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## Original Article

# Measuring the influence of a mutual support educational intervention within a nursing team

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## ABSTRACT

**Background:** Teamwork is essential to provide the highest quality of care for patients. Feeling supported within a nursing unit is a significant factor in nursing satisfaction, intention to remain in the job, and the capacity to provide safe patient care by Aiken et al [1].

**Purpose:** This study examined mutual support among a nursing team to measure the influence of an educational intervention focusing on Mutual Support from the Team STEPPS curriculum by Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality, AHRQ [2].

**Methods:** The study design used a Likert scale survey, the *Nursing Teamwork Survey*, before and following an education intervention adapted from the Team STEPPS curriculum on Mutual Support. Demographic data from the 41 participants were analyzed for impact on educational background, roles and responsibilities, age, and other factors.

**Results:** Pre- Post education intervention results varied among the survey items, although scores demonstrated heightened awareness of teamwork following the educational intervention. The subscale of Backup illustrated the strongest improvement.

**Conclusion:** The study demonstrates that education can have an impact on perceptions and awareness of mutual support among nursing team members. The survey instrument can be used effectively to inform leadership areas for improvement and staff development in the effort to improve team coordination and mutual support.

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## 1. Introduction

Nurses are frontline caregivers positioned to impact safety and the quality of patient care through care coordination among disciplines. In most countries, nurses comprise one of the largest sectors of the healthcare workforce; in the US alone approximately 3 million workers [3]. Nurses have a responsibility to speak up about patient safety and quality, to participate in initiatives to promote quality safe patient care, and to model positive teamwork behaviors among all team members. While much attention has been focused on inter-professional team behaviors, there is less information on teamwork approaches within nursing teams, for how nurses support each other as well as those who provide unit based care such as unit clerks and nurses aids.

Providing high quality safe care for patients requires working effectively with the entire healthcare team, and that includes nursing teams. Nurses need tools and strategies to improve communication, support each other, and lead care coordination to foster healthy work environments that contribute to retention [1]. Team STEPPS (Team Strategies and Tools to Enhance Performance and Patient Safety) is a multimedia curriculum distributed widely in the US and other countries to improve working relationships across hospital settings as well as within units [2]. Team STEPPS evolved from a coordination of efforts between the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (AHRQ) and the Department of Defense (DoD) as “the national standard for team training in health care” [4]. Team STEPPS has four main competency areas: Leadership, Mutual Performance/Situational Monitoring, Mutual Support (Back up Behavior), and Communication [4]. In considering nursing teams, the concept of mutual support is particularly relevant.

Mutual support refers to the ability to anticipate needs of other team members to be able to offer support. Team members need to know and understand the responsibilities and workload of fellow team members. Mutual support among teams is a vital aspect of healthy work environments and effective nursing teams. Feeling supported by the unit leader as well as others on the unit are vital aspects of satisfaction and intent to stay in the job and contribute to higher quality care [1]. Helping nurses better understand the knowledge, skills and attitudes that define mutual support could improve patient care outcomes [5].

The Team STEPPS curriculum defines Mutual Support as the essence of teamwork by focusing on how team members interact, share, and affirm each other to avoid work overload situations that may reduce effectiveness and increase the risk of error [2]. Helping staff develop the knowledge, skills and attitudes associated with Mutual Support may help team relationships through greater awareness of the impact of staff interactions and awareness with each other. Positive worker relationships are key aspects of quality of care and patient safety.

Evidence indicates that educational interventions improve teamwork [4] but there is little information on the impact of education interventions for nursing teams that include ancillary staff. The purpose of this study is to examine the influence of mutual support, an important teamwork

behavior, among nurses and other staff (nursing assistants and unit secretaries) on a nursing unit following an educational intervention on Mutual Support adapted from Team STEPPS curricula [2].

### 1.1. A teamwork model

Because teams are defined in a myriad of ways, especially those referring to healthcare teams, a framework for studying teams helps clarify the concepts. In the present study, the Salas teamwork model will guide the scope of defining teamwork and identify the characteristics of teamwork in guiding the study design [6]. The model describes teamwork behaviors and the relationship of the components to team effectiveness; it supports the purpose of this project to examine how team members offer mutual support. Salas's model was utilized by Kalisch, Lee, and Salas in developing the *Nursing Teamwork Survey*. There are five core elements and three coordinating mechanisms [6]. The core elements are the cohesiveness of the team's orientation and their awareness of itself as a team; team leadership reflected in the structure, direction, and support provided by the formal leader; mutual performance monitoring as the observation and awareness of team members of one another while completing their own work; how team members backup each other to help one another with their tasks and responsibilities; and, adaptability for adjusting work consistent with changes in the environment [6,7]. Three coordinating mechanisms include communication as the active exchange of information between two or more team members, shared mental models as a collective mindset, and mutual trust representing the belief that team members will act in ways that promote the aims of the team [6,7].

#### 1.1.1. Teams and teamwork behaviors

The multi-dimensions of teamwork make it difficult to have a consistent definition that also represents the various factors of teamwork. Teamwork is frequently defined as two or more individuals working together with a common purpose [8]. Saltman, O'Dea, Farmer, Veitch, Rosen, & Kidd offer specific elements important for healthcare teams: small size (usually less than 20 members); adequate levels of complementary skills; a meaningful purpose; specific goals; and, a clear working approach [9, p. 57]. An earlier model by Salas, Sims & Burke found the following components promote team effectiveness: leadership, mutual performance modeling, backup behavior, adaptability, and team orientation [7]. These characteristics are revised in the 2010 *Nursing Teamwork Survey* subscales: Trust, Team Orientation, Backup, Shared Mental Model, and Team Leadership [6]. More recently, Salas, Frush, Baker, Battles, King and Wears identify effective teamwork and communication as including structured communication, effective assertion/critical language, psychological safety, situational awareness, and effective leadership behaviors [10].

The knowledge, skills and attitudes for teamwork and collaboration are consistent with the teamwork behaviors identified in the Quality and Safety Education for Nurses (QSEN) competencies [11]. The competency Teamwork and Collaboration is defined as being able to function effectively within nursing and interprofessional teams with the capacity

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