

The Journey of Nursing Students in Clinical Practice? A Qualitative Study

Mawada A. Bafageeh¹, Yara T. AlAboud², Joudi T. AlAttas³, Lamees S. Jenaid⁴,
Ghidaa A. Farea⁵ & Maram A. Banakhar⁶

Abstract

Background: Clinical supervision plays a key role in clinical practice. However, ineffective clinical supervision (i.e. evaluative rather than instructive) can have a negative impact on students' clinical learning experience. **Study aim:** This study explored the experiences of nursing students during their clinical practice. **Method:** Our study employed a qualitative descriptive research design, conducted with fourth year nursing students within the faculty of nursing. The data were collected by using three focus group interviews. The sample size consisted of sixteen student nurses based on data saturation, with the data analyzed using thematic analysis. **Results:** The analysis demonstrated that nursing students encountered several issues related to ineffective supervision during their clinical practice, i.e. a lack of availability of clinical instructors and the need to answer too many questions in front of patients. **Conclusion:** This study will prove beneficial for enhancing the baccalaureate nursing program at the faculty of nursing, as well as assisting course coordinators in improving their courses to successfully fulfil learning outcomes, so leading to increased student satisfaction.

Key words: clinical practice, nursing students, clinical supervision, theory practice gap.

1. Introduction

Clinical education is defined as “a key area that explains the importance of a student’s performance in the clinical setting and provides the students a place to practice their skills, establish their professional identity, enhance their knowledge, and apply the theoretical and practical knowledge in the clinical setting” (Abu Salah, Aljerjawy & Salama, 2018). Clinical experience thus forms an essential aspect of nursing education, enabling students to gain the skills to undertake clinical practice alongside an understanding the clinical basis of practice (Sharif & Masoumi, 2005). The success of education within a clinical setting is impacted by several factors, including students and instructors, as well as the healthcare professionals employed at the hospital, and the physical surroundings. This current study also addresses the topic of clinical supervision, which is an ongoing systematic process that both encourages and supports improved professional practice (Sharif & Masoumi, 2005). In addition, in consideration of the existing gap between theory and practice, theory is defined as a set of statements (or principles) devised to explain a group of facts or phenomena. Theory consists of an aspect that has been repeatedly tested, or widely accepted, and can be used to make predictions about a natural phenomenon. Practice is thus defined as the act (or process) of undertaking performance or action (Ajani & Moez, 2011). This indicates that the theory-practice gap will arise if students are unable to put any theory they have acquired into practice.

A number of challenges have been identified by a study conducted to explore students’ experiences related to clinical learning environments and factors impacting on the clinical learning process. Firstly, students identified the negative impact of a lack of sufficient feedback on their performance when being asked questions by their instructors in front of patients, particularly since this led to fears that these patients might lose trust in the students’ ability should any answers prove incorrect.

¹ Faculty of Nursing, King Abdul-Aziz University, Jeddah, Saudi Arabia

² Faculty of Nursing, King Abdul-Aziz University, Jeddah, Saudi Arabia.

³ Faculty of Nursing, King Abdul-Aziz University, Jeddah, Saudi Arabia.

⁴ Faculty of Nursing, King Abdul-Aziz University, Jeddah, Saudi Arabia.

⁵ Faculty of Nursing, King Abdul-Aziz University, Jeddah, Saudi Arabia.

⁶ Assistant Professor, Faculty of Nursing, King Abdul-Aziz University, Jeddah, Saudi Arabia.

Secondly, students complained of the negative impact of a lack of supervision on an ability to maintain their full attention during clinical hours, which prevented them from fulfilling their clinical objectives. Thirdly, students reported that differences between practices learnt in a laboratory and those applied in a clinical setting resulted in a lack of confidence during practice. Finally, the motivation of students was also impacted by fear of a low evaluation (Arkan, Ordin, & Yilmaz, 2018).

