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Research Article

Learning for Success Through 'Grow Your Grit': A Qualitative Descriptive Study Examining Self-Reflections Among First Year Nursing Students

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Background: The global demand for nurses is increasing, yet high attrition rates in nursing programs hinder workforce sustainability. Nursing students face numerous challenges, including employment pressures, stress adaptation difficulties, and dissatisfaction with support and clinical experiences. Grit is crucial in nursing, where dedication and resilience are essential. Despite its importance, limited empirical evidence on interventions to enhance grit among nursing students remains. Within this context, the aim was to understand what impact the 'Grow Your Grit' program has on first-year nursing students' academic engagement, performance, and retention.
Methods: A qualitative descriptive design was undertaken. The Grow Your Grit program consisted of four modules on grit characteristics (interest, practice, purpose, and hope) and was implemented among first-year Bachelor of Nursing students in an Australian university. Qualitative data were gathered throughout the Grow your Grit program, where each module encompassed activities and reflective exercises that encouraged students to create weekly journal entries as they developed grit over the six-week program undertaken in their first 12-week semester of the nursing program. All weekly reflective journal entries were analyzed using Thematic Analysis to identify themes. This study adhered to the SRQR guidelines.
Results: Among the reflective journal entries of the 69 (79.3%) students who participated, four key themes emerged. These included navigating uncertainty, sparking confidence and motivation, building confidence and growth, and boosting confidence and resilience. Reflections indicated uncertainty and apprehension, but as the program progressed, students reported increased confidence, motivation, and resilience. The structured framework of the program facilitated self-reflection and goal setting, contributing to students' personal and academic development.
Conclusion: The Grow Your Grit program positively impacted first-year nursing students by enhancing their grit, confidence, and resilience. The program supports academic success and retention, suggesting its potential to be applied in other programs to foster resilience and retention in nursing and other academic disciplines.

Keywords: academia; education; engagement; grit; nursing; resilience; students

1. Introduction

The global demand for nurses is increasing, where the healthcare systems are encountering significant challenges due to an aging population and a rise in chronic diseases [1]. Nursing students are a crucial part of the workforce solution. However, this workforce solution is exacerbated by high attrition rates within nursing programs, which pose a critical issue for addressing the demand and sustainability of the nursing workforce [1]. Nursing students drop out of university for various reasons, including employment pressures, difficulties in adapting to stress, and poor student satisfaction with perceived lack of support and challenging clinical experiences [2]. However, a central factor contributing to this attrition is low levels of grit. Grit, a concept that has been widely examined, however, is relatively new to the nursing discipline, especially among baccalaureate nursing programs [3].

Grit is defined by passion, perseverance, and a long-term commitment to goals despite facing adversity [4]. Unlike resilience, which is the ability to recover from setbacks, grit involves maintaining effort and interest over years despite failure, adversity, and plateaus in progress [4, 5]. Nursing students generally possess grit and further develop this trait after entering the profession [6]. Despite this, the attrition of nursing students before they graduate is estimated to be 20%–35%, even when learning and pastoral support are provided [7]. Those at higher risk of dropping out are often the first in their family to attend university, academically poorer, and lacking in resilience, self-confidence, and emotional intelligence [8].

Grit is crucial as it encompasses more than just the ability to withstand stress; it involves a sustained effort toward long-term goals. This trait is particularly important in nursing, where the demands of the profession require a high level of dedication and perseverance. The ability to persist through challenging academic and clinical environments is essential for success in nursing programs and the profession at large [3, 4]. Interventions aimed at enhancing the mindset of nursing students have shown promise in better equipping them for the rigors of the academic study and the nursing profession. These interventions often focus on developing a growth mindset, which encourages students to view challenges as opportunities for growth rather than insurmountable obstacles [9]. By fostering a growth mindset, students can develop greater resilience and perseverance, which are key components of grit [9].

