



Stepping up, stepping back, stepping forward: Student nurses' experiences as peer mentors in a pre-nursing scholarship



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ABSTRACT

Mentorship is an essential part of the registered nurse's role, yet few opportunities exist for student nurses to mentor others during pre-registration programmes. This paper reports student nurses' experiences of mentoring school pupils during a pre-nursing scholarship. Focus groups were conducted with fifteen final year student nurses (14 female, 1 male) in two university campuses in Scotland. Discussions were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim, and data analysed thematically. Three interconnected themes emerged: 1) stepping up; 2) stepping back; 3) stepping forward. 'Stepping up' was a process through which student nurses rapidly assumed responsibility for mentoring pupils, facilitated through the attitudes and actions of students' mentors and students' control over pupils' practice experiences. 'Stepping back' encapsulated attitudes and behaviours that enabled student nurses to mentor pupils that involved considerable judgement around how unfolding events in practice could provide learning and development opportunities, and emotional acuity to support pupils through, sometimes challenging, practice situations. 'Stepping forward' described how students' mentoring experience allowed them to appraise and affirm nursing knowledge and skills, and gain greater appreciation of the reality and complexity of mentorship in clinical practice. Peer mentoring may prepare student nurses for future mentoring roles and aid their transition into clinical practice.

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Introduction

Practice learning is a fundamental component of nurse education (Wilkes, 2006). In the United Kingdom (UK) students' practice learning is supported by registered nurse mentors following completion of an approved programme that prepares them to support, teach and assess students in practice (NMC, 2008). In order to mentor effectively nurses need adequate preparation (Watson, 2004; Myall et al., 2008), although research suggests that nurses feel ill-prepared for this crucial role (Andrews and Chilton, 2000; Watson, 2000). Responding to this evidence, the Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC) devised Standards to Support Learning and Assessment in Practice (SLAP Standards) which include requirements for teaching and on-going professional development of mentors (NMC, 2008). Although it is not a statutory requirement that all UK nurses become mentors, there is an expectation within the SLAP Standards that "the majority of nurses would at least meet

the outcomes of a mentor" (NMC, 2008, p. 15). Mentorship is therefore a key role for registered nurses in the UK supported by standards and associated Continuing Professional Development programmes. However, few opportunities exist for student nurses to gain mentoring experience during pre-registration training and only rarely is peer mentorship integrated into nurse recruitment initiatives (Daumer and Britson, 2003; deLapp et al., 2008).

The aim of this study was to explore the experiences of final year student nurses who were peer mentors to aspiring student nurses during a pre-nursing scholarship programme. The programme was developed to encourage school pupils from remote and rural parts of Scotland to aspire to nursing careers. Specifically, it asked whether involvement in the pre-nursing scholarship prepared student nurses for future mentorship roles.

Background

Mentorship and nurse education

Mentorship is now an integral part of nurse education, despite international differences in implementation (Fulton et al., 2007).

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Evidence from a recent systematic review suggests that effective mentorship is built around mutual relationships that serve to strengthen nursing students' professionalism and facilitate their learning (Jokelainen et al., 2011). In the UK, the formal introduction of the concept of mentorship to nurse education can be traced to the transition of nurse education into higher education as a result of Project 2000 (Bray and Nettleton, 2007). Yet, mentorship remains a difficult concept to define, not least because the term is often used interchangeably with others such as preceptor, supervisor and facilitator in practice, policy and research (Bray and Nettleton, 2007; Jokelainen et al., 2011). Hence, there is no universal definition of mentorship (Bray and Nettleton, 2007) and international attempts to reach consensus on the concept of mentorship and to harmonise the content of mentor preparation programmes have proved challenging (Fulton et al., 2007).

Although the integration of mentorship in nurse education is unquestioned, debate exists around the exact role mentors should have in support of students' learning and how best to train mentors for mentorship roles. Considerable role confusion exists among mentors due to their dual role as both mentors and assessors of students (Bray and Nettleton, 2007) with the effect that "there is now a real risk that the essential meaning of mentorship has been diluted and a valuable concept devalued with a lost opportunity to tailor mentorship schemes as they were originally intended" (Nettleton and Bray, 2008: 210). This mentor-assessor tension has been noted to be particularly disadvantageous for 'failing students' (Bray and Nettleton, 2007) and is likely to be acutely felt by 'sign-off mentors' stipulated by the UK NMC's SLAP standards as arbiters of students' entry to the nurse register (Andrews et al., 2010). Mentors have also reported that their role is not supported with dedicated practice time (Andrews and Chilton, 2000; Lauder et al., 2008) nor recognised through either remuneration or status (Nettleton and Bray, 2008) leading some to suggest that the mentor role should be voluntary (Bray and Nettleton, 2007), incentivised (Lauder et al., 2008) and require adequate resources, organisational support and systematic preparation (Jokelainen et al., 2011).