A further qualitative study exploring nursing students' experience during clinical practice found that students experienced considerable stress as a result of their lack of clinical experience, along with being faced by unfamiliar areas, and fear of making mistakes, as well as being evaluated by faculty members during their initial clinical practice. In addition, the majority of these students viewed their instructors as playing a role that was evaluative rather than instructive. The study concluded that clinical instructors were important for promoting the confidence of student nurses, along with enhancing their socialization, and encouraging independence, all of which leads to clinical competency. It also noted that a lack of proper clinical supervision can prevent students from attaining adequate clinical competency. In addition, student nurses tended to be given instructions that diverged from the theory with which they were familiar. This led to a lack of satisfaction with the clinical component of their training, particularly in relation to their clinical experience (Sharif & Masoumi, 2005).

Clinical practice is a crucial learning environment for student nurses to develop effective skills and knowledge. However, the students highlighted several issues impacting on their ability to learn during their clinical practice. For example, a qualitative study exploring students' experiences during clinical practice at a nursing college in Limpopo Province, using interviews with eleven students in their fourth year of nursing, identified the following aspects as negatively impacting on their practical experience: (1) the gap between theory and practice; (2) the absence of interpersonal relationships between individuals; and (3) poor learning support. It also revealed the constraints and needs of such undergraduate students in the clinical learning environment. This demonstrated that nursing students valued being accompanied and supervised by instructors as an important component of professional clinical learning. Consequently, clinical supervisors and RN need to strive to provide an environment within clinical settings that can prove beneficial for enhancing students' learning experience during their clinical practice (Mabuda, 2008).

Furthermore, a qualitative study in Nigeria explored the experience of nursing students as they attempted to apply their classroom education in seven separate clinical learning contexts, focusing on eighty of the 294 students taking their final year (Odetola, Oluwasola, Pimmer, Dipeolu, et al., 2018). The study illustrated several points negatively influencing the students' practical experience, including: (1) the gap between theory and practice; (2) the absence of interpersonal relationships between individuals; and (3) poor learning support. In addition, a mixed method study carried out in Australia sought to identify the existence of any relationship between the training of nursing students during simulated clinical laboratory sessions and their experience during clinical practice (Maginnis & Croxon, 2010). The study employed a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews with nine student nurses, concluding that there was a vital need to apply a combination of lectures and clinical laboratory sessions, alongside the provision of clinical placements and hands-on experience. Moreover, such uniformity between the aspects that could be taught and those acquired by experience was considered essential to ensure safe practice among nursing students (Maginnis & Croxon, 2010).

In addition, a quantitative cross-sectional design study was conducted in Gaza to assess the presented role of clinical nurse instructors in bridging the gap between theory and practice from the perspective of nursing students (Abu Salah, Aljerjawy & Salama, 2018). The data were collected from students working in governmental hospitals within the Gaza strip, with the results demonstrating the crucial role of instructors in reducing the theory-practice gap when following up the progress of students in such departments. The researchers reported that the use of theoretical teaching, as opposed to clinical training, resulted in the creation of a wider gap between theory and practice. Moreover, the results also demonstrated the reality of such a gap, as well as its capacity for improvement if clinical instructors created a positive learning environment, in particular by updating their skills and knowledge of clinical practice. Likewise, a literature review of eleven studies was carried out in China to identify the presence of a theory-practice gap in nursing in Macau, including the size of any such gap. Furthermore, the review examined factors relating to the application of nursing theory to practice, revealing that the size of the gap in Macau was also identified in other countries as being the same, if not greater (Mao, 2015).

The clinical learning environment has been verified as a crucial aspect of a nursing program capable of providing students with unique learning opportunities, particularly those relating to classroom theory and skills added to practice using real life situations (Abu Salah, Aljerjawy & Salama, 2018). It is therefore vital to coordinate theory and clinical practice, in order to ensure student nurses gain a vivid picture of the factors outlined when being taught theory.

