



The influence student placement experience can have on the employment choices of graduates: A paediatric nursing context



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ABSTRACT

This paper explores how the student placement experience may influence employment choices in the context of paediatric nursing. A qualitative research methodology was used. Data was collected using semi structured interviews at a tertiary teaching hospital. The sample group comprised of six newly qualified nurses who had completed their Bachelor of Nursing less than 12 months before the interview. They had completed at least one clinical placement at the site of data collection in their 2nd or 3rd year of undergraduate nursing studies. The main themes contributing to the student nurse experience within the context of paediatric nursing included the wish to work with children, a job being available, support during clinical placements and assistance with future career planning while on placement. The support experienced by student nurses during their clinical placement was seen to have a very positive influence on their future employment choices. Group de-briefing to support mutual understanding and sharing was seen to be a highly positive aspect of a clinical placement. Also how students were treated by clinical staff was a key factor that influenced future employment choices.

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Introduction

There is a great deal of discussion and debate focusing on the future workforce needs and predicted significant gaps between supply and demand for Registered Nurses across Australia in 2020, (HWA, 2013). Currently there is debate about the number of nurses that need training and how they can transition into the workforce in order to address the predicted workforce shortfall. Policy makers and funding bodies cannot afford to overlook the importance of supporting professional socialization during undergraduate student placements if they intend to make a real difference to health workforce issues. Specialist contexts of practice such as paediatrics need to be especially focused on future planning and positive recruitment and retention strategies to ensure the ongoing provision of high quality safe care delivery with positive health outcomes. However, there is little existing literature focusing on the student experience in terms of employment choices in the area of paediatric nursing.

Nursing educators and facilitators can have a powerful influence on the experience of students and should provide a solid foundation to shape learning experiences to positively impact on the future employment choices made (Horsfall et al., 2012). On placement it is essential for the student to fit into the social environment of the clinical setting and be accepted by staff and clients (Nolan, 1998). Interpersonal relationships are vital to the growth of a positive learning environment, good relationships with a good support network result in positive learning (Andrews et al., 2005). Peer support is thought to be critical to a positive learning experience for the student nurse on placement, and students' value effective post clinical conferences as they are thought to increase reflective learning achieved during clinical placements (Nolan, 1998). Kelly and Ahern (2009) suggest that professional socialization is significant in shaping new graduates in their role as a registered nurse, and has the potential to influence the recruitment and retention of nurses. Internationally there are a number of terms used to describe the roles that support student placements. To promote clarity this paper will use the term preceptor to denote the Registered Nurse who supports the student in the clinical area during their shifts in placement. A student facilitator is an individual whose key role is to support both clinicians and the students during their placements. They also conduct appraisals with the

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students, gain feedback from the clinicians (preceptors) working with the students and liaise with university staff and hospital management to keep them informed of student progress and the learning environment offered by the placement.

The pre-registration nursing programs across Australia must meet the accreditation standards developed by Australian Nursing and Midwifery Accreditation Council (ANMAC). This includes a minimum of 800 h of clinical placement experience, not inclusive of simulation activities, that are incorporated into the program and providing exposure to a variety of health-care settings, ([Health Workforce Australia, 2014](#)). The care of paediatrics is an area where students are placed to gain this diverse health care experience and placements vary between 4 and 12 weeks depending on the University curriculum.

The aim of this study was to explore how the paediatric clinical placement experience may influence employment choices on graduation and in the future. To support this, the following research questions were formulated:

- What were perceived to be positive aspects of the clinical placement?
- What were perceived to be negative aspects of the clinical placement?
- What influence did the facilitation model used during placements have on the overall placement experience?
- How were decisions made regarding future employment choices?

The exploration of these questions provided an insight into what influenced employment choices within the context of paediatric nursing. This insight has enhanced existing knowledge and understanding in the local context.

