A Descriptive, Cross- Sectional Study Analyzing the Characteristics of an Effective Clinical Instructor: Perceptions of Baccalaureate Nursing Students

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Abstract

This study explored baccalaureate students' perception of the characteristics of an effective clinical instructor utilizing the Whitehead Characteristics of Effective Clinical Instructor Rating Scale. The instrument is a 39 item 5 point Likert-type scale that measures, interpersonal relationships, personality traits, teaching practices, knowledge and experience, and evaluation procedures. This descriptive, cross-sectional study utilized a sample of 110randomly selected second and third year students from an urban school of nursing. Results showed that students regarded all characteristics as important (m= 4.05 to 4.76). A comparison of the means for the characteristics of an effective clinical instructor by year group, showed significant differences between the year groups for all five categories (p= 0.0001). A comparison of the mean characteristics of effective clinical instructors by age groups revealed statistically significant differences between the mean scores of interpersonal relationship (p= .005), personality traits (p= .024), teaching practices (p= .027) and evaluation procedures (p= .047). Students placed high levels of importance on the characteristics of the Clinical instructor. Therefore to ensure a suitable environment for learning, nursing schools could establish interactive feedback sessions with students and clinical instructors to ensure both groups have an understanding of their expectations of each other.

Keywords: Clinical instructors in nursing, Role and responsibilities of clinical instructors in nursing, Characteristics of an effective or good clinical instructor, Clinical nursing education

Introduction

Clinical instructors creatively plan the clinical learning experiences for students and facilitate students in planning, implementing and evaluating patient care. Sometimes referred to as "Nursing preceptors", ''Clinical teaching associates'' or ''Clinical preceptors'', they provide individualized experiential learning opportunities to nursing students (Bott, Mohide & Lawlor, 2011). Clinical instructors are seen as teachers who are present in the clinical setting, working alongside the students; these individuals should be experts in both clinical and theory (Dahlke et al., 2012). They are expected to display a high level of knowledge and skill in nursing whether deriving from their education or extensive clinical experience. Great emphasis should be placed on delivering this clinical education to students in the best way possible (Ali, 2012). At a particular university based school of nursing, clinical instructors are full-time members of faculty who are mainly responsible for the development of nursing skills of the students and clinical teaching in the clinical setting.

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In the clinical skills laboratory the Clinical Instructors work with small groups of students to facilitate their development of psychomotor and affective skills through demonstrations and return demonstrations. Their role is also pivotal in transferring theoretical knowledge acquired in the classroom into the real clinical setting.

The position of clinical instructors considered clinical experts, was a new model in this school of nursing, developed to address the long standing shortage of nurses in the clinical areas and the quality of the supervision of their nursing students. The significant need for well-prepared nurses was a priority to the institution; hence it is important that the effectiveness of clinical instructors be assessed. This study therefore explored the characteristics of effective clinical instructors from the BScN students' perspective. The results of this study may be useful in informing best practices for Nursing Education at the BScN level.

Literature

Clinical instructor is one of the many terms used to describe the teachers in clinical education in nursing. Since the 18th century clinical instructors have been a vital component to nursing education (Brown et al., 2008 as cited in Dahlke et al., 2012). Clinical instructors play a vital role in the students experience and they can either help or hinder the students learning and self-efficacy (Rowbotham & Owen, 2015). Clinical instructors have been an important part of the teaching/learning process in other health sciences and humanistic disciplines and appear to be similar to that of clinical instructors in nursing. The behaviours and skills that promote effective clinical instruction include matching clinical teaching skills to student understanding and experience, having good communication skills, providing constructive feedback, facilitating a student-centered environment, and training clinical instructors (Levy et al., 2009). According to Valiee, Moridi, Khaledi & Garibi (2016) the instructors teaching performance is an important contributing factor to the quality of clinical education. In Speech & Language Pathology, the clinical supervisor and the students conduct problem solving activities and evaluations to build the best learning environment (McGovern and Dean 1991, cited in Levy et al., 2009). In Mental Health "the supervisor's responsibility is to facilitate the student's educational and individual growth while supporting their clinical independence" (Winstanely & White 2003, cited in Levy et al., 2009 p. 9).

