. Institutional Review Board approval was sought and obtained from West Texas A&M University. Semi-structured interviews were conducted during the late spring and early summer of 2021.

### **2.2 Setting & sample**

The setting for this study is a nursing department in a university located in the Texas Panhandle. Relevant to this setting is the practice of utilizing a standardized testing package. For the past decade, students have utilized this testing package, which consists of case studies, patient reviews, practice quizzes, specialty exams, and comprehensive exams. Among the reasons for utilizing this testing package is to prepare students for NCLEX-RN. Also relevant is the fact that this program has a 92%+ NCLEX-RN first-time pass rate over the past decade and a program completion rate of 81%+ for the same time period.

Purposive sampling was utilized to allow the researchers to recruit nursing graduates who had successfully completed the NCLEX-RN on their first attempt within the past year. No other criteria were required for inclusion in this study. The researchers set a time frame of one year to ensure potential graduates could adequately recall their experiences of preparing for the NCLEX-RN exam. There were 79 graduates who met the requirement of having graduated within the past year and subsequently passing the NCLEX-RN on their first attempt. Four graduates required two attempts to pass and were excluded from recruitment. Fourteen graduates were initially contacted. Special attention was given to prevent participants from feeling compelled or obligated to participate in this study. They were invited only once to participate in the project. Written informed consent was obtained from each participant prior to data collection commencing.

### **2.3 Procedure**

The primary investigator contacted 14 recent graduates via phone or text, and all agreed to participate. The graduates were former students of the researchers. Pseudonyms were assigned to each participant (P1-P14). Data collection was accomplished through semi-structured telephone or virtual interviews. The interviews ranged from 30 to 45 minutes. Each interview was audio recorded and a verbatim transcription was completed. A commercial transcription service was utilized. All transcripts were reviewed by the researchers for accuracy.

A broad open-ended question was utilized to open the interview, "Can you tell us what you did between graduation and taking your NCLEX exam as preparation for the NCLEX?" After responding, the participants were encouraged to explore the following areas if not already discussed: length of time spent in preparation; activities completed in preparation; challenges and unanticipated events that may have interfered with their preparation; testing environment and what insights they would like to share about their experience. After the initial 14 interviews, the researchers determined that data saturation had been reached as no new information was being gathered and data collection was halted.

### **2.4 Data analysis**

All interview transcriptions were uploaded into ATLAS.ti 9 and thematic analysis was conducted utilizing the software. To ensure the trustworthiness of these findings, each of the fourteen transcripts was read independently by all researchers and initial codes were developed. The development of codes required reading and re-reading of each transcript. Finally, these codes were clustered into themes. Each of the themes were discussed in-depth with the other researchers involved

with the project until consensus was reached on the following findings.

### 3. FINDINGS

A phenomenological approach was utilized allowing fourteen graduate nurses to reflect upon their experience of successfully preparing for the NCLEX-RN after graduation. Participants were asked to share what they did between graduation and testing day in preparation for taking the NCLEX-RN exam. All participants in this study had passed their NCLEX-RN exam within 70 days of graduation. Four main themes were identified as relevant to their experiences including: (a) Difficulty Finding Motivation, (b) Study Tactics, (c) Taking a Break, and (d) The Testing Experience. Each is described below.

#### 3.1 Theme 1–Difficulty finding motivation

The first theme, Difficulty Finding Motivation, revealed that all of the participants struggled to find the motivation to study and to continue preparing for the NCLEX-RN exam after graduation. In fact, they considered this to be one of their greatest challenges. One graduate reported, “Just the fact that you’re done, you’ve graduated, and you want to do whatever - just because you’re done doesn’t mean you are a nurse, so, you still have to find that motivation to study (P-4).” And another described, “You feel done, but you’re not really done (P-6).”

No longer having scheduled classes or required times to be on campus made it difficult to find the motivation to schedule study/prep time as reported by Participant 3, “I think it was just hard to balance everything at home after graduation and studying at the same time. . . with no timetable.” Those used to studying with a partner or in a classroom situation reported no longer having easy access to their study group after graduation. This was difficult as demonstrated by Participant 7, “I did have a good study group but then we all just kind of had crazy schedules. So, we were probably able to meet up and study together only maybe once a week, but yeah, other than that I studied alone.” Another stated, “After graduation, I thought motivation was really challenging to find. . . trying to make myself focus on the NCLEX versus those external factors, like trying to find a place to live and trying to find a job. It was so much easier to just get on Zillow instead of UWorld (P-2).”

Finally, several of the graduate participants reported that finding motivation was difficult because their non-nursing friends who had graduated with them were finished with their class work while they still had a challenging exam to complete. One reported, “Motivation! Cause you know, it would have been nice to just be a senior who graduated col-

lege and I’m done – but you know, there’s another test to take (P-7).” Another participant (P-5) reported wishing that she had asked someone to be her “support buddy” as she prepared for the NCLEX-RN. She said, “It can be a classmate, it can be friend, it can be family- just at least one person that you can have to call when you’re not feeling super disciplined. . . and they’ll say just do 15 questions and be done. Just at least one support buddy to have to cheer you on and help keep you motivated.” Another attributed her success on the NCLEX-RN to having a study partner, “Finding a partner, I think that is the only reason that I passed, it’s because I had somebody that was my accountability person. That was having somebody that was in the same boat as me (P-2).”