Moreover, addressing the factors that contribute to low levels of grit among nursing students is essential. This includes providing support systems that enhance emotional intelligence, self-confidence, and academic skills. Further, mentorship programs, stress management workshops, and resilience training must enable students develop the necessary skills to succeed in their studies and future careers [8]. Despite the growing recognition of grit as a vital factor in the academic success and retention of nursing students, significant gaps remain in understanding how to effectively cultivate this trait among first-year nursing students, particularly those at higher risk of dropping out. However, there is limited empirical evidence regarding specific interventions that can enhance grit and reduce dropout intentions among this demographic.

Despite limited interventions currently enacted to support nursing students, one intervention 'Grow Your Grit' (GYG) program has been developed and trialed [10]. Designed by Biangone [10], GYG features a series of learner-directed video modules aimed at fostering active learning. This approach encourages students to engage deeply in the learning process, promoting self-evaluation and the development of personalized learning pathways. Modules are web-based, interactive, and concise, each lasting no more than 10 min. They are grounded in research on grit by Duckworth et al. [4], focusing on the characteristics of interest, practice, purpose, and hope. These modules align with the curriculum of the first year of a baccalaureate nursing program, providing students with opportunities to actively participate rather than passively listen.

To ensure the validity and effectiveness of the content, key experts, including experienced nursing faculty and a web-based academic support tool developer, evaluated the modules. Their feedback led to improvements in clarity, relevance, and user-friendliness. The modules include overviews of grit characteristics, their relevance to nursing education, key phrases for students to remember, and strategies for overcoming challenges. Additionally, reflective activities called 'Thoughts to Ponder' encourage students to journal and reflect on scenarios related to each grit characteristic, enhancing their learning experience [10]. Overall, GYG has been demonstrated to have success among nursing students undertaking baccalaureate training in the US [10]. However, in the international context, there remain limited insights as to the impact of GYG among students.

The research undertaken by Terry and Peck [3] was some of the first to examine and measure grit levels among nursing students and found that the first year of study saw the greatest change in grit and was the most important time for its development. Within this context, the aim of the study is to understand what impact the GYG program has among first year students on academic engagement, performance, and student retention. Further, the objectives were to foster grit through the purpose build program and enable first-year students to develop strategies to better manage the rigors of the study and clinical learning experiences as they prepare for the healthcare workforce. As such, the research questions were as follows:

- How effective is the GYG program in fostering grit among first-year healthcare students?
- How does the program enable first-year healthcare students to develop strategies for managing the rigors of study and clinical learning experiences?

2. Methods

A qualitative descriptive design was selected as the method to examine the impact of the GYG program among first-year students. The program consists of four modules, each

focusing on a different grit characteristic: interest, practice, purpose, and hope and provided through the university learning management system. Qualitative data were collected through journal entries within the GYG program. Each module included several activities and reflective exercises that encouraged students to create journal entries each week as they develop grit over the six-week program, which was undertaken in their first 12-week semester of their nursing program. Reporting methods adhered to the Standards for Reporting Qualitative Research (SRQR) guidelines.

2.1. Sample.
The study involved all first-year Bachelor of Nursing students enrolled at a regional university in Australia, including both on-campus and online students, totaling $n = 860$ first-year students. Participation was open to all students.

2.2. Data Collection.
At the start of the program, each student completed the short grit scale (Grit-S) to assess their initial level of grit. Students were informed of their grit level before beginning the modules and were asked to reflect on its significance, guiding their grit development throughout the program. After completing the modules over the first 6 weeks of the semester, students retook the Grit-S to self-evaluate any changes in their grit levels and provide a reflection of their grit scores and also how they were progressing through the semester. Students were then followed up at the end of the semester to complete a final Grit-S self-evaluation of their overall progress throughout the semester. All data were collected within the GYG program, aimed at supporting students' development and academic success and hosted within the university's learning management system. The data collected included student comments and reflections each week as they participated throughout the program and semester, which aimed to assess the program's impact on their development of grit.