The development of nursing students into professional nurses is dependent on the quality of the clinical learning environment (Ali, 2012). The relationship between the student and the clinical instructor greatly influences students' educational development because it can affect students' integration of theory into the clinical practice (Ali, 2012). Nursing students model their behaviours from those of their clinical instructors as they learn from their behaviours, knowledge, experience and skills. Research has suggested that when clinical instructors are perceived as caring, nursing students develop the same caring ability (Wade 2006, cited in Ali, 2012); this further highlights the importance of the nursing student-clinical instructor relationship and the vital role this relationship plays in clinical education.

The role of the clinical instructor in the clinical area was explored qualitatively by Duffy & Watson (2001) in a qualitative study in Scotland; instructors described their role as being an "advisor", "supporter", "regulator", "interpreter" and "networker" for the students. The inter-personal relationship between the student and the clinical instructor greatly influences students' educational development because it can affect students' integration of theory into the clinical practice (Ali, 2012).

Characteristics describe the traits of a clinical instructor and delineate the qualities an effective clinical instructor should possess. A number of studies found that clinical instructors should possess characteristics of teaching, positive attitudes, be skilled in clinical procedures, eloquent, be a role model, and have a positive personality. A phenomenological study by Papp, Markanken and Von-Bonsdroff (2003) explored student nurses' perceptions of clinical experiences. Results showed that from the perspective of the students, clinical instructors must display effective clinical teacher characteristics in order to facilitate the students' entry and learning in the versatile world of practice.

The most effective teaching strategies of clinical instructors from the students' perspectives according to Valiee, Moridi, Khaledi & Garibi (2015) 'treating students, clients and colleagues with respect' and 'being eager for guiding students and manage their problems'. Tang, Chou and Chiang (2005) further supported that students' perceived that, it is the teachers' attitudes towards the student rather than personal abilities that differentiates "effective" from "ineffective teachers". A descriptive co relational study conducted by Mohamed-Nabil Ismail, Mohamed-Nabil Aboushady & Eswi (2016) using a convenient sample of 333 Baccalaureate students at different levels, reported the students perceived clinical teaching abilities, nursing competence and evaluation to student understanding and experience as being effective characteristics of a clinical instructor. Also, the nursing students considered the personality and interpersonal relationship as being very important characteristics to provide support and encouragement to the student during clinical practice

A descriptive study by Gignac-Caille and Oermann (2001) explored students and faculty perception of the characteristics of effective clinical teachers in the associate degree nursing program (ADN). They used a probability sample of 292 nursing students and 59 clinical instructors and the Nursing Clinical Effectiveness Inventory. The characteristics identified were that an effective clinical instructor communicates clear expectations, corrects students without belittling them, is approachable, demonstrates clinical skill and judgment, explains clearly and is well prepared for teaching.

Another qualitative descriptive study identifying students' perspectives of the characteristics used to judge the quality of a classroom nursing instructor was conducted by Berg and Lindseth (2004). A purposive sample of 171 nursing students completed a questionnaire regarding personal demographics, characteristics of an effective and ineffective instructor, and how their grade and the amount of coursework affected their opinion of the instructor. A content analysis was performed to categorize the characteristics that emerged, as a result, teaching methods, personality, and presentation of course materials were the three primary characteristics of an effective instructor, according to the students' responses, with personality being most important (Berg & Lindseth, 2004). In another study by Heshmati-Nabavi and Vanaki (2010) using the Grounded Theory method, semi-structured interviews were carried out to collect data from 10 nursing students. The findings revealed that the characteristics of an effective clinical instructor are: personal traits, meta-cognition, making clinical learning enjoyable, being a source of support and being a role model.

Research Questions

1. What are the characteristics of an effective clinical instructor from the perspective of BScN students?
2. Is there a difference in the perceptions of the identified characteristics of an effective clinical instructor from the perspective of BScN students based on the year they were enrolled in the programme?
3. Is there a difference in the perceptions of the identified characteristics of an effective clinical instructor from the perspective of BScN students based on their age groups?

