

Exploring Student Nurses' Learning Experience in the Clinical Setting: A Literature Review

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Abstract

Background: Clinical practice is an important part of nursing education as it allows the student to improve their clinical skills, apply theory with practice and also supports their professional growth. It is known that student nurses perceive their clinical practice as rewarding but the clinical learning environment is also presented with numerous challenges. The aim of this literature review is to explore the student nurses' learning experiences in the clinical setting.

Methods: To search for the research articles, PubMed and Sciencedirect databases were used. The inclusion criteria for the research articles are that they must be published between 2010 until 2020, with open access in English Language. Research articles must be looking at student nurses' learning experiences. Nine articles were included in this review.

Conclusion: Nursing students learn best in an environment that encourages collaborative learning, trust and mutual respect, and a good student-nurse relationship influences the students' learning experience positively. Theory-practice gap, unclear role of student nurses in the clinical placement and negative emotions hindered the learning experience for the students. It is recommended that the clinical instructor shape the learning environment to meet the students' education needs and to motivate the staff nurses to take part in the student nurses' education to decrease the barriers of effective learning.

Key words: *clinical placement, clinical practice, learning experience, nursing, student nurse*

Introduction

The aim of this literature review is to explore the student nurses' learning experiences in the clinical setting. Nursing education provides a combination of theoretical and practical learning experiences in order to provide the student nurses with the knowledge, skills and attitudes that are essential to their future professional practice as a nurse ¹. From the clinical practice, students have the opportunity to make decisions, apply theories, prioritize those decisions, learn time management, and have the chance to practice their clinical skills ². Thus, clinical practice is an important part of their training ³ and it is seen

as the heart and essence of learning and education in nursing ⁴. It is well known that student nurses perceive their clinical practice as rewarding since it allows the students to improve their clinical skills, apply theory with practice and also support their professional growth ⁵.

The clinical learning environment plays a factor in affecting the students' learning. One of the criteria in a supportive learning environment is where the students are encouraged to be independent in their learning and are advised to be self-reliant ⁶, and this environment contribute to the students' positive learning as well as emotional well-being ⁷. However, the clinical learning

environment also presents numerous challenges to students⁵. In order to enhance the students' learning, the positive and negative aspects of the clinical practice for the student should be identified, by having an insight to the students' experiences of their learning process in the clinical practice⁸. Thus, the rationale of this literature review is to gain an understanding of the existing knowledge regarding student nurses' learning experiences.

To achieve the aim as stated, the objectives include: 1) to obtain the research articles related to the topic from the databases, 2) to synthesis and present the findings from the research articles by using themes, and 3) to identify and discuss the significant and implications of the findings to clinical teaching practice.

Methods: Search strategy and results

In order to search for the literature, there are several steps done before choosing the articles to be reviewed. The first step is to come up with the search terms that correspond to the objective of this literature review. The search terms include 'student nurse', 'learning experience' and 'clinical placement', words with similar meaning with these search terms were also used to ensure that the search would be broad, such as 'nursing student' was used for 'student nurse' and

using 'clinical attachment' and 'clinical environment' for 'clinical placement'. Boolean operators were used to synthesize the search terms such as "(nursing student OR student nurse) AND learning experience AND (clinical environment OR clinical attachment OR clinical placement)".

The databases used as the source of articles in this literature review were PubMed and ScienceDirect. The publication year was set from 2010 to 2020, to ensure that the articles are up to date, with open access which means that the articles are freely downloadable as this review is not funded. The number of records identified through database search from PubMed was 223 articles and ScienceDirect, 790 articles. The articles were then screened based on the title and abstract. The inclusion and exclusion criteria are shown in Table 1. The inclusion criteria for the articles are; it should be research articles such as quantitative study, qualitative study, mixed-method study, systematic review and thesis papers, but commentary and editorials articles will not be included. The articles should be in English Language, articles with other languages will not be included. The participants must be student nurses and not registered nurses nor non-nursing students; and the articles must be looking at the learning experiences in the clinical setting.

Table 1. Inclusion and exclusion criteria

| Inclusion criteria | Exclusion criteria |
|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Published from 10 years until present time · Open access articles · In English Language · Research articles (qualitative, quantitative, mixed-method, systematic review and thesis) · Participants are student nurses · Looking into learning experiences in the clinical setting | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Not in English Language · Editorial, commentary and newspaper articles · Participants are registered nurses · Participants are non-Nursing students · Not looking at learning experiences in the clinical setting |

After screening the title and abstract, 986 articles were excluded and 27 full-text articles were assessed for eligibility. From there, 18 more articles were excluded from this process due to not meeting the inclusion criteria where in those excluded articles, the participants were not nursing students and were not looking into the student nurses' learning experiences in the clinical setting. Therefore, only nine articles, of which eight are qualitative and one is quantitative study, were included in this literature review.

