

PERCEIVED IMPORTANCE OF TEACHING CHARACTERISTICS IN CLINICAL NURSE SPECIALIST PRECEPTORS



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Advanced practice nursing education includes a minimum of 500 hours of supervised clinical practicum, with practicing clinicians serving as preceptors providing the bulk of the supervision. Preceptor behaviors and teaching skills can significantly impact student learning, however, no empirical evidence exists that identifies or evaluates effective clinical teaching characteristics in clinical nurse specialist (CNS) preceptors. The purpose of this study was to explore and compare CNS student and preceptor perceptions of the importance of clinical teaching characteristics in CNS preceptors. Data was obtained from CNS preceptors ($n = 278$) and CNS students ($n = 78$) through a web-based questionnaire instrument. Twenty-one previously identified effective clinical teaching characteristics served as the questionnaire items and participants were asked to rate their importance and identify the most and least important characteristic. Statistical tests including calculation of mean scores and independent t-tests for each characteristic were completed. The CNS preceptors and students rated all effective teaching characteristics as important. *Clinical competence/judgment* was identified as the most important characteristic among participants. The findings demonstrated congruence between students' and preceptors' ratings except for the characteristics *calm during times of stress* and *flexibility*. These findings can help CNS faculty and practicing CNSs better prepare and evaluate preceptors for supporting advanced practice students in clinical practicum experiences. (Index words; preceptor; preceptorship; clinical nurse specialist; advanced practice nurse) *J Prof Nurs* 31:208–214, 2015. © 2015 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

Clinical experiences provide foundational learning for all advanced practice nursing students. Clinical Nurse Specialists (CNS), one of four advanced practice nursing specialties, are nurses prepared at the graduate level (masters or doctorate). CNSs function as clinical experts to advance and integrate nursing practice to prevent, remediate, or alleviate illness and promote health within a defined specialty population. The National Association of Clinical Nurse Specialists (NACNS) have established core practice competencies to reflect CNS practice. In order to achieve these core practice competencies, students

must complete a minimum of 500 supervised clinical hours with a qualified CNS preceptor (NACNS, 2004).

Clinicians serving as preceptors are critical to CNS students' achievement of practice competencies. Preceptors are experienced professionals who teach, supervise, and role model practice for students enrolled in academic programs with clinical practice requirements (Billay & Yonge, 2004; Usher, Nolan, Reser, Owens, & Tollefson, 1999). Preceptors teach, support, counsel, coach, evaluate and aid in the socialization of students to a new role (Di Leonardi & Gulanick, 2008; Myrick & Yonge, 2005). In addition to assuming a multifaceted role in practice, preceptors should demonstrate certain characteristics such as clinical expertise, leadership, collaboration and consultation skills (Myrick & Billay, 2010). Regardless of the professional role and setting, similar characteristics have been reported among all clinical preceptors. Evaluation of important preceptor characteristics, behaviors, and skills should be completed to support effective precepted clinical experiences for advanced nursing practice (Byrd, Hood, & Youtsey, 1997; Levy et al., 2009).

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The purpose of this study was to explore CNS preceptor and student perceptions of the importance of clinical teaching characteristics in CNS preceptors. Findings from this study will provide important baseline information to assist CNS faculty and practicing CNSs better prepare and evaluate advanced practice preceptors.

Background

Clinical preceptors are used to assist in developing the clinical skills and abilities of undergraduate students, new graduates, specialty practice, and advanced practice nursing students (Billay & Myrick, 2008). For undergraduate nursing students, preceptors aid in growing an initial nursing knowledge base and clinical skill set through real-life experiences (King et al., 2004; Letizia & Jennrich, 1998). In health care delivery systems, hospitals and other organizations use preceptors to support new graduates and other nurses transitioning to new specialty areas of practice (Casey, Fink, Krugman, & Propst, 2004). Also, graduate nursing programs engage community-based clinical preceptors to provide targeted clinical experiences in preparing students for advanced practice roles (Di Leonardi & Gulanick, 2008).

Important preceptor characteristics have been identified for preceptors at all levels of nursing. Undergraduate nursing students and registered nurse preceptors identified attitude toward teaching and learning, communication skills, and clinical competence as the most important factors for a successful student-preceptor learning partnership (Byrd et al., 1997). Additionally, deans and directors of baccalaureate nursing programs ranked clinical competence and commitment to the preceptor role as the most important qualities in a preceptor (Altmann, 2006).

Much like student nurses, new graduates rely on nurse preceptors to guide their transition and socialization into their new roles (Baltimore, 2004; Hickey, 2009; Richards & Bowles, 2012). New graduates are known to experience moderate levels of stress related to lack of experience, interactions with other healthcare providers, organizational skills, new procedures and unfamiliar clinical situations, and inconsistent preceptors (Fink & Krugman, 2008; Oerman & Garvin, 2002). New graduates report having a consistent preceptor provides positive reinforcement and guides learning to facilitate successful transitions (Casey et al., 2004). Preceptors were also reported to be essential for new graduates to develop confidence in practice (Oermann & Moffitt-Wolf, 1997). Furthermore, new graduates identified six themes when identifying difficulties in transitioning to new roles – lack of confidence in skill performance, struggles with dependence on others yet wanting to be independent, frustrations with work environment, organization and priority-setting skills, communication with physicians, and relationships with peers and preceptors. The lack of a consistent preceptor during orientation with a corresponding lack of positive support and ongoing verbal feedback contributed to the difficulties transitioning to their new roles (Casey et al., 2004).

Precepted experiences for advanced practice nursing students are just as essential in their learning and role transition as for undergraduate nursing students and new graduates (Di Leonardi & Gulanick, 2008; Stiffler, Arthur, Ray, & Cullen, 2009). Different from the other types of nursing preceptors, there is limited information about preceptor characteristics for advanced practice nursing roles. The research on characteristics of advanced practice nurse preceptors has been focused on nurse anesthesia preceptors (Hartland & Londoner, 1997; Katz, 1984; Smith, Swain, & Penprase, 2011). Hartland and Londoner (1997) determined the perceived importance of the 22 preceptor characteristics of effective clinical teachers (Table 1) among nurse anesthesia program directors, certified registered nurse anesthetist clinical instructors, and first and second-year nurse anesthesia students. All four respondent groups valued the 22 characteristics and perceived them as critically important to clinical instruction. Smith et al. (2011) further assessed the perceived importance of the 22 preceptor characteristics in addition to two additional characteristics (preceptor educational course and mentoring style) in a group of student registered nurse anesthetist (SRNA) and certified registered nurse anesthetists (CRNA). The SRNA group identified the three most important characteristics of a clinical preceptor as 1) stimulates student learning involvement, 2) appropriately encourages independence, and 3) motivates students; whereas, the CRNA group identified the three most important characteristics as 1) clinical competence/judgment, 2) ego strength/self-assurance, and 3) calm during times of stress.

Table 1. Effective Clinical Teaching Characteristics of Preceptor (Katz, 1984)

Characteristics
Clinical competence/judgment
Calm during times of stress
Ego strength/self-assurance
Flexibility
Appropriately encourages independence
Engenders confidence
Motivates students
Empathy/respect
Evaluation/counseling
Enjoys teaching
Stimulates student involvement
Positive role model
Open-minded
Sensitivity
Scholarly teaching/knowledge
Accessibility
Communication skills
Individualizes teaching
Timely feedback
Actively teaches
Stimulates effective discussions
Use of student care plans*

* Characteristic omitted in current study.

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