Nursing Students’ Perspectives on Clinical Assessment Practices and Tools

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Extended Abstract

Introduction

A major focus in nursing education is on the evaluation of clinical performance, and it is a complex process due to the diverse nature of nursing practice (Dolan, 2003). Difficulties in the development of valid and reliable assessment measures for nursing competency have resulted in the formulating of assessment instruments with an increase in face validity, but less focus on reliability (Nicholson, Griffin, Gillis, Wu & Dunning, 2013). Gonçzi (1994) advocated a holistic approach in the assessment of competency which considers the knowledge, skills and attitudes of the professionals in clinical situations. This notion of evaluating competence also incorporates professional judgment, which involves complex structuring, being able to bring together disparate attributes and tasks required for intelligent performance in a particular clinical situation. In fact, assessment of clinical competence requires explicitly defined standards which have to meet national standards of the nursing profession (Garrett, MacPhee & Jackson, 2013). At the same time, these standards should be easily understood and interpreted in the same manner by the preceptors, provide a guideline for the nursing students, and practically applied in the clinical setting. Therefore, it is essential to develop a holistic assessment tool to meet the needs of our local situation.

“Transition to Practice” is a consolidated clinical practicum for pre-registration nursing students. In order for these students to be able to function as competent beginner-level practitioners upon registration and gaining employment, they need a period of consolidated clinical experience to develop the required level of competency. Being thrust into an unpredictable and uncontrollable clinical environment they are unaccustomed to without clinical experience can create stressful situations for students (Nahas & Yam, 2001; Oermann, 1998). Elçigil and Yıldırım Sari (2007)
explored concerns commonly reported by nursing students in Turkey which reflect these stressors; they include anxiety over the assessment method, being interrogated, receiving negative feedback, and receiving insufficient guidance from the preceptors. Tiwari et al. (2005) stated similar concerns by nursing students in Hong Kong. Meanwhile, according to Hickey (2009), the preceptors reported that new graduate nurses were lacking in psychomotor skills and other soft skills such as critical thinking, time management, communication and teamwork. Besides the dynamic clinical situations, the preceptor’s approach and level of teaching experience also play an important part on the students’ learning experiences (Nahas & Yam, 2001).

**Objectives of the Study**

This study aims to explore the views of final year nursing undergraduates on the assessment methods used in the “transition to practice” clinical practicum. Based on the discussion, it addresses issues and concerns about learning and assessment conducted during “transition to practice”.

**Methodology**

**Study Design**

An explorative qualitative approach using focus group discussion was adopted. Boyd (1993) emphasised that the focus of the qualitative approach is on “achieving understanding and opening new perspectives that can change people’s worlds” (p. 69). This approach was used to understand the learning and assessment experiences of nursing students in “transition to practice”.

**Sampling and Sample Size**

A purposive sample was used to justify the inclusion of rich sources of data that can be used to generate explanatory frameworks (Gerrish & Lacey, 2006). A total of 24 Year Three undergraduate nursing students participated in the focus group discussions. The proposed number of participants was decided by both the project time frame and the in-depth nature of the qualitative approach.

Inclusion criteria:
- Year Three undergraduate nursing students who have completed the “Transition to Practice” clinical practicum, ages ranging from 21 to 40 years old

Exclusion criteria:
- Participants do not agree or allow audio recording of the focus group discussion.

**Data Collection Procedure and Data Analysis**

For the focus group discussion, the researcher selected a suitable environment, established rapport with the participants, and got them to discuss more about their experiences in learning and assessment during transition to practice in order to gain “rich descriptions of the participant’s experience” (Schneider, Elliott, LoBiondo-Wood & Haber, 2003, p. 198). The focus group discussions were facilitated by the researcher with seven to nine participants at a meeting room in the school. Three focus group discussion sessions were conducted in May 2014.

The participants were required to fill in the demographic questionnaire after obtaining consent and before they participated in the focus group discussion proper. Personal identifiers collected include their name, age, contact number, and email address. The sessions that were recorded on audio-tape were transcribed verbatim and the transcripts were read numerous times to enable key themes to be identified. Latent content analysis, which involves an interpretative reading of the symbolism
underlying the surface structure of the text, was used for the qualitative dataset (Stommel & Wills, 2004). The study engaged member checking to ensure dependability of the results. Participants were given the results of the study, and they were encouraged to read and verify whether the results accurately reflected their experiences.

**Main Findings and Conclusion**

During the focus group discussions, students acknowledged that going through the “transition to practice” clinical practicum help them to achieve a better understanding of the workflow, to develop the capacity to consolidate their nursing skills, and have the opportunity of working collaboratively with other healthcare professionals. They also mentioned that working alongside with the preceptors helped to boost their confidence to function as registered nurses. However, the students also shared their concerns that the preceptors tend to be more preoccupied with patient care, and that left limited time for them to guide the students. There were also inconsistencies in the interpretation of the assessment tool among the preceptors.

The baccalaureate study equipped nursing students with theoretical knowledge and fundamental skill competency but they may still lack confidence and clinical exposure. The meta-summary of the literature on students’ clinical experiences identified four major themes: fear of harming patients, desire to help people, the need to integrate theory and clinical practice and the desire to master psychomotor skills (O’Connor, 2006). Hengstberger-Sims, Eagar, Gregory and Andrew (2008) explained that the level of confidence among new graduate nurses depends on the following factors: length of time spent during their undergraduate clinical placements as well as the provision of workload of patients in conjunction with a preceptor to consistently help these graduate nurses to improve or work through any issues of time management, competence and confidence with their nursing tasks.

The current trend of moving from a generic to holistic model of clinical assessment, leads to the nurturing and development of competent nursing professionals. Nevertheless, it is essential to establish a support system which prepares preceptors and students to use these tools. This collaborative approach is valuable in many ways: in enhancing the learning experiences of the students, in providing professional development for preceptors in terms of exposing them to new pedagogical approaches and enhancing their competency as assessors, and their clinical credibility as academics.

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