



## Perceptions and experiences of nurse preceptors regarding their training courses: A mixed method study



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### SUMMARY

**Background:** Although the benefits of preceptor training programs on the performance of nurse preceptors have been reported, research related to nurse preceptors' perceptions of and experiences with preceptor training courses is relatively limited.

**Objectives:** To explore nurse preceptors' perceptions of preceptor training courses and obtain information on their experiences in working as preceptors.

**Design:** A mixed method design was conducted.

**Participants and settings:** Nurse preceptors who currently work at one of eight hospitals in northern Taiwan were recruited to participate in this study.

**Methods:** A questionnaire survey and focus group interviews were conducted. A training course perception scale was developed and generated based on the current nurse preceptor training programs offered in eight hospitals. Focus group interviews were conducted to obtain additional information on nurse preceptors' experiences in working as preceptors. The survey data were analyzed using descriptive statistics. Interview data were transcribed and analyzed using a qualitative content analysis approach.

**Results:** The results from the surveys of 386 nurse preceptors revealed that most courses included in the current preceptor training programs did not fulfill the learning needs of nurse preceptors and were clinically impractical. The most necessary and clinically useful course was the communication skills course, whereas the least useful course was the adult learning theory and principles course. Three themes were identified as problems based on the three focus group interviews conducted with 36 nurse preceptors: inadequate training was received before nurses were appointed as nurse preceptors, the courses were more theoretical rather than practical, and the preceptors experienced stress from multiple sources.

**Conclusions:** The results revealed that the current preceptor training courses are impractical; therefore, the content of preceptor training courses must be altered to fulfill nurse preceptors' training needs. Furthermore, problems identified through the focus group interviews reinforce the survey results.

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### Introduction

Although numerous studies have reported that training exerts crucial effects on the competency, clinical skills, and satisfaction of nurse preceptors in guiding new graduate nurses (NGNs), not every nurse preceptor is sufficiently trained to assume this expanded and complex

role in a highly complex and specialized healthcare environment. Panzavacchia and Pearce (2014) also observed that nurse preceptors in the United Kingdom did not receive formal preparation or training for their role as preceptors. In addition, several negative effects of preceptor training have been reported. Hong et al. (2009) determined that, although the preceptorship training program for NGNs has been implemented widely in Taiwan hospitals, most training courses have not been designed based on nurse preceptors' learning needs. Smedley et al. (2010) indicated that, although surveyed nurses received preceptor training, they did not feel confident in conducting clinical teaching. Furthermore, Madhavanpraphakaran et al. (2014) reported that, according to numerous nurse preceptors, training content was overly theoretical rather than practical. Therefore, understanding nurse preceptors' perceptions of and experiences with training content

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is critical for future improvements and for hospitals to ensure that preceptor training programs yield positive effects and fulfill the learning needs of nurse preceptors.

Nevertheless, in the nursing literature, studies have primarily focused on nurse preceptors' experiences with precepting nursing students rather than on NGNs' (Ownby et al., 2012), perceptions as nurse preceptors (Chang et al., 2013), perceptions of a preceptorship program for NGNs (Muir et al., 2013), or perceptions of various education models (Mamhidir et al., *in press*). Few investigations have been conducted to understand nurse preceptors' perceptions of their training courses and their experiences as preceptors. Therefore, the aims of this study were to explore nurse preceptors' perceptions of their training courses and to obtain comprehensive information on their experiences as preceptors. In addition, this study addressed the following research questions: (1) Which components of the training courses were the most and least effective in fulfilling the learning needs of nurse preceptors, and which were the most and least clinically useful for nurse preceptors in mentoring NGNs during their preceptorship? (2) What were the nurse preceptors' experiences as preceptors?

The present study specifically focused on nurse preceptor training courses to improve the quality of preceptor training content by obtaining feedback from nurse preceptors that can be provided as a reference to hospital nursing educators. Furthermore, by using the findings of this study, hospital nursing educators may develop an infrastructure for preceptor training courses to satisfy the future learning needs of nurse preceptors completely and improve the training outcomes within the contemporary nursing care environment.

## Literature Review

The value of the professional development of NGNs at work depends on the provision of frequent opportunities to engage in patient care, and largely on the manner in which nurse preceptors influence NGNs through their profound knowledge, clinical skills, and feedback. To retain NGNs effectively, preceptor training programs have been established at numerous hospitals in Taiwan since 2006. These programs have been recognized as a requirement for the continuing professional education of nurses (Lee et al., 2009) and for preparing nurses with the appropriate knowledge and skills necessary to mentor NGNs, to improve teaching abilities, to perform effectively as nurse preceptors, and to ensure patient safety (Yin, 2010; Yang et al., 2011). According to a Taiwan Nurses Association report (2012), although there is no basic degree requirement for nurse preceptors, nurses with at least 3 years of work experience can attend preceptor training. Each nurse should receive at least 8 h of course training and pass a posttraining examination to become a qualified nurse preceptor (Lee and Kao, 2012). However, the contents of the training can be determined by nursing departments of individual hospitals.