Theoretical Framework

Albert Bandura's Social Learning Theory guided this study and it describes how individuals learn by modelling (Quinn, 1995). This type of learning transpires when one scrutinizes another person's behaviour. Ali (2012) postulated that the relationship between the student and the clinical instructor greatly influences students' educational development because it can affect students' integration of theory into the clinical practice. Social learning gives nursing students the opportunity to learn practical skills as well as professional attitudes from their teacher (Quinn, 1995). Research has suggested that when clinical instructors are perceived as caring, nursing students develop the same caring ability (Wade 2006 cited in Ali, 2012). This shows that the quality of the interaction with the student and the clinical instructor greatly impacts the learning outcomes as these students learn by modelling their clinical instructors in order to develop their own skills.

Research Design

Study Design and Population

This quantitative study utilized a descriptive, cross-sectional design. The study was conducted at an urban school of nursing which offers a 4-year Baccalaureate programme. The population studied was 2nd and 3rd year nursing students. This population was chosen because students at this level in the programme were developing basic nursing skills in the clinical skills laboratory and had more direct contact time with clinical instructors.

Sampling

The population consisted of 253 students who were currently utilizing the skills laboratory. The calculated sample size was 153 based on a 95% confidence interval, a 5% margin of error and a response distribution of 50%. An additional 5% was added based on the expected non-response. Hence the final sample size was 165. Simple random sampling was used to select students. The sampling frame consisted of the combined names, numbered consecutively, of the two year groups (n=253). Using a random sample generator, 165 random numbers and names, from 1 to 253, was selected for inclusion in the study. Consent was sought only from those students. The inclusion criteria were students in 2nd and 3rd year enrolled in the BScN programme. The exclusion criteria included the 1st and 4thyear students, and those 2nd and 3rd year students who were on leave of absence or sick leave.

Data Collection Instrument

After reviewing the literature, the Whitehead Characteristics of Effective Clinical Instructor Rating Scale (WCECIRS) (Whitehead, 1997), was identified as an appropriate tool for the proposed study. Permission was received from the author to use and modify the tool. The instrument was a self-administered questionnaire with two sections. The first section elicited demographic data from the respondent and the second section comprised of 39, 5-point Likert-type scale items to measure: a) interpersonal relationships which comprised of 11 questions, b) personality traits which comprised of 7 questions, c) teaching practices which comprised of 7 questions, d) knowledge and experience which comprised of 9 questions, and e) evaluation procedures which comprised of 5 questions. Scores of 1 to 5 were assigned to Likert scale items with 5 indicating most important and 1 indicating not important. The scale also included an optional open ended comment area to allow the respondents to report any other observation that might not be captured by the tool. The questionnaire took approximately 15-20 minutes to complete. The Whitehead Characteristics of Effective Clinical Instructor Rating Scale had been found to be reliable by Whitehead (1997) and showed results of Cronbach's α coefficient ranging between 0.920- 0.932. For this study the tool was pre tested among a sample of 10 students in a similar population that were not included in the sample to ensure that it was readable and culturally relevant. The Cronbach's α coefficient was 0.911, which showed that the tool was reliable and/or consistent and effectively measure the constructs in this population.

Data Collection Procedure

Approval was received from the University's Ethics Committee to which the school is attached, and permission from the Head of Department at the school of nursing to conduct the study. Once permission was received the researcher met with the two groups of students separately to give general information about the study and explain the selection process. All selected3rd year students were met at a mutually convenient time and all selected 2nd year student were met in 5 different small sub-groups post examinations to conduct the consent process and administer the questionnaire. Participants received an envelope with the questionnaire and after completion; they returned them to the researcher without any identifying information.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using the SPSS version 22. Scores of 1 to 5 were assigned to Likert scale items with 5 indicating most important and 1 indicating not important. The highest possible mean score an item could receive was a 5.0 indicating highest importance. The mean score for each of the five categories; a) evaluation procedures b) knowledge and experience c) interpersonal relationships d) teaching practices and e) personality traits was calculated by summing the students' ratings, divided by the total number of students who rated the category. The results are presented by year groups for comparison. The correlation coefficient was determined between age and the five categories for rating the instructors 'characteristics. Analysis of variance (ANOVA) was calculated for the five categories by the year group and age group. A test result at 0.05 levels was considered statistically significant. There was an additional open ended comment section, which was listed in narrative form by the researcher, it elicited the students' opinions which was collated and reviewed for dominant themes. The final comment area of the tool was analyzed qualitatively, where themes were identified to elicit which of the 5 categories they were related to on the WCEIRS.

