

Role of Nurse Preceptors in the Clinical Learning Environment for Undergraduate Nursing Students at Selected Health Facilities in Central and Eastern Kenya

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ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

Keywords

Roles

Clinical learning environment

Undergraduate nursing students

Nurse preceptors.

To precept means mentoring or instructing someone. The clinical nurse preceptor instructs, coaches and supervises nursing students. The role of a nurse preceptor is an experiential teaching strategy that lasts for some-time and involves a nurse who is experienced in nursing practice working individually with nursing students. The main objective of this study was to assess the role of nurse preceptors in the clinical learning environment for undergraduate nursing students at selected health facilities in Central

and Eastern Kenya. was collected from nurses who were directly involved with undergraduate nursing students' clinical learning environment. 153 nurses from Meru, Nyeri and Chuka Teaching and Referral Hospitals and a structured questionnaire was used to obtain the data. Descriptive statistics was used to analyse data and presented in frequencies and percentages using tables and graphs. The response rate was 91.5%. 96 (68.6%) were female while 44(31.4%) were male. The majority of the respondents 137(97.8%) indicated that their role was to welcome and orient students in the clinical learning environment. Other roles mentioned were mentoring and supervising students; interact with students in a friendly manner as mentioned by 129(92.1%) of the respondents. 126(90.0%) of the respondents mentioned inducting new students while 117(83.5%) mentioned assigning duties as per clinical objectives. Nurse preceptors were aware of many roles in the clinical learning environment for undergraduate nursing students. They were aware that they were responsible in moulding a nursing student to be a competent professional nurse. The nurse preceptor should be aware of the students' learning objectives in order to be effective in their preceptorship. They should be knowledgeable, skilled with critical thinking and decision-making skills that enable them to prepare students to be professional nurses in future. Therefore, nurse preceptor's roles should be well defined to them.

Introduction

According to Boud *et al.* (1993), learning is based on and flows from experience, and it can only happen through involvement. Clinical instructors who integrate teaching and practice in the clinical learning environment can help students learn more effectively.

The clinical instructor's practical knowledge could be a significant resource for developing educational theory. Nurses along with other medical professionals are expected to engage in continuous learning throughout their careers. Regardless of their time practicing as a nurse, she is likely to learn

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<https://doi.org/10.58506/ajstss.v4i2.303>

AFRICAN JOURNAL OF SCIENCE, TECHNOLOGY AND SOCIAL SCIENCES. ISSN:2958:0560

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something new every day. If the nurse is enthusiastic about continual professional development and enjoys reading medical publications, she could make an excellent nurse. A great nurse must also be able to work well with others. Nursing personnel provide care within a broader context. They team up with nurses, physicians, therapists and other specialists involved in healthcare. This allows improvement in outcomes and provides support to patients' overall wellbeing. This underscores the importance of teamwork in the workplace (McCray *et al.*, 2012).

The role of a nurse preceptor is to work closely with nursing students in the hospital setting. The goal is to help the students learn the expected skills and be competent nurse when they graduate. They play a crucial role in developing nursing students' clinical knowledge and abilities since clinical practice is a big component in their educational experience. Nurse preceptors have a dual role of caring for patients and precepting nursing students. Furthermore, they must help students continually improve their ability to apply theoretical knowledge and abilities in the practical context (Bradshaw *et al.*, 2021). Although clinical skills are necessary, nurses must also possess soft skills and personal attributes. Strong problem-solving abilities are one of the qualities that a nurse must have. Every day, nurses must be available to handle difficulties and manage complications involving sick patients, trauma cases, and other emergency situations. For successful management of daily activities, the nurse requires good problem-solving skills. Integrity is a vital quality of a good nurse. This is because nurses should respect people, regulation and confidentiality in the hospital settings. They should consider the patient as a priority all the time. They should recognize the value of responsible stewardship, individual dignity, peace, justice, and reconciliation (Marian University: Leighton School of Nursing, 2023).

