



Clinical education

The operating room as a clinical learning environment: An exploratory study

Rhoda Meyer^{a, *}, Susan C. Van Schalkwyk^a, Rosaley Prakaschandra^b^a Stellenbosch University, Cape Town, South Africa^b Durban University of Technology, South Africa

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 26 November 2014

Received in revised form

3 February 2016

Accepted 16 March 2016

Keywords:

Clinical learning environment

Operating room

Students' perceptions

ABSTRACT

Students undertake their clinical placement in various clinical settings for the exposure to and acquisition of skills related to that particular context. The operating room is a context that offers the opportunity to develop critical skills related to the perioperative care of the patient. Despite numerous studies that have been undertaken in this field, few have investigated the operating room as a clinical learning environment in the South African private healthcare context. The aim of this study was to determine nursing students' perceptions of the operating room as a clinical learning environment. An exploratory, interpretive and descriptive design generating qualitative data was utilized. Eight nursing students completed an open-ended questionnaire, and twelve nursing students participated in the focus group discussion. Four themes emerged, namely, 'interpersonal factors', 'educational factors', 'private operating room context', and 'recommendations'. The opinion that the operating room offers an opportunity to gain skills unique to this context was expressed. However, despite the potential learning opportunities, the key findings of this study reveal negative perceptions of nursing students regarding learning experiences in the operating room. Exploration into the preparatory needs of students specific to learning outcomes before operating room placement should be considered. It will also be necessary to improve collaboration between lecturers, mentors and theatre managers.

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1. Introduction

The primary purpose of nursing education is to prepare students to practice in a variety of health care settings (Iwasiw and Goldenberg, 2015), with the ultimate goal being a practitioner who is adequately equipped with the necessary knowledge, skills and attitudes to nurse efficiently (SANC, 2005). Clinical placement is a critical component of nursing education, and is integral in attaining this goal (Henderson et al., 2009; Jonsén et al., 2013). Furthermore, clinical placement provides the student an opportunity to acquire a number of skills in an authentic environment related to the specific area of placement (Levette-Jones and Lathlean, 2007), thus contributing to the development of clinical competence. Numerous studies on the clinical learning environment focus on the influence of specific factors on learning such as

staff-student relationships and the degree of mentoring (Killam and Heerschap, 2013; Papp et al., 2003; Sharif and Masoumi, 2005). However, Clare et al. (2003) and Soemantri et al., 2010 argue that it is the context within which clinical learning takes place that is most influential in developing the necessary skills. Furthermore, to date, few studies that have investigated the operating room as a clinical learning environment in the South African healthcare system have been published.

The aim of this article was to evaluate student nurses' perceptions of the operating room as a clinical learning environment in a South African private hospital context. In addition, the researcher aimed to develop recommendations which may contribute to the acquisition of critical skills essential to enhance learning and ultimately, clinical practice.

2. Theoretical perspectives

Extensive research has been undertaken internationally to explore the clinical learning environment (Edwards et al., 2004; Lydon and Burke, 2012; Papp et al., 2003; Sharif and Masoumi,

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: rhodameyer1@hotmail.com (R. Meyer), scvs@sun.ac.za (S.C. Van Schalkwyk), RosaleyPRA@dut.ac.za (R. Prakaschandra).

2005), revealing that students were commonly dissatisfied with clinical experiences. The authors relate this to specific challenges such as decreased patient interaction in the intra-operative environment, lack of mentoring, and the high complexity of nursing practice in the perioperative environment (Callaghan, 2010; Hughes, 2006). In some instances this work has led to the development of recommendations for the improvement of students' experiences in the clinical setting, as well as the improvement in the quality of the clinical learning environment for the purposes of achieving quality learning.

Findik et al. (2015) suggested that the perceptions of students have an influence on the quality or degree of learning taking place. This suggestion is consistent with educational literature (Entwistle and Peterson, 2004) and significant for the improvement of learning in a clinical environment. It is also clear that the environment or context in which clinical learning takes place can influence learning.

Yardley et al. (2012, p.102) support this by stating that 'learning is situated', occurs from interaction with factors in the environment and is initiated by exposure to 'authentic or workplace learning'. Workplace learning provides an opportunity for students to gain concrete learning experiences that may lead to integration with theory and abstract concepts (Yardley et al., 2012). However, workplace learning also provides multiple influences, depending on the context, which may affect the learning and the perceptions thereof for each individual student (Henderson et al., 2009).