Results

Demographic profile of the participants

Table 1: Demographic profile of students

	2nd Year		3rd Year		Total	
Characteristics	N	%	N	%	N	%
Sex						
male	2	5.7	6	8	8	7.3
Female	33	94.3	69	92	102	92.7
Age group (years)						
≤21	18	51.4	22	29.7	40	36.4
22-25	15	42.9	41	55.4	56	50.9
26-30	2	5.7	11	14.9	13	11.8

Of the 163 participants 110 responded representing 67.4 % response rate. The reason for this low response rate was due to the collection of data during the one-week break when students were preparing for final examinations. Of the 110 students, 35 (32%) were 2nd year students and 75 (68%) were 3rd year students. The majority of respondents were female (92.7%) and below the age 26 years (87.3%).The age distribution was different among the two year groups with most of the year 2 students <22 years and (51.4%) and most of the year 3 students 22 years and over (70.3%). (See Table 1).

Characteristics of an Effective Clinical Instructor

Table 2: Means score (± SD) of the characteristics of a clinical instructor

Questions	Mean (± SD)
Interpersonal relationship	
Demonstrates open and honest communication with students	4.72 ± 0.45
Conveys to students that teacher is concerned about them	4.51 ± 0.71
Clearly communicates expectations	4.76 ± 0.49
Is readily accessible to students	4.75 ± 0.44
Demonstrates concern and empathy	4.52 ± 0.57
Is sensitive to students' needs and feelings	4.60 ± 0.53
Demonstrates flexibility in dealing with students	4.66 ± 0.48
Provides support and encouragement	4.68 ± 0.47
Recognizes individuality of students	4.63 ± 0.54
Respects confidentiality of student relationship	4.71 ± 0.48
Promotes self-confidence in students	4.70 ± 0.48
Personality traits	
Demonstrates enthusiasm	4.46 ± 0.71
Accepts criticism constructively	4.59 ± 0.58
Is organized	4.76 ± 0.43
Is energetic	4.27 ± 0.74
Demonstrates a sense of humor	4.05 ± 0.96
Is willing to admit a mistake	4.64 ± 0.49
Presents a neat appearance	4.23 ± 0.82
Teaching practices	
Clinical assignments relate to course objectives	4.67 ± 0.48
Alleviates student anxiety in the clinical area	4.64 ± 0.56
Demonstrates genuine interest in patients and their care	4.65 ± 0.57
Expectations are clearly defined	4.68 ± 0.49
Provides appropriate and timely feedback	4.66 ± 0.48
Remains with student during stressful times	4.46 ± 0.62
Student feels free to ask questions or ask for help	4.69 ± 0.47
Knowledge and experience	
Identifies basic principles of nursing practice	4.73 ± 0.45
Demonstrates technical skill in nursing	4.71 ± 0.51
Makes student aware of professional responsibility	4.63 ± 0.56
Communicates knowledge to students	4.72 ± 0.45
Is well informed in the area of clinical practice	4.71 ± 0.46
Displays confidence in ability as a professional nurse	4.68 ± 0.54
Helps student identify alternatives in providing safe and effective care	4.64 ± 0.50
Demonstrates a willingness to help	4.65 ± 0.53
Performs as a positive role model	4.58 ± 0.55
Evaluation procedures	
Allows student an opportunity to practice before evaluating	4.72 ± 0.45
Demonstrates objectivity and fairness in evaluation of students	4.70 ± 0.48
Offers constructive criticism without devaluing student	4.71 ± 0.46
Demonstrates concern with learning rather than testing	4.68 ± 0.53
Gives credit for a job well done	4.60 ± 0.58

The items under each category were explored and the mean scores ± standard deviation of each item was determined. The mean scores for both year groups ranged from 4.05 – 4.76. (See Table 2)

Comparison of the characteristics of an effective clinical instructor

Table 3: Comparison of the characteristics of an effective clinical instructor by year group

