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# Enrolled Nurses' experiences learning the nurse preceptor role: A qualitative evaluation

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## KEYWORDS

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## Summary

**Background:** Preceptors are crucial to the provision of effective clinical learning experiences for nursing students however many are insufficiently trained and lack support in the role. Within Australia, preceptors may work with students preparing to become Registered Nurses or Enrolled Nurses. An intervention was designed specifically to engage Enrolled Nurse preceptors because they are particularly overlooked.

**Methodology:** A qualitative evaluation of the educational experience was undertaken using semi-structured group interviews.

**Findings:** Four themes were identified: (a) feelings of disempowerment hinder a desire to do the job, (b) open to embracing opportunities to learn about clinical teaching, (c) barriers to engagement and (d) preceptoring across nursing divisions.

**Conclusion:** The study identified that the learning experience was valuable. In particular participants enjoyed the challenge of engaging with digital stories where other experienced educators shared the way they responded to learning problems and developed solutions, and the facilitated discussions. Recommendations to further improve the online resource included development of stories that are relevant to the unique challenges Enrolled Nurse preceptors face.

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## 1. Introduction

Nursing students are the nurses of tomorrow and thus close collaboration between academics in higher education, and clinicians and educators in health service facilities benefits us all. A large body of nursing education research has repeatedly found the role of nurse preceptor, in particular,

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is a vital part of nursing students' clinical learning (Benner, Sutphen, Leonard, & Day, 2010; Broadbent, Moxham, Sander, Walker, & Dwyer, 2014). However, Smedley, Morey, and Race (2010) claim many nurse preceptors lack sufficient training and support. For Australia, and other countries needing to replenish the nursing workforce, it is imperative preceptors be sufficiently trained and their role clarified, supported and developed through research (Health Workforce Australia [HWA], 2014, p. 4). There is a growing body of research literature pertaining to the needs and capabilities of nurse preceptors, but this work is limited to preceptors working to support Registered Nurses (RN) (Gilbert & Womack, 2012; Henderson & Eaton, 2013; McAllister, 2012). Enrolled Nurses (EN), the second tier of nurses in Australia, also work as preceptors, but the research on their needs, as well as innovative ways of supporting them in the role, was lacking. This paper reports the findings of a project that sought to develop, provide and evaluate a learning experience specifically targeting EN preceptors.

## 2. Review of the relevant literature

### 2.1. The nurse preceptor

Nurse preceptors are described as buddies, mentors, facilitators of clinical learning, promoters of professional development and providers of students' pathways for orientation and socialisation into the nursing discipline (Carlson, Wann-Hansson, & Pilhammar, 2009; Liu, Lei, Mingxia, & Haobin, 2010; Smedley et al., 2010). Nurse preceptors are employed by the health service facility to provide clinical experience and work with nursing students, at the bedside, during the clinical placement (Henderson & Eaton, 2013). Nurse preceptors generally provide feedback and assessment on the learner's progress to the learner's clinical facilitator. A clinical facilitator is defined by HWA (2010, p. 9) as a RN who supervises groups of students, whilst on their clinical placement.

A review of current literature was undertaken, to examine research on the role of the Enrolled Nurse (EN) preceptor. An EN is by definition from the Nursing and Midwifery Board of Australia (NMBA) a nurse who possesses a minimum education standard of a Diploma in Nursing and in some states in Australia is referred to as a Division 2 nurse (NMBA, 2014). Combinations of key words used for the searches were; nurse, enrolled nurse, clinical, preceptor, supervisor, facilitator, Division 2 nurse, licensed practical nurse (LPN) (American terminology for the Diploma equivalent nurse), teacher, educator, student, assessor, communities of practice, and work integrated learning. The databases searched include: CINAHL with Full Text, Cochrane Library, Medline, PubMed, Scopus, ProQuest, PsycINFO, Health Source: Nursing/Academic Edition. Searches of the literature returned no exact matches for data pertaining to ENs working in this role.

The review revealed a large body of work exploring RNs working as preceptors and clinical facilitators (Broadbent et al., 2014; Kristofferzon, Martensson, Mamhidir, & Lofmark, 2013; Liu et al., 2010; McAllister et al., 2013; Smedley et al., 2010). Two significant problems revealed about RN preceptors were they lack knowledge of

educational theory relevant to the role (Broadbent et al., 2014; Liu et al., 2010) and they commonly find the role stressful (Bourbonnais & Kerr, 2007). Such issues are risks to success in the role, and in the preparation of students for graduate practice.

Experiential learning is an integral component of nursing students' education and therefore preceptors' ability to support this learning is vital (Henderson & Eaton, 2013; HWA, 2014). However, without formal training and acquisition of knowledge and qualifications in teaching and learning, preceptors may not be well placed to provide effective or high quality teaching support to nursing students. The need for formal training and the challenges the RN preceptor experiences when they are inadequately trained and ill supported have been well documented (Broadbent et al., 2014; Cangelosi, Crocker, & Sorrell, 2009; Gilbert & Womack, 2012; McAllister, Mosel Williams, Gamble, Malko-Nyhan, & Jones, 2011; McAllister et al., 2013; McAllister, Oprescu, & Jones, 2014; Smedley et al., 2010).

Despite the flourishing literature and research in this area, few studies reported on EN preceptors' experiences. This demonstrates an important gap in knowledge, because the preceptor of Enrolled or Assistants in Nursing may have different concerns and pressures. Additionally, the work of the EN is diversifying and now includes the expectation of a teaching role (NMBA, 2016). Thus, understanding ENs' experiences in the preceptor role is imperative and specific approaches to support their role confidence and effectiveness are needed.

### 2.2. Preceptor training

Numerous researchers have found; preceptors often have negative experiences with students (Bourbonnais & Kerr, 2007), that professional development focusing on communication is helpful in reducing this problem, but that training is not widely available (Liu et al., 2010; Smedley et al., 2010). This appears to be an international issue.

In North America, for example, Altmann (2011) and Finke (2013) reported professional development for educators, whilst needed, was inconsistent. Liu et al. (2010) found in a study of RN preceptors in Macau, many did not have degrees and had insufficient knowledge and skills to supervise students in the clinical setting. Broadbent et al. (2014) found similar results in an Australian study, even though to teach nurses in Australia one must hold a postgraduate degree (Australian Nursing and Midwifery Accreditation Council [ANMAC], 2014). Formal preparation for the education role would appear to be a pressing need.

### 2.3. Strategies to develop capabilities and capacity in the nurse educator workforce

Within Australia, McAllister, Jones, Oprescu, Duncan, and Flynn (2015) developed and evaluated an online learning resource for RN clinicians moving, or wishing to move, into the teaching role. The online resource contains a series of digital stories, each providing an account of a nurse educator who had encountered, and resolved, a significant issue or problem in their teaching practice. The website address

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