From the review, four themes have been identified which include 1) Conducive learning environment, 2) Student-nurse relationship, 3) Missing real purpose of clinical placement, with two subthemes a. educational confusion b. treated as workforce and performing routine tasks, and 4) Fear, anxiety and stress: Emotions felt during the clinical placement.

Results

Conducive learning environment

Conducive learning environment is important for the student nurses in order to have effective learning experiences. The students view a clinical environment as conducive and positive if they are able to learn and practice nursing skills and they concurred that it was highly influenced by the clinical setting and their clinical instructor⁸. There are other different factors that the students regard to being important for a conducive learning environment. The students expressed that they learn best in an environment that encourages collaborative learning, trust and mutual respect, they also explained that the enthusiasm and motivation of their instructor in teaching and patient care positively influence their clinical experience⁸. Whereas, in another study, the students believed that interpersonal communication between students, nurses, lectures, doctors and patients was one of the most important factors that affect their clinical learning, they described that communication with

their classmates in the educational environment was positive and satisfying⁹. Clinical practice is viewed as an opportunity for the students to practice what they have been taught during their classes and the students indicated that they can get the full benefit of clinical practice when they are assigned to the wards that offer care for patients with conditions that they have discussed in class¹⁰. This means that the ward that they are allocated in is one of the factors that affect their learning experience.

There are several issues that prevent conducive learning environment to occur. Students explained that they were unable to practice certain skills due to lack of resources, lack of diversity of cases and high number of students in one area^{8,11}. Also, the students were left unsupervised during clinical placement and as a result, adverse incidents sometimes occurred which confirmed that it is important for the student to be supervised during clinical placement¹². The implication of these findings suggest that in order to have conducive learning environment, there should be collaborative learning, trust, mutual respect and their instructor's enthusiasm also played a role in contributing to a conducive learning environment. Moreover, having interpersonal communication, limiting the number of students in the ward and having supervision are important to ensure that the students have a good learning experience.

Student-nurse relationship

The student-nurse relationship plays a role in the learning experience for the student nurses, it can either be a positive or negative experience depending on what kind of relationship that the student and nurse had. For a positive and friendly relationship between students and nurses it can increase the students' self-confidence and learning⁹, whereas poor student-nurse relationship had negative impact on the students' skill acquisition on the ward¹¹. Even though

Jahanpour et al.⁹ claimed that a positive and friendly student-nurse relationship can facilitate the students' learning, however, in their study, the relationship from the nurses was not respectful in such a way that the nurses did not trust the student's work and they blamed the student if anything happened in the ward. The excessive blame of students due to little mistake was also found in AliafsariMamaghani et al.¹³'s study and along with that, the students said that they are being monitored continuously by staff to mock and hassle them. In Magobolo&Dube¹⁴'s study on factors influencing high absenteeism found that 77.3% of the participants agreed that students are absent from the clinical area because they are ill-treated by senior staff. This indicates that students are being mistreated by the staff nurses in the clinical area. The nurses' negative attitude towards the student and their mistrust caused an unsupportive atmosphere which was unpleasant to the students¹⁰. It was suggested by Adjei et al¹¹ that the learning environment was not friendly due to the lack of bonding between the students and the staff nurses. This implied that the students should create a bond with the nurses as it would be very beneficial for their learning and there must be reasons for the nurses' negative behaviors toward the student but it was not stated in any of the articles reviewed.

Missing the real purpose of clinical placement

This theme describes how the students are missing the real purpose of doing clinical placement. The students had experience educational confusion which hindered their learning and they were also being treated as part of workforce; instead of learning experience, they perceived it as working experience.

a. Educational confusion

The students have their own learning objectives to achieve from their clinical placement but they were unable to achieve the goals and are confused on what they are really supposed to learn in the ward. The

same goes to the staff nurses in the ward; they just let the students do the routine tasks without actually teaching other skills to the students. As found in a study, the nurses were often unaware of the learning objective and their expectations of the student were different from the lecturers⁹ and it was also stated in another study that there was no clear description of tasks for the nurses and students so they did not know what they were responsible for¹⁰. The students wanted to achieve their learning objectives but the nurses prioritize in performing nursing skills⁸, meaning that this would prevent the students to achieve their own learning goals.

