

CLINICAL COMPETENCE AMONG SENIOR NURSING STUDENTS AFTER THEIR PRECEPTORSHIP EXPERIENCES

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The senior nursing preceptorship is the culminating clinical experience in the baccalaureate nursing program and assists students in the application of their nursing knowledge and skills. Students' success in getting their first job may also depend on this clinical preceptorship. How well they learn to practice their nursing skills before graduating may determine the success of their transition from being a student nurse to becoming a staff nurse. This descriptive study explored the perceptions of senior baccalaureate nursing students about their clinical preceptorship program. Perceptions were examined in relation to (a) the degree of students' interaction with the preceptor and (b) the degree of their perceptions of competence in using the nursing process. Data were collected from 102 senior nursing students with the use of a 52-item survey questionnaire that included opinion and competence statements. The results suggest that the clinical preceptorship program increased the overall perceived competence of 91 of the 102 nursing students. With a greater amount of preceptor interaction, there was a greater degree of perceived competence in nursing skills among the students. Ninety-six percent of the students rated their relationship with their preceptor as *important to very important*. The results also identified strong and weak areas of perceived clinical skills in the students. These results will help in facilitating future senior nursing preceptorship placements. (Index words: Clinical preceptorship; Senior nursing students; Clinical competence; Nursing process) J Prof Nurs 23:369–75, 2007. © 2007 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

THE SENIOR NURSING preceptorship is the culminating clinical experience in the baccalaureate nursing program and assists students in applying their knowledge and skills. Students' success in getting their first job may also depend on this clinical preceptorship. How well students learn to practice their nursing skills before graduating may determine the success of their transition from being a student nurse to becoming a staff nurse.

Clinical preceptorship programs vary in length and design in different universities. Typically, these include classroom instruction and a closely supervised clinical preceptorship with staff nurses. The length of clinical experience is set by each state board of registered

nurses and by the educational institution from which students graduate. Through clinical practice, students learn to apply theories to patient care. Most students commit considerable time to organizing educational materials to facilitate this clinical learning experience. Some parts of the preparation occur before the clinical experience, whereas others are accomplished during the clinical experience. The senior clinical experience builds upon skills developed during the previous quarters or semesters.

Therefore, the last nursing quarter or semester is the capstone experience in which all nursing knowledge and skills are put together. This study evaluated the clinical preceptorship program experiences of senior nursing students at the end of their last clinical experience and provided information about the student-to-graduate nurse transition.

Problem

The transition from being a student nurse to becoming a staff nurse can be a stressful experience. Student nurses

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appear to experience significantly more stress during their academic preparation, especially during the period of their last preceptorship experience, than during their first year of employment (Younge, Myrick, & Haase, 2002). The change in their role may increase unpleasant feelings, such as frustration, anxiety, and depression. These negative feelings (Mamchur & Myrick, 2003) can further lead to absenteeism. Some of the effects of unsuccessful transitioning from the student status to the professional status may be exhibited by lower work productivity, decrease in job satisfaction, and burnout or leaving nursing. These effects may lead to further nursing shortages.

The inadequacy of clinical experience may also lead to students' difficulty with their integration into the workplace. If students are continually dissatisfied with the quality and scope of their clinical experiences, then the nursing program may suffer (Peirce, 1991). A traditional nursing program for senior nursing students involves a student:instructor ratio as high as 18:1. This indicates that students could receive clinical instruction in less depth. The interaction between students and instructors could be minimal. The use of preceptorship in the final semester of a nursing program can reduce reality shock and ease students' transition. Preceptorship has been widely used nationally and internationally; however, there is a paucity of research, particularly on students' perspectives, to evaluate its effectiveness in applying the nursing process.

Rising health care costs and uncertain health care environments have also caused health care managers to closely analyze their systems in ensuring the effective use of human resources. Improving the productivity of nurses is one of the key issues in financial management for health care organizations. The expense of recruiting and orienting a professional nurse to a hospital may range from \$8,000 to \$50,000 (Beeman, Jernigan, & Hensley, 1999; Marcum & West, 2004). Therefore, a well-planned senior clinical preceptorship program may meet the recognized needs of senior nursing students by increasing their confidence and competence in the clinical agency and may help hospitals and health agencies stabilize employment as well as cut orientation and turnover costs.

Purpose

The objectives of this study were to examine the perceptions of baccalaureate senior nursing students about their clinical preceptorship in relation to the degree of their interaction with their preceptor and to evaluate their perceptions of competence in implementing the nursing process. The study specifically addressed the following research questions: (a) What are the perceptions of senior nursing students about their clinical preceptorship and their relationship with their preceptor? (b) How competent do senior nursing students feel about implementing the nursing process at the end of the preceptorship experience? and (c) Is there a relationship between the level of perceived

nursing competence and the degree of interaction with the preceptors by the senior nursing students? The preceptorship is a useful process to integrate knowledge and skills for students before assuming the professional nurse's role. The question is on how competent senior nursing students feel about implementing the nursing process at the end of the preceptorship experience. This study explored students' perceptions of their competence.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework used for this study was derived from (a) the adult learning theory by Knowles (1970) and (b) four components of the nursing process, including professional growth and development from the senior nursing curriculum described by Yura and Walsh (1983). Knowles stated that as students mature, (a) their self-concepts move from a dependent being toward a self-directed being, (b) they accumulate a resourceful experience for learning, (c) their readiness to learn becomes increasingly apparent in the developmental tasks of their social roles, (d) their time perspective changes from one of postponed application of knowledge to that of immediacy of application, and (e) their orientation toward learning shifts from being subject centeredness to becoming problem centeredness.

In addition, as students mature, they begin to develop various experiences and their learning becomes more comprehensive. Some nursing characteristics that senior nursing students need to attain include (a) being self-directed individuals, (b) learning new nursing skills and organizational activities, (c) applying nursing knowledge and skills to take care of the immediate needs of their patients, and (d) increasing and expanding their nursing experiences and social skills in clinical settings. As they do the tasks, they become action oriented and willing to take risks for the first time. They are also task-oriented problem solvers whose learning has shifted from the subject matter to critical thinking. Therefore, their learning is defined in terms of the *person*, not in terms of the *subject*. Knowles (1970) reported that students can achieve higher levels of learning and educational outcomes when the following learning processes are involved: (a) establishment of a climate conducive for adult learning; (b) creation of an organizational structure for participative planning; (c) assessment and evaluation of needs for learning; (d) formulation and direction of learning; and (e) development and implementation of activities.

In conjunction with the learning process discussed by Knowles (1970), the nursing process used by the nursing curriculum in the senior year provides a useful approach to evaluating individual learning experiences. The nursing process uses a problem-solving approach to evaluate the effectiveness of nursing care given by the nursing profession and serves as a tool that helps nurses demonstrate their accountability. Although the components of the nursing process can be defined differently

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