#### 3.2 Theme 2–Study tactics

A second theme of Study Tactics showed that all 14 participants utilized some sort of electronic NCLEX-RN practice question set as their main study method. Some utilized more than one question set product. These products included; UWorld, Your Best Grade, Kaplan Nursing, and ATI NCLEX Prep. There were likely others we were unaware of. A few reported also using online teaching videos as additional study material. Several recounted that studying the rationales for correct answers (regardless of the question set brand) was especially helpful. P-5 reported, “I spent a lot of time reading the rationales - there’s a lot of information they’ll give you.”

None of the participants reported utilizing their course textbooks after graduation; however, one reported utilizing class notes on occasion. For example, P-7 reported, “There’s no point in sitting down and trying to read a chapter. Just try to be asked questions to apply the knowledge and that’s going to be like the best way to prepare.” When recounting the best method for preparing for NCLEX-RN, Participant 10 replied, “Definitely purchasing practice questions.” Several participants recommended that future nursing students utilize practice question programs even prior to graduation as a method of study.

The participants also reported that they utilized test-taking strategies practiced in their nursing courses. For example, P-2 reported, “. . . being able to answer off-the-wall questions and figure out our ABCs and just use strategies for answering questions - I really felt like that made me successful . . . because when my knowledge failed me, my ability to figure out the right answer based on what’s in front of me and what kind of question it is, was really the reason I could pass.” Others recounted that their ability to break down a question was enhanced by answering as many practice questions as possible. P-6 reported, “You all always taught us those test-taking strategies, so I used a lot of those on NCLEX.”

An added benefit to utilizing the practice question sets was gaining confidence in their ability to earn a passing score as they did better on the practice exams. While they reported being anxious as the NCLEX approached, one participant described that “taking just like 10 questions in the morning when I wake up just to get my brain working on it” was helpful. Additionally, P-7 reported, that utilizing the practice question exams, “gave me a little bit more confidence.” Most reported completing at least a few practice questions every day. P-5 reported “I think the best thing for me was just having the discipline to do a few questions every day and intentionally do the questions. It wasn’t about how many I did, it was about taking my time and thinking about the questions, doing the best that I could.”

Because they were spending time practicing exam questions, some participants described a preference for studying by themselves after graduation, however a few continued to study in small groups occasionally. P-8 reported that “you get distracted too easily.” One participant reported utilizing Facetime when she wanted to work with a study partner (P-9). Participants also reported a wide variety in the amount of time they spent studying. The times ranged from one hour to six hours per day.

### 3.3 Theme 3–Taking a break

The third theme of Taking a Break revealed that all 14 participants took time off between graduation and the test date during which they did not work or prepare for the exam. None of the fall/winter graduates in this project started work or began studying until after the Christmas/New Year’s break. Many of the spring graduates revealed that they took at least a week off and then started working as a graduate nurse and studying for the NCLEX-RN exam. The amount of break time for the participants in this study varied from one week to five weeks. Participant 5 recounted, “We had graduation on Saturday and then I had a week off before I started orientation up at the hospital. . . it was hard for me to start the transition of the hospital stuff and all the new information with that and still do 100 practice questions. I would just do as many as I could, even if it was 20 questions.” Participant 8 reported, “The first couple of weeks, especially with the holidays, I kind of took a mental break and just did my own thing.” Participant 8 also reported, “and then the last two weeks, I was like, oh my gosh, it’s almost here, I probably should have studied more.”

### 3.4 Theme 4–The testing experience

Finally, the fourth theme of The Testing Experience characterized how all of the participants worried about testing day. Participant 1 planned out the day in advance, “I’ve always

been one to over-prepare. I drove to the location to see how long it takes, what’s the best way to go, where to park so that I’m not stressed about things like that because I always get worried.”

Several participants reported that the testing environment was not what they had expected. Participant 3 recounted, “I expected to get there, and you know, kind of how it is in class, everyone starts at the same time. Then just when you’re done, you get up and leave and everyone is taking the same exam. But everyone was taking a different exam. People were getting there at all different times; it was just kind of hard to focus sometimes.” Nearly all of the graduates could hear movement and noises in the testing center and were aware each time someone came in or left. P-1 reported, “It was kind of weird going in and them patting you down, but the only time I got distracted was at the end, they ask a bunch of survey questions. And so, I hadn’t gotten to that section, and I am kind of like . . . who is answering these questions so fast? The clicking of the mouse was so distracting.” However, another reported that the testing center was very quiet, “I didn’t have any distractions or anything.”