Irwin *et al* (2018) discussed a modern nursing education paradigm that aims to create professionals who are competent, confident, and reflect evidence-based nursing care and advocate for the patients and the profession. To prepare the nursing students along this paradigm, the nurse preceptor instructs students on nursing care of patients by teaching, mentoring and guiding them. The students then learn new roles within the clinical area using clinical learning objectives students have set

with the aid of the nurse preceptors or nurse educators. This allows the students to put acquired knowledge into practice. When nursing students are in their final two semesters of the training, the nurse preceptor has the responsibility of ensuring that students apply high level thinking abilities as stated by Bradshaw *et al.* (2021). Furthermore, precepted clinical experiences allow the students to display true leadership while also practicing communication and teamwork abilities. When students watch others work as a team, they get a better understanding of the hospital behaviour and contemporary challenges therein. The nurse preceptor and the students collaborate as preceptorship progresses to facilitate achievement of clinical learning objectives. This collaboration in some occasions continues beyond clinical setting because the nurse preceptor cultivates a positive learning environment as the students show receptive attitude (Bradshaw *et al.*, 2021). Both parties learn the governance and policies of the hospital wards.

When students do not get the true picture of what nursing is all about, after graduation they tend to move from one hospital to another leading to high rate of existing, and poor professional development. This compromises the quality of care with most of the nurses find themselves in new assignment more often than not. Nurse preceptor helps socialize students into new roles in the nursing profession for stability and job satisfaction in future. Nurse preceptors aid nursing students in terms of students' capacity to integrate classroom theoretical knowledge with actual clinical practice in a healthcare facility. In addition, he/she can provide specific attention and direction to improve the students' clinical competence and confidence (Bradshaw *et al.* (2021). Nurse preceptors also work with nurse educators in supervision of nursing students as stated by Neal (2016) and supported by Bradshaw *et al.* (2021). Nurse preceptors should be aware of students' clinical objectives in order to support planning, tracking progress, and recording performance. The nurse preceptor as a seasoned practitioner with practical knowledge in the field, role model a health professional for students to learn from. He/she should also share preceptorship expectations with students to ensure successful experience that bridges the gap between the classroom and the clinical practice (Bradshaw *et al.*, 2021).

According Alraja (2011), those questions related to patient care raised by nursing students should be answered positively by the nurse preceptor. These positive responses may positively impact the nursing students' experiences in the hands-on training environment as stated by Happel and Gaskin (2013). This leads to a beneficial positive relationship because they assist each other in the process of completing their responsibilities and objectives. The nurse preceptor in collaboration with the nursing officer in charge of the ward should establish a set of precepting goals and expectations. These goals and expectations should be discussed between the preceptor and the nursing students and worked out into a mutually agreed-upon plan with a time line to accomplish. The nurse preceptor has the responsibility of advocating for the students through bridging the gap between the universities and the hospitals. They partner with nurse educators to provide assistance, direction, motivation, facilitation, problem-solving, troubleshooting, monitoring, and evaluation. Nurse preceptor seeks to establish a safe and meaningful interactive relationship with his/her students as well. He/she also demonstrates communication and decision-making skills with the patient, family, and multidisciplinary team. As the experience unfolds, the preceptor teaches the student how to provide direct patient care, use technology, connect with the interdisciplinary team, and utilize the resources available in the workplace. He/she may also prepare students in advance by use of role play (Bradshaw *et al.*, 2021).

The nurse preceptor should also know when to stay around the students and when to step aside and allow the students to perform procedures independently as he/she watches them from a distance. When the patient's condition is acute or changes unexpectedly, the nurse preceptor should work closely with the students in provision of care. When the patient's condition is stable, the nurse preceptor may choose to go over the plan of care with students before observing and evaluating the students' ability to implement it (Bradshaw *et al.*, 2021). Along with teaching at the bedside, the preceptor exposes and socializes the students to the work environment to help them transition from being a nursing student to a professional nurse. Socialization into the profession is an important part of the nursing students' education. The nurse preceptor teaches nursing student the culture of the hospital, values of staff, offi-

cial and informal responsibilities held by staff member, and the formal and informal norms that govern how the unit operates. These include fundamentals such as how the schedule works and how to use the hospital communication system, as well as how to deal with the realities of the healthcare environment. A great nurse must also be able to work well with others. Nursing personnel provide care within a broader context. They team up with nurses, physicians, therapists and other specialists involved in healthcare. This allows improvement in outcomes and provides support to patients' overall wellbeing. This underscores the importance of teamwork in the workplace (McCray *et al.*, 2012).