The above discussion confirms that the current study will enhance the quality of the baccalaureate nursing program in the Faculty of Nursing at the university. In addition, it will guide course coordinators to improve their courses, so increasing the level of student satisfaction. Furthermore, this study will raise the issue of the current conflict between clinical supervision and the gap between theory and practice. Clinical supervision is a continuous systemic process that both motivates and supports improved professional practice (Sharif & Masoumi, 2005). This indicates that ineffective clinical supervision (i.e. instructors playing a role that is evaluative rather than instructive) can negatively impact on students' clinical experience (Sharif & Masoumi, 2005). This can result in exhaustion on the part of students, along with a loss of motivation due to their instructors' unrealistic expectations (Arkan, Ordin, & Yilmaz, 2018). In addition, the theory-practice gap can be defined as an inconsistency between the skills acquired by student nurses through theoretical lectures and the demands of their experience in a clinical setting (Abu Salah, Aljerjawy & Salama, 2018). This can result in students lacking a theoretical background in clinical experience, due to their initial exposure being to clinical, rather than theoretical aspects (Mabuda, 2008). This current research found sufficient evidence to support this conclusion arising from several studies conducted in a variety of international countries with differing results. However, it should be noted that research in Saudi Arabia has been unable to locate any study examining the experience of nursing students during their clinical practice at the Faculty of Nursing. This led the current study exploring the experience of student nurses during their clinical practice.

2. Methods

2.1 Design and participants

This study was carried out using a descriptive qualitative research design, in order to examine the experience of student nurses during their clinical practice without any theoretical or philosophical foresight. A qualitative study is used to explore and describe the experience of, or human behavior towards, a specific phenomenon (Neill, 2019). Therefore, conducting this qualitative research design provided answers to questions concerning issues of 'how' and 'why', i.e. student nurses' experience of clinical practice, in particular clinical supervision and the gap between theory and practice.

The study sample was made up of student nurses following the fourth year of their Bachelor's degree, , due to these firstly, following a variety of courses and experiencing different clinical training issues in a number of hospitals and secondly, working with clinical instructors on different courses. The study participants were selected from the Faculty of Nursing and recruited using a purposive sampling technique. Purposive sampling is known as 'information-rich cases', used for selecting study participants to explore the study phenomenon (Patton, 2015). The inclusion criteria consisted of all nursing students in their fourth year at the Faculty of Nursing at a single university in Saudi Arabia, with the exclusion criteria being all second- and third-year nursing students at the Faculty of Nursing. This study employed three focus group interviews. The total sample size consisted of sixteen fourth year nursing students. The sample size in this qualitative study depended on a small number of participants to achieve an in-depth investigation based on data saturation.

2.2 Data collection method

The data were collected through semi-structured focus groups with fourth year student nurses. Focus groups have been used in nursing research for a number of years to explore a variety of issues related to clinical practice, education, management and professional perspectives. The focus group interviews concentrated on explaining and exploring, as well as describing, student nurses during their fourth year of study, in order to establish their individual experiences as part of a group [11].The interview guide in this study was designed to develop interview questions in response to the literature review. Hence, the focus group questions explored the experience of student nurses following different courses during their clinical practice, as well as attempting to establish their experience of clinical supervision and the gap between theory and practice.

2.3 Data analysis

Thematic analysis was employed in this study as a method of qualitative data analysis for the collected data, using the following steps. Firstly, all conducted interviews were transcribed verbatim by recording the interviews. Secondly, all of the researchers involved in this study familiarized themselves with the data by reading all the transcripts and commencing the development of first level codes. Thirdly, the researchers reviewed all first level codes in order to generate the required second level codes (i.e. sub-categories). Finally, the themes were developed and refined.

2.4 Ethical considerations

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the Faculty of Nursing at a single university, situated in Jeddah in Saudi Arabia. The ethical principles considered included the protection of privacy and avoidance of

deception (Bryman, 2012). The names and identity of the participants were concealed during the process of data collection, as well as for the analysis and reporting of the research (Todd, 2006).