2.3. Data Analysis.
Data were exported from the learning management system into Microsoft Excel and Word. Journal entries were identified by the week of reflection and assigned a number based on the response count. Due to the anonymity of the entries, data could not be matched across weeks (e.g., Week 1, Participant 1 does not correspond with Week 2, Participant 1). Thematic analysis, as described by Braun and Clarke [11], was used to identify themes within the data. Researchers followed the five stages of thematic analysis, starting with thorough reading of the transcripts. Data were assigned meanings, and significant quotes were initially grouped by two researchers (JKand LKJ) and then independently categorized into themes by the remaining researchers (DT, MB, and BP). Themes were refined through collaborative discussions and consensus and named to capture their essence, using participant excerpts to enhance confirmability. This systematic approach aimed to avoid the influence of previous research outcomes and minimize researcher bias, thereby enhancing the research's trustworthiness [12].

2.4. Ethical Considerations.
Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the Federation University Human Research Ethics Committee (Approval #21-162A). The research adhered to the ethical principles for medical research involving human subjects as outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki, and all procedures complied with relevant guidelines and regulations. Before starting the program, students received information about grit and the research through a plain language statement and video explaining the program, their consent, and the requirements for their journal entries. Informed consent was obtained from each participant before data collection began.

3. Findings

Journal entries were provided by 69 of the 87 (79.3%) students who participated in the GYG program. Student reflections encompassed journal entries that were made each week at the beginning of their first semester of the study, at the mid-way point and at the end of the semester. Such an approach highlighted student insights into the overall program and how they were progressing over the course of the semester. Therefore, student expectation is presented regarding what they anticipated to achieve through their participation and what they thought about the program after it was completed.

Four key themes emerged from student reflections, encompassing students *navigating uncertainty* and *sparking confidence and motivation* at the commencement of the program. *Building confidence and growth* encompassed what students had reported once they had reached halfway through the program and study period. This was followed by *boosting confidence and resilience* that students had reported at the end of the program. Each of these themes will be examined in detail.

3.1. Navigating Uncertainty.
The first theme centers on student reflections of their initial grit score, which highlighted that students had a level of uncertainty regarding their grit and abilities.

> *I am unsure what I will get out of this group... I feel like everyone is smarter than me and it makes me very unconfident about my abilities.* (Wk 1, P20)

Nevertheless, undertaking the preliminary survey motivated students and provided them with a positive and encouraging commitment. It was almost as if completing the survey opened the eyes of the students to the possibilities in front of them. Furthermore, undertaking the preprogram survey enabled students to see whether they could achieve

their goals and gave them the confidence to continue with their study.

> I feel motivated towards learning more and achieving my targets by studying consistently. (Wk 1, P9)

> After going through the [survey] I started to realise how capable I am, doing what I need to do to finish this course driven by my very own motivation. (Wk 1, P7)

The nursing students' narratives also indicated that undertaking the survey before participating in the grit program highlighted the reality of studying for some. One student expressed their apprehension about being in the nursing program, stating as follows:

> I found that by completing this survey… I am a bit more apprehensive about starting this course than I originally thought. The chances and ideas of possibly dropping out of the course was much higher. (Wk 1, P11)

This would suggest that their participation in the program may have confirmed their existing fears and made them more aware of the challenges ahead in the nursing program. Conversely, other students gained reflective insights into their abilities, which provided a sense of positivity. Additionally, the survey offered valuable insights into the strategies needed for success.

> My grit score was probably not a surprise to me, I would not describe myself as a "driven" type of personality, though I generally finish what I start and give it my best. Looking forward to see how I can improve. (Wk 1, P38)

> The [survey] made me realise I need to stick with tasks and finish them before getting distracted by something new. (Wk 1: P39)

Overall, students initially felt uncertain by the grit program; however, the preliminary survey boosted their confidence and motivation, helping them realize their potential and the strategies needed for success. While some students felt apprehensive, others found the survey encouraging and insightful, leading to a more positive and determined mindset. In this sense, the survey played a crucial role in supporting students' transition and commitment to their studies.

3.2. Sparking Confidence and Motivation.

After commencing the program and undertaking a reflective exercise at the end of the session, many students indicated that they felt very positive about the program and how it would make them feel. They also commented on what they hoped the program would achieve for them and indicated the great expectations they had for developing their grit.