The nurse preceptor serves as a mentor for the students who left behind familiar environments and support systems and must establish a new firm foundation on which to flourish as a professional nurse. He/she should set aside some time for reflection. This allows the nurse preceptor and students to reflect on the patient care experience and explore in greater depth how and why specific patient care decisions were made. This time of reflection also allows students to reflect on ideas and feelings about what happened to the patient, how care was provided, and what lessons might be applied to future care. These sessions strengthen the relationship between the nurse preceptor and the students, fostering trust and improving communication. The nurse preceptors also play an important role by ensuring that clinical learning environment shapes students' perceptions of clinical learning environment as a potential future work site as stated by Billings and Halsted (2015). Mutair (2015) stated that one of the primary responsibilities of nurse preceptor is to supervise students as they give care to patients. The nurse preceptor is expected to be experts who are eager and capable of teaching effectively. They serve as resource persons for students in the absence of nurse educators (Wright, 2002). A favourable experience at the hospital with a focused loving role model might encourage learning as stated by Addis and Karadag (2014).

Nursing instructors in the clinical settings must be cognizant of and attentive to the anxiety that nursing students experience during clinical training. Under such circumstances, it is possible to find ways to reduce it so that nursing students can successfully apply their knowledge in a helpful and learning-friendly setting. Using humor is one strategy to

reduce nursing students' anxiety levels. When used as a teaching tool, humor can help students learn more effectively, focus their attention, build stronger social bonds, boost their self-esteem, and reduce stress and anxiety (Hyden-Miles, 2002). All in all, the nurse preceptor is responsible for evaluating nursing students in all areas of the clinical experience. The evaluation must continue to help these nursing students learn and determine learning outcomes. Constructive and timely feedback that fosters performance and growth is critical in the hospital setting (Billings and Halstead, 2015).

Methodology

The study utilized a cross-sectional quantitative study design to assess the role of nurse preceptors in the clinical learning environment for undergraduate nursing students at selected health facilities in Central and Eastern Kenya. The study sites were Meru, Nyeri and Chuka teaching and Referral Hospitals. The study population comprised nurse preceptors in the clinical learning environment for undergraduate nursing students at selected health facilities in Central and Eastern Kenya. 153 nurse preceptors were sampled and given a pre-coded self-administered questionnaire to collect quantitative data. Descriptive statistics were used to analyse the data and presented in frequencies and percentages using tables and graphs. Permission to conduct the study was obtained from Institutional Review and Ethics Committee in Moi University and NACOSTI, county commissioners, selected health facilities and universities before the study. Written informed consent was obtained from the study participants and confidentiality was assured.

Results and Discussion

Results

The researcher sought to find out the role of nurse preceptors in clinical learning environment for undergraduate nursing student at selected health facilities in Central and Eastern Kenya. The **figure 1** below shows that the majority of the respondents 137 (97.85%) indicated that their role is to welcome and orient nursing students as they report to the clinical placement while 129 (92.14%) indicated that it is their role to mentor and supervise nursing students. Another 129 (92.14%) indicated that it is their role to interact with the students in a friendly

way. 126 (90.00%) of the respondents mentioned carrying out induction for new nursing students as their role. 117 (83.57%) of the respondents mentioned assigning duties to nursing students as per the clinical objectives as their roles. 112 (80.00%) of the respondents indicated that their role is to mentor students while 89 (63.57%) indicated that their role is to countersign student documentation after performing procedures. 30(21.42%) of the respondents indicated that it is their role to assess students.

Discussion

The study aimed to assess the role of nurse preceptors in clinical learning environment for undergraduate nursing students. According to the findings, the majority of the respondents 137 (97.85%) indicated that their role is to welcome and orient nursing students as they report to the clinical placement. When nursing students are made to feel a part of the team in patient care, they adapt fast and learn faster. This is supported by Addis and Karadag (2014) who stated that nurses should take the lead in assisting students to adapt to a clinical environment, viewing them as team members. This enables the students to become acclimated to working in and adjusting to the clinical learning environment. *Mhango et al.* (2021) further said that preceptors should work with nursing students aiding them in gaining basic level of skills and socially adapt to the practice and profession, which is in support of Udlis (2008) who stated that preceptors have been utilized in orientation of new nursing students in Australia, Canada, Sweden and the USA. 129 (92.14%) indicated that it is their role to mentor and supervise nursing students. This is in line with Atakro and Gross (2016), who stated that mentorship and supervision of the nursing student in the clinical learning environment is considered one of the roles of nurse preceptors in the absence of faculty members. They have to work with students for a given period of time before the students are given an opportunity to perform procedures with minimal supervision. Mutair (2015) also stated that one of the primary responsibilities of a nurse preceptor is to supervise students as they give care to patients. The nurse preceptor is expected to be an expert who is eager and capable of teaching effectively. Another 129 (92.14%) indicated that it is their role to interact with the students in a friendly way. This is in line with Hyden-Miles (2002) who