The participant information sheet clearly provided all information concerning the study, along with the voluntary nature of any participation. The process of protecting participants' identities involved removing their names, to be replaced by codes during the analysis and reporting phases, in order to ensure that data could not be traced back to specific individuals. The researchers were responsible for outlining the aim of this study, resulting in the drawing up of a participant information sheet that fully explained the study's purpose. In addition to stating the researchers' responsibilities, as well as the risks and benefits for each of the research participants, this clarified that the participants had the right to refuse to participate, without giving any reason. All potential participants were given the necessary information to make an informed decision concerning their involvement in this study. Prior to commencing the data collection, participants were given the opportunity to ask any questions. If they then agreed to participate, they completed and signed the study consent form.

2.5 Data collection process

After obtaining ethical approval from the nursing college, the participants were accessed and recruited to participate in the current study by means of a list covering all fourth year student nurses. The potential participants selected according to the inclusion criteria were approached through a five-minute presentation, during which the researchers introduced the research topic and provided the volunteers with all the required information. All potential participants expressing their willingness to participate were contacted and notified of the focus group interviews to be held at the college. During each focus group interview, the consent form was signed by each participant agreeing to take part in the study. All focus groups interviews were recorded and lasted for one hour. The data were collected between February and March 2019.

3. Results

3.1 Nursing students' experience of clinical practice

The participants of this current study were found to have encountered several clinical issues. All the participants identified three main clinical issues within their clinical placements. For example, the students following the maternity course stated that their clinical experience was impacted by the lack of access to cases, as noted by one of the students: *"we spent a full day without a single case in labor."* Furthermore, the majority of nursing students following one of the basic nursing courses indicated that they were allocated patients without any particular selection criteria, which they considered to be a waste of time: *"(during the) second year of nursing, we had no background and we used to waste time trying to find patients without knowing what to do. I used to choose through luck"*. Additionally, the students found themselves concentrating on their grades only during their clinical practice, which impacted on their ability to learn, as illustrated by one of the students: *"my only concern during the clinical practice was my grades. It didn't matter if I learned anything, my grade was more important."*

3.2 Nursing students' experience of clinical supervision during clinical practice

This question was answered by nursing students using the following factors: (1) effective clinical supervision and (2) ineffective clinical supervision.

3.2.1 Effective clinical supervision

The majority of participants agreed that they found the psychiatric course the most enjoyable aspect of clinical practice. The clinical instructors for this course tended to focus on the students' learning experience rather than evaluation, as evidenced by a statement from one participant: *"I found that they really put their students first. Even if the instructor asked me a question and I answered her wrongly, it was okay. She didn't make you feel under stress."* In addition, another student reported that the course offered sufficient time to prepare and present patients' cases, assisting them to learn without becoming stressed: *"the instructor used to let us present the case the next day, which gave us time to read and understand."* Furthermore, the student nurses highlighted that the clinical instructors teaching this course made themselves available to students undertaking clinical practice, in order to address any issues, inquiries, or questions. Moreover, clinical instructors for the course provided encouragement by initially demonstrating the best ways of communicating with patients, with one the students stating: *"at first, the instructor would sit with the patient and show us how to act, that was encouraging for us."* Importantly, the clinical instructors on the psychiatric course ensured that students achieved the clinical objectives of their clinical practice by conducting pre- and post- conferences, as well as their constant availability to students during the clinical placement: *"the instructors made sure that we 100% met the course objectives."*

In addition, the participants of this study indicated that their clinical instructors were all experts in the field of mental health nursing, possessing sufficient knowledge and experience to assess students during their

clinical practice. Furthermore, the clinical instructors also assisted other faculty members assigned as clinical instructors from different specialties, in order to provide adequate supervision for the student nurses.

“The instructors assigned to us had enough knowledge to clarify any questions or concerns we had” and “even if the clinical instructor was from a different profession, the course coordinators would help and teach her to be the best she could for the students.”