> From participating in the Grow your Grit program I expect to gain a lot more self-confidence to complete my studies at [University]. (Wk 1, P41)

The value of the grit program was aptly summarized when a student also saw the value in using the principles of grit to assist in other areas of their life and with other people in their lives to improve, highlighting the reality of life and how motivation changes over time.

> I was briefly introduced to the concept of Grit by my lecturer… I found the concept very interesting and something that made sense to me. I can see how without Grit it could be hard to achieve success. It's now something I want to foster not only in myself but also in my kids. At this stage though, I feel my own level of Grit varies depending on what it's regarding… I have no doubt Grit serves a really important purpose, but I don't currently understand how it can be developed. (Wk 1, P59)

Further, students indicated that it was their hope that undertaking the GYG program would assist in their studies, the challenges they encounter with study, and assist them to be motivated and maintain a level of motivation throughout the remainder of their nursing studies.

> The main reason for me to join is to improve my academic engagement and performance. (Wk 1, P13)

> It is my hope that from this program, I can improve my attitude towards struggling. (Wk 1, P43)

> I get somewhat distracted… lose myself and I don't give my very best. I become very disappointed. (Wk 1, P14)

Despite these positive affirmations regarding the program, some students were ambivalent about how they would change through their participation. Other students had similar insights into their own ability and were able to reflect on what they needed to do to overcome their identified challenges. Some students were evident about the expectations of what the program may be able to achieve, with one student illustrating as follows:

> There might be very high chances of getting distracted, losing interest, and giving up on continuing or completing [the nursing course]. From the [grit] program, I expect to learn how you can firmly maintain your determination in completing the entire course. (Wk 1, P57)

Overall, many students felt positive about the grit program, expecting it to boost their confidence and help them achieve their goals. They saw the program as a way to improve their academic performance and maintain motivation. Some students also recognized the value of grit in other areas of life. Despite initial uncertainty, the program helped students reflect on their abilities and develop strategies to overcome challenges, highlighting its importance in supporting their academic journey.

3.3. Building Confidence and Growth.

When reflecting on the grit program by the 6-week mid-semester break, it was noted that participants reflected on their significant increase in their confidence regarding university work. It was through

the program that they had become more aware of what they were achieving:

I have discovered that consistency and time management is very important to achieve your goals. (Wk 6, P2)

This realization was reported to be pivotal in their academic journey. Particularly, given students had reported that they were challenged by competing interest only weeks earlier.

I know that I am time poor, and I think that is my biggest issue. (Wk 1, P25)

Nevertheless, it was indicated that students were falling behind occasionally, yet this did not deter them, and through the program, students reported that their initial concerns regarding the study had diminished.

The reflections also highlighted the value of the program which provided students with a framework for self-reflection and goal setting, helping them navigate their academic journey. Some students found the program instrumental in refining their focus, driving their energy for study, and managing stress, while others felt they were falling short in what they were wanting to acheive.

Grit is something so variable. One week you've achieved your readings and module content, the next work, family, or something else gets in the way and leaves you feeling disappointed or even gives a sense of failure. (Wk 6, P22)

Despite the challenges they were experiencing at the 6-week mid-semester break, student reflections were demonstrating a level of grit and determination to continue.

[It] has been a good program. It's helped refine focus, drive, and energy for study. It helped to know weekly check-ins would occur, that uni is a process, and self-awareness regularly helps, before getting lost in all the assessments and unit/course requirements, which can make students feel overwhelmed and lost amidst the work. (Wk 6, P24)

Students expressed high expectations of themselves and a commitment to continue progressing in their studies.

I am determined in a way that I haven't experienced before with other endeavours. (Wk 6, P29)

Their reflections provide valuable insights into the experiences, challenges, and resilience of nursing students, highlighting the importance of supportive programs and resources in fostering their academic success and wellbeing.