The link between the learning experience and the environment within which it occurs has also been described in the nursing context. A study conducted in 2004 by Silen-Lipponen et al., showed that negative attitudes of staff in the operating room, together with the negative atmosphere in the learning environment contributed to feelings of anxiety and incompetence by the student nurses. They further highlighted that these negative attitudes towards students contributed to unsuccessful learning. Callaghan (2010) also noted that students had negative perceptions of the operating room not only due to lack of experience in this specialty, but also because of negative clinical learning experiences. It is clear that there are challenges to clinical learning in the operating room, which may provide a distinctive context for learning. As a result, students' perceptions of this area as a learning environment may differ from other clinical areas.

The operating room may also offer different experiences, characterized by the interaction between the student and medical staff, patients, operating room nursing staff, the operating room culture, and even equipment and procedures (Durning and Artino, 2011). For example, Silen-Lipponen et al. (2004) state that nursing students perceive the operating room as a highly stressful environment, possibly due to the nature of the procedures, in terms of the level of medico-legal risks, the high patient turnover, and the urgency of the procedures performed. These conditions may not be present in other specialties.

A further factor that needs to be considered, given the setting of the present study, is the impact on learning in some of the private sector health care settings in South Africa. Students in this context undertake their nursing training at private nursing education institutions, –which belong to the same corporate organization as the clinical environment where they undergo their clinical training. Typically, in this context, emphasis is on profitability and consumer demands (Goh and Watt, 2003), rather than on a student-centered approach. Under these conditions, student learning may not receive the necessary attention, especially where students are integrated into the workforce to work a 42 h week as full-time employees (Breier et al., 2009), in an attempt to ensure completion of all

clinical objectives. This integration may be advantageous in circumstances where students have the opportunities to have a 'hands on' experience; however minimal time may be available for structured facilitation by mentors and staff. This has serious implications for clinical learning especially in an unfamiliar area like the operating room. To augment this, the unpredictable nature of the environment limits the implementation of a structured teaching program, which is recommended to improve learning experiences (Radford and Hunt, 1999). Against this background, the specific objectives of this article are to determine students' perceptions of the operating room as a clinical learning environment in a private hospital context, and propose recommendations to improve clinical learning in this context.

3. Research design

In this study an exploratory, interpretive and descriptive design was utilized, generating qualitative data to explore nursing students' perceptions of the operating room as a clinical learning environment (De Vos et al., 2011).

3.1. Population and sampling

This study was conducted at a private nursing education institution located in a metropolitan area in the Western Cape. At the site where this study was undertaken, the total number of the fourth-year bridging course nursing students was sixty-five (N = 65). These students were selected as the population, because their intense training through the different disciplines gives them a broad view into the different specialties in nursing and helps them determine the quality of the learning environment.

Purposive sampling was used where students from each of the five hospitals (where the clinical placements are undertaken) were selected. The recruitment targeted those participants who had exposure to the operating room. From the students who were selected (n = 40) for the focus group discussion and the questionnaire, twenty-two were willing to participate and were included in the study.

3.2. Data collection

To generate the qualitative data, a survey in the form of a questionnaire, containing open-ended questions and a focus group discussion were used. In both instances, participants were given the opportunity to engage in reflective practice (Bulman and Schutz, 2004). To assist them in this process, both the questionnaire and the focus group discussion were based on an adapted version of Gibbs' cycle of reflection. According to this cycle, a series of six questions are presented to the interviewee (Fig. 1). These questions were adapted for this study by reviewing the relevant literature through exploratory analysis (Burns and Grove, 2005) (Addendum A).

An open-ended questionnaire was chosen as it encourages the participant to consider their thoughts before arriving at a decision (Bolton, 2001). Forrest (2008) adds to this by indicating that the process of writing facilitates the act of contemplation, thus allowing time for the participant to reflect on the value of the experience before recording their thoughts.

After a routine lecture, the researcher who is not their lecturer, but who works at the institution as lecturer for second year students, explained the study, research process, reflective cycle and questionnaire to the students. This introduction to the reflective cycle was followed up by additional sessions where students were

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