3.2.2 Ineffective clinical supervision

The participants of this study raised several issues concerning clinical supervision. For example, all of the participants agreed that the clinical instructors tend to ask too many questions, leading to high level of student stress: *“the instructors used to ask us questions more for the purpose of interrogation and evaluation than for teaching.”* Also, the students agreed that they were given an overwhelming amount of paperwork, which they found stressful, because this made them feel that the only aspect that interested their instructors concerned their papers and grades: *“because of the many clinical papers we had to complete, we didn’t acquire enough skills and experience.”*

A further issue raised by a student concerned the differences between the instructions given by different clinical instructors: *“the clinical instructors would not agree on the objectives; each instructor would teach us a procedure in the way she saw fit.”* This also applied to the clinical paperwork, which was explained in different ways by each clinical instructor. Some courses highlighted that students were able to visit clinical areas without having clear objectives, resulting in students being unable to learn in the absence of a clear plan ahead of the rotation, as illustrated by one of the participants: *“we didn’t know what to do each day, so this led us to sit for a long time and waste clinical hours.”* In addition, the students considered that they lacked support from their clinical instructor throughout their clinical day, because of his/her lack of availability, as stated by one of students: *“the instructor only showed up at the beginning of the day, then left us.”* Furthermore, the students highlighted that clinical instructors failed to focus on developing the students’ skills during their clinical practice: *“they are more interested in the history of the patient than the skills we need to acquire”*. The students were all convinced that they would not have been able to learn the required skills without being confident and independent: *“I learned more during my one-month summer training than the one and a half years I spent in college.”* In addition, the majority of these students said they were hesitant about asking questions as a result of a fear of being judged: *“if I tell the instructor ‘I don’t know’, she’s supposed to teach me instead of deducting marks from my evaluation.”*

The students had expected to undertake a considerable amount of work during their clinical practice, but found that, for most of the time, they were unable to practice in the clinical setting. The students also highlighted the issue of a lack of available resources at the faculty: *“clinical practice is really affected by the lack of resources in the labs.”* For some of their courses, students were unable to meet the course objectives, noting that: *“they weren’t interested enough if we met the course objectives and understood what we’re supposed to do.”* The single most important factor found to influence students’ learning experience during their clinical practice concerned the lack of adequate qualifications on the part of their professors, with the participants noting: *“anyone with a PhD is given a teaching position, even if they are incapable of delivering their knowledge to the students.”* In addition, they stated that they often found it misleading when they experienced a lack of coordination with the instructors, along with an absence of mutual respect: *“clinical instructors have no respect for each other on the same course, each tends to give different instructions”*. The students taking part in this study felt that they were expected to do everything on their own, without help from their clinical instructors: *“there’s no one to support us.”*

3.3 Nursing students’ experience of the gap between theory and practice during their clinical practice

3.1 The theory-practice gap in clinical practice

All of the participants in the current study identified the existence of a gap between clinical practice and theoretical lectures. The students recognized a clear difference between the aspects taught in the classroom and those they encountered in clinical settings, which impacted on their learning experience, as noted by one of the students: *“I finished my seven weeks in clinical practice and, for example, today’s lecture was about infection control and how they screen patients. I never saw or did such a thing during my weeks of clinical practice... We took a lot of important lectures that we should have seen them during our clinical practice, but didn’t.”* In addition, the students perceived a number of theoretical topics as having little relevance, particularly as similar lectures were given as part of their pediatric and adult courses. One student noted: *“during the pediatric course, we had a lecture about reusable diapers, while there were other diseases I wish I’d learn more about instead.”* A number of solutions were recommended to close the gap between theory and clinical practice. Firstly, providing a curriculum consisting of blocks, rather the traditional curriculum, in order to provide more concentrated information before moving onto the next course.

One of the students proposed: *“studying by mean of blocks focusing on each body system.”* Secondly, a need was also pointed out to assign patients’ cases to students in a clinical setting according to their theoretical lectures: *“the clinical instructor should come to the ward with us to allocate us to cases related to our lectures.”*

4. Discussion

The clinical experience of student nurses in this current study revealed a lack of appropriate cases available in the clinical setting to enable them to fully practice nursing care and procedures. This result is inconsistent with other reports concluding that a limited availability of clinical cases, or a well-accepted clinical education environment, does not significantly impact on students' learning outcomes (Payne & Glaspie, 2014).