3.4. Boosting Confidence and Resilience. After students had completed the grit program, they were asked to reflect on its overall outcome and usefulness. Student reflections reveal a diverse range of experiences and emotions throughout their semester, with students being made more aware of what was required from themselves to complete the course. The program's self-reflective nature allowed students to explore their motivations, habits, and inspirations, acting as a digital letter to themselves.

I think [the program] is like a digital letter to yourself, alike what students or people may have done long before, as it has an essence of 'hey you can do this' and 'dear future self.' It was enjoyable to explore motivations, habits, reasons, and inspirations. (Wk 11, P4)

After participating in the Grow your Grit program, I came to realise that I still need to enhance my determination in completing the entire course because it will run for a quite a long time. (Wk 1: P57)

The effectiveness of the program varied among students with some finding it instrumental in their personal growth and academic journey, while others felt that it did not significantly contribute to their understanding of themselves or their motivations. The reflections also highlight the struggles students faced, such as time constraints and personal circumstances such as caring for aging parents. Not all students completed the program, and for some students, this was often related to a number of key constraints.

Although I didn't complete the grit modules because of time constraints with assignments... I have no doubt that I have the grit to get done what is needed to achieve my goals. (Wk 11, P20)

It would appear that this student felt that other programs this university ran assisted them in one aspect of university life and speaks highly of how this helped them.

Again, the FAST program that I took part in at Fed Uni last year provided me with such a great head start and solid foundation for study this year. I honestly feel I would have been lost without it. It is what gave me GRIT and the belief in myself that I have what is needed to succeed. (Wk 11, P20)

Despite the challenges, there is a shared sense of resilience and determination with many students expressing a desire to succeed. However, for some students, the usefulness of the program was in the ongoing process and support that it provided. Students also indicated how the grit program helped them in various aspects of their life. For example, one student stated as follows:

I found out about myself is with determination and motivation (Wk 11, P21)

The program also helped students with many practicalities of undertaking and completing a bachelor course. This varied from specific, hard to grasp aspects to practicalities of passing subjects.

I can understand the anatomy and physiology components and be able to implement then into practical skills. (Wk 11, P21)

Now that I am in the headspace to do assignments, write essays it is coming more easier to do. (Wk 11, P18)

It was clear that GYG for some students achieved what it set out to achieve and is a positive reflection overall. In addition, some students saw the value in the grit program so much that the following comments and suggestions were made:

Overall, [it] has been an enjoyable, relevant, and fun program. I recommend it highly... It has meant a lot to someone like myself, who has waited 19 years to return to uni[versity]. (Wk 11, P6)

I'd love to see the program expanded to all students in first semester across all faculties/schools, then modified as each semester goes on. Much can happen in the space of three years in a program. (Wk 11, P3)

After completing the grit program, students reflected on its overall outcome and usefulness, expressing a readiness to face upcoming exams and an anticipation for the study break that followed the exam. The reflections highlight the importance of self-belief, hard work, and seeking help when needed in achieving academic goals. They also highlight the value of the program in providing support and fostering resilience among students. Overall, these reflections provide valuable insights into the experiences, challenges, and resilience of nursing students in their academic journey.

4. Discussion

The findings of this study highlight the positive impact of the GYG program on first-year nursing students' academic engagement, confidence, and resilience. The qualitative reflections highlight that grit, a trait encompassing perseverance and passion for long-term goals, is not only malleable but also vital for success in the demanding nursing profession. The program's ability to facilitate self-reflection and foster a growth mindset contributed significantly to students' personal and academic development.

Students' initial reflections indicated uncertainty and apprehension about their abilities to succeed in nursing education. Many students felt overwhelmed by the transition to university and doubted their capacity to meet the program's demands, particularly expressing their feeling regarding their abilities compared to their peers, which is a common sentiment among new university students [4, 13]. However, the act of completing the preliminary survey was a motivating factor for many students. It opened their understanding to the possibilities ahead and helped them realize their potential. It was through completing the survey which made them feel more capable and motivated to achieve their goals, and this boost in confidence was critical in setting a positive tone for their participation in the GYG program [14].