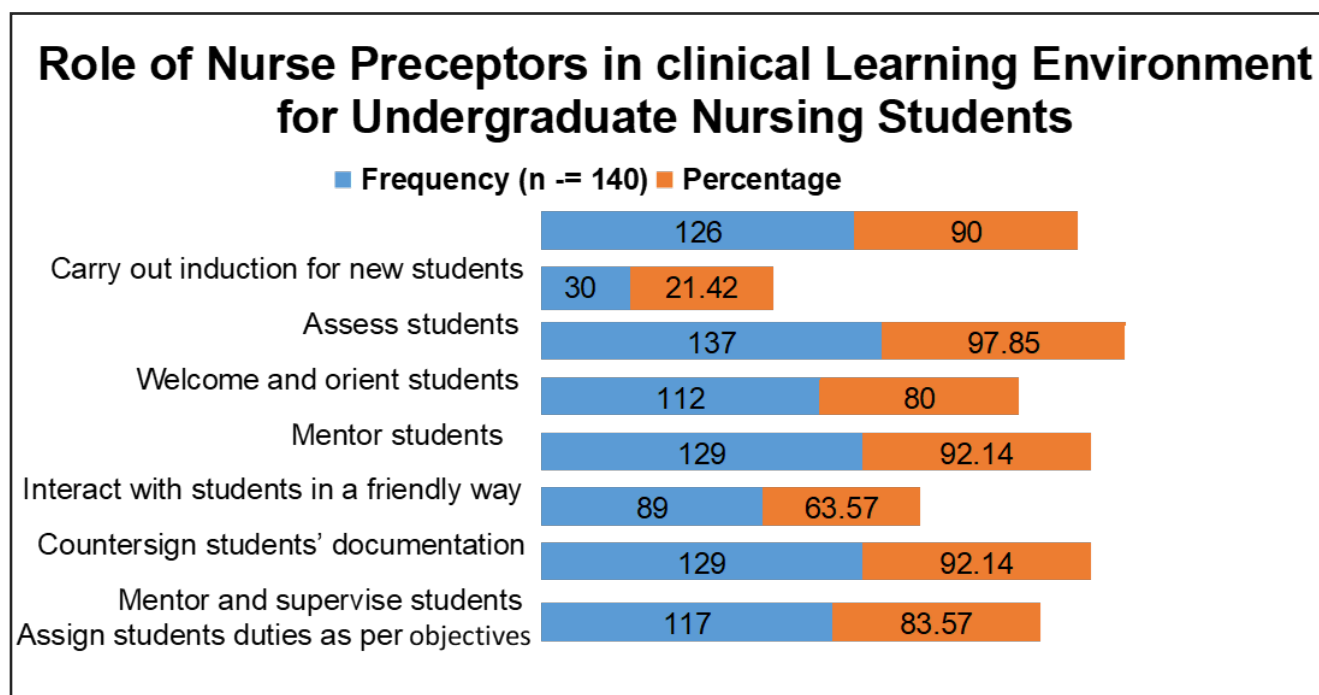


Figure 1: Role of Nurse Preceptors in Clinical Learning Environment for Undergraduate Nursing students

stated that nursing instructors in the clinical settings must be cognizant of and attentive to the anxiety that nursing students experience during clinical training. Under such circumstances, it is possible to find ways to reduce it so that nursing students can successfully apply their knowledge in a helpful and learning-friendly setting. Using humor is one strategy to reduce nursing students' anxiety levels. When used as a teaching tool, humor can help students learn more effectively, focus their attention, build stronger social bonds, boost their self-esteem, and reduce stress and anxiety.