Literature review

There is a great deal of existing literature focusing on the student nurse experience, but minimal located in the paediatric nursing context or with a focus on how this may be linked to employment choices. Overall the literature suggests that positive clinical experiences have been related to how valued and supported students feel on placement, which in turn can impact on their future employment choices. The clinical placement experience for undergraduate nursing students aims to support the translation of theory into practice and to allow students to experience the professional role of the registered nurse ([Warne et al., 2010](#)). The clinical placement provides students with an opportunity to gain an insight into the organization and students have reported that they seek a supportive environment when given the ability to choose a clinical placement ([Hartigan-Rogers et al., 2007](#); [Nolan, 1998](#); [Cummings et al., 2010](#); [Levett-Jones and Lathlean, 2009](#)) and it appears that this could also influence their future employment choices beyond the specialty of nursing the individual has chosen. Factors that appear to influence an individual's choice of employment include clinical support, peer support and debriefing, a sense of belonging, fitting in socially, positive interpersonal relationships and the model of facilitation used ([CUREE, 2012](#)).

The extent to which students feel a sense of belonging has been found to be of significance when measuring satisfaction levels during clinical placement. [Levett-Jones and Lathlean \(2009\)](#) conducted a mixed method study spanning, three universities, two in Australia and one in England, using questionnaires (n = 362) and interviews (n = 18) to explore nursing students' experience of belongingness when undertaking clinical placements. They found that nursing students felt that their safety and security, sense of belongingness, healthy self-concept and learning were important

factors. Students felt that these factors influence their motivation, capacity to learn and confidence to question poor practice and future career decisions. Positive behaviors are important in facilitating learning opportunities for a range of staff. Clinicians with education responsibilities such as preceptor, clinical facilitator, and mentor contribute to student learning through engaging with students to promote learning opportunities.

[Hartigan-Rogers et al. \(2007\)](#) conducted a qualitative study using semi-structured interviews (n = 100) to describe newly-graduated nurses' perceptions of how clinical placements impacted their graduate experiences. Four key themes developed; developing skills and knowledge; preparing for future employment; supportive relationships; and realities of work-life. This supported [Papp et al. \(2003\)](#) earlier work that reported that students sought respect, support and acknowledgment during clinical placements, and optimum learning is promoted when students felt supported by educators, staff and peers. [Andrews et al. \(2005\)](#), used a two phase mixed methods approach to explore the student nurse experience, (n = 650), focus groups (n = 7) and interviews (n = 30). Key themes were mentorship, ward management, learning opportunities and racism, concluding that the more positive the learning experience, the more attractive the organization was for future employment. In support of this a quasi-experimental study conducted by [Henderson et al. \(2010\)](#) using the Clinical Learning Environment Inventory (CLEI) tool developed by [Chan \(2001\)](#), (n = 62) concluded that supporting Registered Nurses in the principles of knowledge transfer based on best practice evidence promoted positive engagement with students, specifically how students were received and the activities in which they were engaged with. [Midgley \(2006\)](#) explored 2nd year pre-registration student nurses' perceptions of the hospital-learning environment during clinical placements (n = 67) also using the Clinical Learning Environment Inventory (CLEI) and found that students preferred an environment with higher levels of individualization, innovation in teaching and learning strategies, student involvement and task orientation. Additionally, [Heslop et al. \(2001\)](#) concluded that that students favored large public hospitals and sought a place of employment offering a good graduate program offering support, regular feedback, reassurance and guidance on a regular basis. Positive role models, a supportive learning environment were found to have a positive association with employment choice by [Walker et al. \(2011\)](#).

There are a number of different facilitation models used to support student nurse clinical placements internationally. While there has not yet been consensus as to which promotes the best experience for student nurses and their successful entry into the workforce, a number of models have been the subject of research. [Omer et al. \(2013\)](#) used [Moore's \(2009\)](#) Preceptorship Evaluation Survey to explore nursing students' perception of two models of clinical placement support (n = 110), finding that student's preferred a model which incorporated intensive support and supervision much more than a model involving increased independence and self-directed learning. Students demonstrated a clear preference for group facilitation in a later study conducted by [Walker et al. \(2013\)](#) and highly valued supportive preceptors and facilitators, ([Brown et al., 2012](#)).

[Severinsson and Sand \(2010\)](#) found that a positive organizational structure and clinical learning environment promoted emotional awareness and responsibility. Staff who are recognized and supported by effective leaders are more likely to engage in learning, whereas task completion alone is not sufficient to achieve optimum outcomes for the nursing workforce ([Cummings et al., 2010](#)). Job satisfaction promoted recruitment and retention and this was influenced by good staffing levels, decreased workload, sufficient clinical support, empowerment, orientation and investment in education and skill development, ([Duffield et al., 2009](#)) Therefore a

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