After training, a nurse preceptor is assigned to mentor an NGN and works with the NGN as a partner during a 3-month orientation period. Nevertheless, several problems and concerns related to nurse preceptor training and preparation have been raised. Yang et al. (2011) observed that, because 80% of preceptor training courses were conducted using a classroom style, the problem-solving abilities, decision making abilities, and situational clinical teaching skills of nurse preceptors remained inadequate even after they had completed the training courses. In addition, Chen et al. (2011) reported that high workloads and patient acuity in daily clinical practice prevent nurse preceptors from receiving appropriate educational training. Thus, to ensure that nurse preceptors fulfill their critical roles and have the competency and mentoring skills required to facilitate the transition of NGNs from nursing students to registered nurses, nurse preceptors should receive adequate training, and the courses offered in preceptor training programs should incorporate nurse preceptors' learning needs and preferences.

Although the contents of preceptor training programs vary, it has frequently been suggested by the Taiwan Nurses Association (2012)

and cited by Lee and Kao (2012) that the following five needs must be addressed in preceptor training courses in Taiwan: training in professional development, teaching knowledge and skills, interpersonal relationship management, trainee assessment and evaluation, and role-based counseling. Neumann et al. (2004) described learning styles, needs assessment, feedback, role modeling, reality shock, principles of adult education, clinical teaching, concerns related to being a preceptor, role enhancement, networking, and problem-solving strategies to assist nurse preceptors in effectively playing their roles. Additionally, Rodrigues and Witt (2013) determined that education, professional values, basic public health sciences, management, health care, teamwork, communication, community orientation, and professional development are crucial components of education for healthcare professionals who serve as preceptors. However, Broadbent et al. (*in press*) reported that nearly 30% of examined nurse preceptors did not receive any training for their roles. The nurses who did receive training considered it to be inadequate. Therefore, Yin (2013) strongly emphasized that experienced nurses should receive essential training before becoming a preceptor regardless of whether or not the unit or nursing department is short staffed. Heffernan et al. (2009) supported this assertion and stated that registered nurses must be provided opportunities to participate in nurse preceptor preparation programs to enhance the effectiveness of nurse preceptors.

Nevertheless, the transition from a staff nurse to a nurse preceptor has been recognized as a stressful experience associated with preceptorship responsibilities, role ambiguity, excessive workload, and a lack of time to perform numerous tasks (Omansky, 2010; Chen et al., 2011). Therefore, various strategies have been implemented to support nurse preceptors in becoming effective mentors, reducing their stress level while mentoring NGNs and enhancing their ability to communicate and provide feedback to NGNs. For example, Burns and Northcutt (2009) proved that nursing preceptor programs are effective in supporting and preparing preceptors for working with undergraduate nursing students. Sandau et al. (2011) reported that preceptors' confidence in guiding new nurses, their ability to cultivate critical thinking, and providing positive and constructive feedback to a NGN considerably improved after they participated in an 8-hour preceptor education workshop. Myers et al. (2010) stated that learning how to provide proper feedback and support to NGNs is essential for nurse preceptors in promoting the learning and effective communication of NGNs. Therefore, a well-designed preceptor training program that incorporates nurse preceptors' learning needs is required to assist them in receiving an appropriate education and fulfilling their roles as preceptors for NGNs.

To determine the topics that should be addressed in training courses to enable nurse preceptors to meet their learning needs in the changing practice environment, a training needs analysis (TNA) was conducted to understand of how preceptor training programs are delivered (Lai, 2013). Several researchers have indicated that TNA is frequently used in postregistration nursing education and training program evaluation to identify trainees' learning needs, to understand training needs and knowledge gaps, and to determine attitude changes (Gould et al., 2004; Pennington, 2011; Gallagher et al., 2012). Therefore, TNA was used as the framework to facilitate clarifying how nurse preceptors perceive their training courses and to obtain feedback that can be used to improve future preceptor training courses. The framework of this study covered quantitative and qualitative analyses and is illustrated in Fig. 1.

## Methods

### Study Design

This study was a mixed study in which a cross-sectional questionnaire survey and focus group interviews were used. The questionnaire survey was used to determine the components of the training courses

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