As students engaged with the GYG program, their reflections revealed a significant increase in confidence and motivation. The structured framework of the program allowed students to identify their strengths and areas for growth. This process of self-assessment and reflection was instrumental in assisting students develop a growth mindset, which is essential for building grit [4, 9]. The program guided students to see the value of consistency, time management, and perseverance, which are critical skills for success in nursing education, where the demands are high and the workload can be overwhelming [15]. By connecting theoretical concepts of grit to practical strategies for overcoming challenges, the program assisted students to develop a more resilient and persistent approach to their studies [4, 9].

Mid-semester reflections indicated a growing recognition of the value of consistency, time management, and perseverance. Students began to see the value of maintaining consistent effort and managing their time effectively. The program's emphasis on reflective journaling allowed students to document their progress and setbacks, providing a valuable tool for self-reflection and growth. The importance of consistency and time management in achieving goals was noted and is pivotal in students' academic journey, as it helps them navigate the challenges of balancing competing priorities. Despite occasional setbacks, students demonstrated a determination to persist and continue their studies, highlighting the program's role in fostering resilience. These findings align with the work of Dweck [9], who emphasized the role of a growth mindset in fostering resilience and persistence.

While students reported challenges such as time constraints and competing priorities, their reflections demonstrated a determination to persist despite setbacks. This supports the conceptual distinction between grit and resilience, with grit encompassing sustained effort and commitment to long-term goals even when progress is slow [5]. The program assisted students develop strategies to overcome these challenges, reinforcing the importance of perseverance in achieving success. Despite whatever challenges the students encountered, the program provided a framework for self-reflection and goal setting, helping students stay focused and motivated [5].

Overall, the program had helped students become more aware of their achievements and the importance of consistency and time management. This awareness was crucial in helping students navigate their academic journey and manage the stress associated with their studies. Students expressed high expectations of themselves and a commitment to continue progressing in their studies. Their reflections provided valuable insights into the experiences, challenges, and resilience of nursing students, highlighting the importance of supportive programs and resources in fostering their academic success and wellbeing [16].

Student reflections highlighted a diverse range of experiences and emotions throughout the semester. The program's self-reflective nature allowed students to explore their motivations, habits, and inspirations, acting as a reflective practice that would enable them to build on as they

continued with their studies and after graduation. Students found the program instrumental in their personal growth and academic journey, while others felt it did not significantly contribute to their understanding of themselves or their motivations. The reflections also highlighted the struggles students encountered, such as time constraints and personal circumstances; however, despite these challenges, there was a shared sense of resilience and determination among students, with many expressing a desire to succeed [17].

4.1. Limitations. Despite its positive outcomes, the study had limitations, including the inability to longitudinally track individual students' progress due to the anonymity of journal entries. Future research could incorporate a mixed method design to quantitatively measure the program's long-term impact on academic performance and retention rates. Additionally, exploring the program's applicability in diverse cultural and educational contexts would provide further insights into its adaptability and effectiveness.

4.2. Implications for Nursing Education. The success of the GYG program in improving student confidence and resilience suggests its potential as a scalable intervention for addressing attrition among students undertaking their nursing studies.

5. Conclusion

Overall, the GYG program had a positive impact on first-year nursing students' academic engagement, confidence, and resilience. The ability of the program to facilitate self-reflection and foster a growth mindset was crucial in assisting students develop grit, a trait essential for success in the demanding nursing profession. By providing a structured framework for self-assessment and goal setting, the program helped students navigate their academic journey and overcome challenges, highlighting its importance in supporting their personal and academic development. Further, by equipping students with the tools to navigate academic and clinical challenges, the program contributes to better retention and preparation for the healthcare workforce. Expanding such initiatives across nursing and other academic disciplines could benefit student success and institutional outcomes.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Author Contributions

Each author has made substantial contributions to conceptualization, data collection, data curation, formal analysis, investigation, methodology, project administration, visualization, original draft preparation, and reviewing and editing of the article critically for important intellectual content. Each author should be able to take public responsibility for the entire work.

Funding

Acknowledgments

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