Another cause of confusion is that there is a theory-practice gap experienced by the student nurses in the clinical practice. The students in Nabolsi et al⁸ described their learning experience in the clinical practice as a reality shock, they explained that the theoretical classes focus on providing holistic care to the patients but it is very different in reality. It was also stated that the theory-practice gap in the clinical practice hindered clinical learning as the students have indicated that they had confusions on how to do procedure based on what they learnt in theory⁹, this is significant as Kaylani et al¹⁰ also stated that the mismatch between expectation and reality and the difference between theories and what they observe in clinical have intensified the students' confusion. Adjei et al¹¹ further support the existence of this theory-practice gap and they claimed that the nurses in the hospitals did not follow standard protocols in providing nursing care. This educational confusion, where the students and nurses were not clear on what their tasks are in the clinical practice and the presence of theory-practice gap, implied that there need to be an improvement made to the nursing education in order for the student and nurses to be clear of what they are expected to do and to ensure that there would not be theory-practice gap. The students in Nabolsi et al

⁸emphasized that the clinical instructor is responsible to shape the learning environment to provide opportunities to achieve their learning objectives. By making improvements, it can ensure that the students would be able to maximize their learning opportunities and experiences in the clinical setting.

b. Treated as workforce and performing routine tasks

Instead of learning in the ward, the student nurses are being misused in the ward to do the routine work of the staff nurses. This is because students are being viewed as additional nursing staff and nurses perceive the students' presence in the ward as a time when they can have some rest and thus, they only delegate the work to the students ¹². Also, from Magobolo&Dube¹⁴'s study on factors influencing high absenteeism rate of student nurses in clinical area, 70.5% of the respondents agreed that they are absent because they do not want to be treated as the workforce. This shows that there is confusion on the student's purpose of coming to the ward. Due to being viewed as staffs instead of students, this hinders their achievement of their learning outcome ^{11,12}. It is also difficult for the students to reach their learning outcomes because they are asked to perform routine tasks in the ward that are deemed by students as not educationally important ^{11,13}. This shows how the lecturers have to communicate clearly with the nurses in the ward to emphasize that the students are there to learn and not to be treated as an additional nursing staff as they are in fact, students.

Fear, anxiety and stress: Emotions felt during clinical placement

Fear, anxiety and stress are the common feelings found in the articles reviewed, that are experienced by the student nurses from their clinical learning experience ^{8,10,11,15,16}. Alves&Cogo¹⁵ found that students have anxiety when performing procedures

with patients and reported that the feeling interfered with doing the skills leading them to feel stress which hinders their learning. Similarly, Memarian et al. ¹⁶ also found the same results where students expressed anxiety when performing skills due to being observed by their clinical instructor and this have negative impact on learning. This shows how anxiety can negatively affect the student as well as their learning experience and this calls the attention to the readiness of the students for clinical placement.

Fear and stress often accompanied the feeling of anxiety. Kalyani et al ¹⁰suggested that the fear and stress in clinical learning environment could be rooted in unknowns, equipment, fear from harming the patients and receiving negative feedbacks from instructors, patient's guardian or nurses. However, in Adjei et al¹¹'s study, almost all of the 33 nursing students expressed their concern about stressful nature of the clinical placement due to the long distance to the hospital and that they have to attend lecture the next day. The argument made by Kalyani et al ¹⁰could be true as supported by Nabolsi et al ⁸where the students stated that the negative feelings started to reduce towards the last semester of their study as they feel more confident and better prepared. From this, the implication drawn is that students' psychological well-being are not looked after by lecturers or the nurses and an intervention needs to be done to ensure that the students are not negatively affected from their learning experience in the clinical placement.

Conclusion

In conclusion, nine research articles have been reviewed and the learning experiences of the student nurses' in the clinical setting have been explored. Four themes have emerged from the review 1) conducive learning environment, 2) student-nurse relationship, 3) missing the real purpose of clinical placement and 4) fear, anxiety and stress: emotions

felt during clinical placement. An environment that encourages collaborative learning, trust, mutual respect, and instructor's enthusiasm can allow the student to learn best but there are several issues that prevent a good learning environment to occur such as lack of resources, lack diversity of cases and high number of students. Additionally, a good student-nurse relationship is important as it will increase the student's learning but it was found in a number of articles that students are being mistreated in the ward which hindered their learning. The students are also unable to achieve their learning objectives as they were unsure what they have to learn and the nurses are also unaware about the students' learning objectives. The presence of theory-practice gap further intensified the students' confusion as what they have learnt in the theory classes were not the same in real life situation. The students were also treated as additional staff and were asked to perform basic routine task that was not educationally important from the students' perspective. From the clinical placement experience, the students experienced negative emotions such as fear, anxiety and stress from various factors which also prevent them from maximizing their learning opportunities and this calls for attention to the students' readiness for their clinical placement.

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