They were all aware of the secure nature of this test and even though they had been testing at school – they felt that this was different. Two of the participants described the experience as “intimidating”. Another reported the experience of testing as “an emotional thing” and added, “I was really unprepared emotionally when I went in.” When asked to expand on this, P-2 replied, “I was so nervous.”

An unanticipated concern surfaced regarding the testing experience. Two graduates related that they had expected to receive just 75 questions and became stressed when they went past that number. “I wish I would’ve prepared myself more for the possibility of having more questions. . . in my mind, I was just going to go and take 75 questions and walk away (P-2).” Another related the experience, “as I hit that 75 mark and I was still going . . . I was panicking (P-11)”.

While not falling into any of the earlier themes, several specific remarks are worthy of sharing. First, few of the participants took it for granted that they were going to pass the exam. Several commented on feeling nervous in the days leading up to the exam. Secondly, they reported wishing they had spent more time preparing. As one graduate put it, “It was just hard to balance everything at home and work after graduation and studying at the same time. I wished that I would have had more time (P-3).” For those who mentioned the number of hours spent studying, 8-10 hours per week was common although one graduate reported spending over 30 hours most weeks. Finally, with regard to studying, several described wishing they had started earlier.

## 4. DISCUSSION

This study adds to the knowledge related to experiences of new graduates preparing to complete the NCLEX-RN exam. As faculty, we have all shared in the experience of finding out about a graduate who was not successful when it was anticipated that they would pass on their first attempt. This is disappointing and leaves faculty seeking ways to prevent this with future students. For many new graduates that time between graduation and testing can be critical and passing will depend on how this time is utilized. The participants in this study have provided a unique perspective on post-graduation NCLEX-RN preparation. Their experiences can serve as a guide for faculty and future graduates.

The lack of motivation to study and taking time off after graduation is both understandable and worrisome. Both are capable of affecting the NCLEX-RN results. According to Woo, Wendt, and Liu,<sup>[9]</sup> graduates in their study were less likely to pass the NCLEX-RN exam as lag time between eligibility to test and actually taking the test increased. They also reported that unless the graduate is working as graduate nurse, a significant lag time might result in a loss of nursing specific knowledge and skills. However, accepting a job can also cause added pressure. Kasprovich and VandeVusse<sup>[10]</sup> reported that the participants in their study experienced additional stress after accepting a new nursing position while still preparing for the NCLEX-RN exam.

The finding of utilizing practice questions as a primary means of exam preparation provides valuable information regarding NCLEX-RN first-time success. Participants in the Kim et al.<sup>[11]</sup> study also reported utilizing practice questions as a helpful method of preparation in first-time NCLEX-RN success. Additionally, practice questions and testing strategies were a significant part of the coaching strategy utilized by Czekanski et al.,<sup>[12]</sup> in their interventions to improve NCLEX-RN first-time pass rates.

## 5. LIMITATIONS

This study has several limitations. This was a small study where the participants were recruited from a single university suggesting caution in the generalizability of our findings to other settings. Although meaningful data was collected, a larger sample may have produced additional findings pertinent to this topic. Additionally, because this sample was relatively homogeneous, different finding may have been uncovered with a more diverse group of participants.

## 5.1 Conclusions & recommendations

The information learned from this study will benefit other graduate nurses and their faculty. Given that each student will face a variety of challenges as they prepare for the NCLEX-RN exam, it will be beneficial for faculty to discuss potential strategies for success prior to graduation. Based on the finding of this study, we recommend the following strategies for faculty to help future graduates prepare for a successful exam:

- 1) Talk to each student about what to expect on testing day. Remind them that there will be others coming and going in the testing area and that they may overhear some movement or clicking noises. Additionally, discuss the fact that they may have more than 75 questions on their exam and can still be successful.
- 2) Discuss testing as soon as graduates are able to schedule a testing time. Remind them of the benefits of testing early including their ability to retain nursing knowledge gained in the nursing program. As they begin new jobs, they will face additional stressors and have new responsibilities to fulfill. This may affect their preparation.
- 3) Lacking the motivation to study after graduation appears to be a common challenge for new graduates. Discuss strategies to help overcome this challenge including setting aside time for study each day and making appointments with others for study sessions. Remind graduates that advanced planning will be beneficial to their success.
- 4) In addition to graduates preparing on their own, nursing programs should set up coaching and tutoring sessions or alternative activities that enable faculty to continue working with new graduates on test preparation. Consider scheduling virtual study sessions that help reinforce strong academic efforts when face-to-face sessions are not an option.

In addition to these strategies, we strongly recommend that faculty maintain contact with new graduates as they prepare for the NCLEX-RN exam. This contact may be as minor as sending out encouraging text messages or as significant as scheduling meeting times to discuss how their preparation is progressing. Such gestures may ensure that graduates stay motivated and continue studying. Success on the first attempt is essential for the graduates as well as their program.

## CONFLICTS OF INTEREST DISCLOSURE

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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