	2nd Year		3rd Year		
Category	Rank	Mean ± SD	Rank	Mean ± SD	P- value
Interpersonal relationship	1	4.33 ± 0.29	4	4.80 ± 0.25	<0.0001
Teaching practices	2	4.26 ± 0.26	3	4.81 ± 0.27	<0.0001
Knowledge and experience	3	4.25 ± 0.26	2	4.87 ± 0.29	<0.0001
Evaluation procedures	4	4.22 ± 0.27	1	4.90 ± 0.25	<0.0001
Personality traits	5	4.17 ± 0.23	5	4.55 ± 0.51	<0.0001

The mean ranking of the five categories on WCECIRS were different for 2nd and 3rd year students. Table 3 shows that the rankings were inverted for second and third year students with the highest rank for 2nd year students' being interpersonal relationship while this was ranked 4th for the 3rd students. Although there were differences in how each category was ranked, the category personality traits were ranked as being the least important on WCECIRS. Students'-test was calculated for each of the five categories by the year groups, revealing statistically significant difference between the 2nd and 3rd year students' mean importance ratings.

Comparison of the characteristics of an effective clinical instructor by age groups

Table 4: Comparison of the characteristics of an effective clinical instructor by age group

Age range		Interpersonal relationship	Personality traits	Teaching practices	Knowledge and experience	Evaluation procedures
≤21 (n=40)	Mean	4.53	4.29	4.54	4.62	4.60
	SD	.343	.448	.400	.413	.426
22-25 (n=56)	Mean	4.69	4.46	4.65	4.66	4.67
	SD	.332	.472	.361	.409	.410
26-30 (n=13)	Mean	4.86	4.68	4.85	4.87	4.92
	SD	.273	.421	.218	.283	.192
	P-value	.005	.024	.027	.134	.047

ANOVA was used to test for differences in mean scores of each of the five categories of WCECIRS according to age group and it was observed that as the students got older the mean values increased and this was so for each character. The category personality traits had the lowest mean ranking (m=4.29-4.68). There were statistically significant differences between the mean scores of interpersonal relationship (p= .005), personality traits (p= .024), teaching practices (p= .027) and evaluation procedures (p= .047). However for knowledge and experiences there was no statistical significant difference between the mean score in comparison with the age groups of the students (p= .134). (See Table 4).

The following additional comments were made by seven of the participants:

1. ''Instructors should be able to provide additional information other than what is on the checklist, and be able to give real life scenario or link what is being taught to real life experiences''.
2. ''From my experience clinical instructors should be as informed as the lecturers because sometimes they don't prepare sufficiently for the students''.
3. ''They advocate for us when the need arise''.
4. ''There is too much devaluing of students''.
5. ''The clinical instructor is supposed to portray an example of values and professionalism towards their job''.
6. ''An effective clinical instructor needs to help, teach and correct me in a professional manner''.
7. ''Be mindful of the level year experience and knowledge for the students based on institutional curriculum''.

Discussion

Demographic data were gathered for every participant in the study population. There were more females than males for both year groups and both year groups had more students below the age of 26, showing that majority of the respondents were mainly youths, which might suggest that they would have fresh new thoughts and innovative ways to accomplish certain goals. Each item on the questionnaire was examined and the students rated the item 'communicate expectations' under the category interpersonal relationship and the item' being organized' under the category personality traits as the most important characteristics. Additionally, the item 'sense of humour' under the category personality traits was rated the least important characteristics.

The results indicated that there was statistically significant difference in the perceptions of the characteristics of an effective clinical instructor between the 2nd year and 3rd year students. Both year groups mean ranking of the five categories were different. The 2nd year students' ranked the categories in the following order a) interpersonal relationship as most important, followed by b) teaching practices c) knowledge and experiences d) evaluation procedures e) personality traits, while 3rd year students ranked a) evaluation procedures as most important, followed by b) knowledge and experience c) teaching practices d) interpersonal relationship e) personality traits. However both year groups ranked personality traits as being the least important on WCECIRS, which reveals that both year groups believe that personality traits is the least important characteristic of an effective clinical instructor.