126 (90.00%) of the respondents mentioned carrying out induction for new nursing students as their role. This finding is in line with *Bradshaw et al.* (2021) who stated that the role of a nurse preceptor is to work closely with nursing students in the hospital setting with the goal of helping the students learn the expected skills and be a competent nurse when they graduate. These nurse preceptors play a crucial role in developing nursing students' clinical knowledge and abilities since clinical practice is a big component in their educational experience. They have a dual role of caring for patients and precepting nursing students. Furthermore, they must continually improve their ability to apply theoretical knowledge and abilities in the practical context. This enables the students to become acclimated to working in and adjusting to the clinical learning environment. 117

(83.57%) of the respondents mentioned assigning duties to nursing students as per the clinical objectives as their roles. This was supported by *Irwin et al* (2018) who discussed a modern nursing education paradigm that aims to create professionals who are competent, confident, and reflect evidence-based nursing care and advocate for the patients and the profession. To prepare the nursing students along this paradigm, the nurse preceptor instructs students on nursing care of patients by teaching, mentoring and guiding them. The students then learn new roles within the clinical area using clinical learning objectives they have set with the aid of the nurse preceptors or nurse educators. According *Alraja* (2011), those questions related to patient care raised by nursing students should be answered positively by the nurse preceptor. These positive responses may positively impact the nursing students' experiences in the hands-on training environment as stated by *Happel and Gaskin* (2013). This leads to a beneficial positive relationship because they assist each other in the process of completing their responsibilities and objectives. The nurse preceptor in collaboration with the nursing officer in charge of the ward should establish a set of precepting goals and expectations. These goals and expectations should be discussed between the preceptor and the nursing students and worked out into a mutually agreed-upon plan with a time line to accomplish.

112 (80.00%) of the respondents indicated that their role is to mentor students. This is supported by Mutair (2015) who mentioned that supervision of nursing students in the clinical learning environment is one of the roles of the nurse preceptors in the hospitals. Irwin et al (2018) further said that a nurse preceptor can only instruct nursing students by mentoring them. The students then learn new roles within the clinical area using clinical learning objectives students have set with the aid of the nurse preceptors or nurse educators. 89 (63.57%) indicated that their role is to countersign student documentation after performing procedures. The nurse preceptor should work closely with the students in provision of care. When the patient's condition is stable, the nurse preceptor may choose to go over the plan of care with students before observing and evaluating the students' ability to implement it (Bradshaw et al., 2021).

30(21.42%) of the respondents indicated that it is their role to assess students. This is supported by Billings and Halstead (2015) who said that the nurse preceptor is responsible for evaluating nursing students in all areas of the clinical experience. The evaluation must continue to help these nursing students learn and determine learning outcomes. Constructive and timely feedback that fosters performance and growth is critical in the hospital setting.

Conclusion

The nurse preceptors were aware that they are wholly responsible for the cultivation and shaping of future confident and competent nursing workforce. The nurse preceptor roles mentioned in the study included receiving students in the clinical learning environment, orienting, inducting and assigning the patient to facilitate achievement of clinical learning objective. They are also responsible for evaluating them after their clinical rotation. Although clinical skills are necessary, nurse preceptors must also help students cultivate and internalize soft skills and personal attributes that include critical thinking and decision-making. Strong problem-solving abilities are one of the qualities that a nurse must have. This is because every day, nurses must be available to handle difficulties and manage complications involving sick patients, trauma cases, and other emergency situations. For successful management of daily activities, the nurse requires good problem-solving skills.

Integrity is a vital quality of a good nurse. This is because nurses should respect people, regulation and confidentiality in the hospital settings. They should consider the patient as a priority all the time. They should recognize the value of responsible stewardship, individual dignity, peace, justice, and reconciliation as per Marian University: Leighton School of Nursing, (2023).

Recommendation

This study recommended that nurse preceptors should be aware of the nursing students' learning objective for them to carry out preceptorship effectively. They should be knowledgeable, skilled and possess critical thinking as well as decision-making skills that enable them to prepare nursing students to be professional nurses in future. Nurse preceptors should continuously update themselves on their roles.

Acknowledgement

The authors thank nurse preceptors who participated in the study for their important contributions. We also thank Moi University who gave me (principal researcher) the opportunity to study in their institution. My sincere gratitude to every other person who facilitated the success of the study in one way or another.

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