This result can be explained by the fact that the selected hospital was unable to facilitate students' training in clinical practice and achieve the clinical objectives of their course. In addition, this study indicated several issues experienced by student nurses regarding clinical supervision. One interesting finding was that the clinical instructors within the clinical placement tended to pose too many questions during clinical practice. This finding is similar to that of a further study, which demonstrated the importance of the instructor's role in assisting nursing students to achieve professional excellence. Moreover, the majority of the participating students viewed the role of their instructors as being more evaluative than instructive (Sharif & Masoumi, 2005). A possible explanation could be that the clinical instructors tended to place a greater emphasis on testing the students' knowledge rather than on developing their clinical skills, due to students attending theoretical lectures prior to undertaking their clinical practice.

A further significant factor consisted of the students receiving a variety of instructions from their clinical instructors during their clinical practice. This resulted in the students encountering a lack of support from their clinical instructors. This result is similar to a number of findings in the literature, affirming that inconsistencies between faculty members can result in confusion and frustration among students, in particular when faced with inexperienced clinical instructors (Carver, Ashmore & Clibbens, 2007). This finding can be seen as due to the different levels of experience held by clinical instructors assigned to the course, as clinical instructors working in the college tend to originate from differing backgrounds and schools of clinical instruction. Furthermore, the current study has demonstrated a lack of clear clinical objectives for students during their clinical practice. This finding supports a previous study identifying that student nurses considered the lack of clear clinical education objectives as their main issue during their clinical education (Khodadadi, Ebrahimi, Moghaddasian, & Babapour, 2013). This could be caused by a lack of organizational skills and experience on the part of the course coordinators, i.e. it is vital that a coordinator assigns a specific clinical objective for each clinical week, so as to achieve the appropriate learning outcomes during clinical practice.

In addition to the above, the most important clinically relevant finding concerned the lack of availability of clinical instructors within the clinical setting. This result is similar to a separate study demonstrating the constraints and needs of undergraduate students in the clinical learning environment. It revealed that student nurses valued being accompanied and supervised by instructors as an important component of professional clinical learning. Thus, clinical supervisors and registered nurses in clinical settings need to provide an environment capable of enhancing the learning experience of students during their clinical practice (Sharif & Masoumi, 2005). This result can be explained by the shortage of clinical instructors in the faculty; resulting in those available being sometimes assigned to more than one unit, and supervising more than one group of students. This can therefore result in difficulties in making themselves available to all students during the clinical day. The most obvious finding to emerge from this analysis concerns the recognition of a gap between clinical practice and theoretical lectures, i.e. the demonstration of a difference between what is being taught in the theoretical lectures and the situation experienced by students within the clinical setting. This is supported by a previous study conducted in Australia, which identified the need to reinforce and apply a combination of lecture and clinical laboratory sessions, while showing the necessity for clinical placement and 'hands on' experience (Maginnis & Croxon, 2010). This referred in particular to hospital policy during clinical placement, as undergraduate students are not permitted to conduct certain nursing procedures until they have successfully completed their competency checklist within the assigned clinical units.

5. Conclusion

The current study concludes that students attending this nursing college tend to experience a lack of effective clinical supervision for the majority of clinical courses. Moreover, this study demonstrated the perception expressed by the student nurses of the existence of a gap between theory and practice. Thus, this study suggests a need to conduct a workshop for all faculty members, setting out the roles and responsibilities of the course coordinator. Moreover, this study has identified that a further workshop should be put in place to clarify the roles and responsibilities of the clinical instructors during students' clinical practice. Furthermore, it has highlighted the benefits of simulation laboratory sessions for particular procedures in clinical courses, in order to prepare students to practice both effectively and safely. Additionally, it has recognized the importance of carefully allocating undergraduate students clinical placements with preceptors to supervise student nurses when performing nursing procedures, in order to maintain patient safety.

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7. Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest statement.

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