The year groups conversely differ in the order of importance of the other categories, showing that they have varying ideas on which characteristics they place importance. This suggests that at different levels of their educational training, students have an appreciation for different qualities. Students in 2nd year may need more of a nurturing experience while in 3rd year they have become more accustomed to the process and require less interactive connection with the clinical instructor. This finding is congruent with a study conducted by Bryan, Lindo, Anderson-Johnson and Weaver (2014) where ''faculty members are viewed as nurturers within the academic setting and may be able to influence third year students' behaviours through the formation of positive interpersonal relationship'', which is also a characteristic that was examined. However the findings are slightly different from a study done by Mohamed-Nabil Ismail, Mohamed-Nabil Aboushady &Eswi (2016) where highest ranked clinical instructor's characteristics as perceived by the students, was teaching ability category followed by nursing competence and evaluation respectively.

Additionally, analyses of variances were calculated for the five categories by the age groups. There was a statistically significant difference between four of the five categories and the age groups of the students such as: interpersonal relationships, personality traits, teaching practices and evaluation procedures. However mean scores were similar for the category knowledge and experiences by age groups. It was observed that for all the categories the mean scores increased as the age group increased, so the older students rate each category higher than the younger students. All categories were given high mean ratings, which suggest that irrespective of the category, students felt it important that clinical instructors possess these characteristics. It is highly possible that age may be correlated to year group, hence the similar differences seen. The additional comments that were given by the students were similar or can be integrated to the five categories of the tool used. The following comments "instructors should be able to provide additional information other than what is on the checklist, and be able to give real life scenario or link what is being taught to real life experiences'' and ''from my experience clinical instructors should be as informed as the lecturers because sometimes they don't prepare sufficiently for the students'' can be integrated into to the knowledge and experience category. The comments ''they advocate for us when the need arise'' and ''there is too much devaluing of students of the school being studied'' can be integrated into the category interpersonal relationship. Other comments made such as; ''an effective clinical instructor needs to help, teach and correct me in a professional manner' 'and ''the clinical instructor is supposed to portray an example of values and professionalism towards their job'' and ''be mindful of the level year experience and knowledge for the students based on institutional curriculum'' can be integrated into the category teaching practices.

Conclusion

The findings of the study suggested that there are statistical significant differences between the perceptions of the characteristics of an effective clinical instructor between the 2nd and 3rd year students. This study is congruent with past research done which has identified the characteristics of a clinical instructor (Papp, Markanken & Von-Bonsdroff 2003; Heshmati-Nabavi & Vanaki 2010; Gignac-Caille & Oermann 2001).

The differences between the mean scores for the categories based on the age groups of the students were small, suggesting that all the characteristics of an effective clinical instructor identified were important for all age groups of students that participated in the study. However it was recognized that as the age group increased the mean score increased as well for all the categories, suggesting that as the students got older they placed more importance on each of the categories. Having workshops where feedback from the students is communicated to the clinical instructors and vice versa will help to ensure that expectations of both groups are met, thus ensuring a better learning environment.

Study Limitations

This study was conducted at one school of nursing therefore, the results were only representative of the population under study, and cannot be generalized, especially since the desired sample size of 165 was not obtained. Data was collected using a self-administered questionnaire which has been shown to have low response rates and the researcher was not able to observe any visual cues or any body language that may display the students' true feelings towards a particular question, which may have impacted on the response received from the population. According to Paulhus and Vazire (2007) even when respondents are doing their best to be straightforward and intuitive, their self-reports are subjected to various sources of inaccuracy. Hence self-reported instruments allow for limitations such as self-deception and memory.

Implications for Nursing Education

The findings of this study showed the characteristics of an effective clinical instructor and the level of importance the students placed on each characteristic. This study can assist nursing schools to focus their orientation and continued education of clinical instructors into adapting these characteristics and be used to inform the content of clinical instructor programmes. The characteristics identified can also be incorporated into the staff evaluation of the clinical instructors. In addition, educators should consider these results when teaching, to note the emphasis needed for the various year groups.

Recommendations for Future Research

1. To increase the generalizability of this research, the study should be repeated with a larger sample size, with other year groups and at other nursing schools.
2. Explore the characteristics of an effective clinical instructor from the faculty members' perspective.
3. Compare the perceptions of the students as well as the faculty members' perception of the characteristics of an effective clinical instructor.

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