More positively, mentorship can promote the recruitment and retention of nursing students (Jokelainen et al., 2011) and has been found to be mutually beneficial for both mentors and students (Nettleton and Bray, 2008; Watson, 2004). However, a systematic review of international mentorship literature over the past two decades did not identify any studies that used peer mentorship to harness these benefits and observed that in order to adequately facilitate students' learning, mentors required "pedagogical competence" (Jokelainen et al., 2011: 2863). Hence, programmes that provide opportunities for student nurses to rehearse future mentorship roles by establishing relationships with aspiring student nurses may support recruitment and retention of nursing students as well as enhance students' confidence and competence to assume mentorship roles.

Peer mentorship

Peer mentoring defines a mentoring relationship where the mentor and mentee are similar in age and/or status (Gilmour et al., 2007). Peer mentors are usually senior students who engage in a range of teaching, support and socialisation activities for more junior students. For example, peer mentors have supported clinical skills practice sessions (Brannagan et al., 2013; Goldsmith et al., 2006), acted as a resource and role model (Dennison, 2010), and supported new nursing students into university and nursing (Gilmour et al., 2007). Peer mentorship has also been used in the United States to increase recruitment and retention of student nurses, notably to attract minorities into nurse education

(DeLapp et al., 2008; Martin-Holland et al., 2003). Peer mentors report a range of benefits arising from their role. Peer mentoring has been described as a rewarding experience that helped others (Dennison, 2010; Gilmour et al., 2007), provided an opportunity to review knowledge and maintain skills (Dennison, 2010; Gilmour et al., 2007), enhanced learning (Goldsmith et al., 2006) and increased readiness for professional practice (Christiansen and Bell, 2010).

While there is a paucity of literature examining the experiences of student nurses acting as peer mentors for aspirant student nurses, there are reports that peer mentoring as part of pre-nursing experiences provides early socialisation into nursing programmes and realises benefits for both mentors and mentees. Gilmour et al. (2007) used student nurses as peer mentors to support students making the transition into university and nursing. Both mentees and mentors reported development of positive peer relationships, and the experience encouraged collegiate interaction and learning. DeLapp et al. (2008) identified peer mentoring as one important component of a project to recruit and retain Alaskan natives into nursing that helped to prepare 'pre-clinical' students.

Although the benefits of peer mentoring for student nurses are largely positive, effective peer mentorship requires careful matching of mentor to mentee, management of both mentors and mentees expectations, adequate preparation of mentees to be mentored, and strategies developed for communication barriers and potential conflicts that may emerge as relationships develop (Gilmour et al., 2007). Hence, evidence around the multifaceted nature of mentorship (Jokelainen et al., 2011), further confirms that peer mentoring is a similarly complex process that needs to be underpinned by purposeful planning and continual support (Gilmour et al., 2007; Goldsmith et al., 2006).

Pre-nursing scholarship

In 2012, the School of Nursing, Midwifery and Health at the University of Stirling in partnership with local National Health Service (NHS) Boards and education authorities, piloted a nine-month 'pre-nursing scholarship' for penultimate and final year secondary school pupils (aged 15–18 years) from remote and rural parts of the Scottish Highlands and Western Isles (Beattie et al., 2014). The scholarship comprised four components:

1. **Residential week** at the start of the scholarship included hands-on clinical skills sessions and lecture-based input to provide pupils with insight into the life and work of nursing students and to prepare pupils for their practice placement;
2. **Practice learning experience week** in a local NHS hospital and/or community setting that focussed on care of older adults;
3. Completion of a Skills for Work (Health Sector) **qualification** accredited by the Scottish Qualification Authority (SQA);
4. **Graduation** to celebrate completion of the scholarship with parents, teachers and other NHS and education partners, academics, practice mentors and student nurses.

A fundamental aspect of the scholarship was the allocation of a final year student nurse 'buddy' to each school pupil on entry. Student nurses volunteered for this role and were paired with a pupil for the duration of the scholarship. Buddies were involved for two reasons. First, through informal conversations between pupils and their buddies, it was hoped that pupils would gain insight into the realities of life as a student nurse to aid their decision-making around nursing as a career. Second, it was believed that buddies would benefit by gaining experience of mentorship to prepare them for this future role.

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