



LEARNING CHALLENGES EXPERIENCED BY STUDENT NURSES DURING CLINICAL PLACEMENTS AT OPERATING THEATRE

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INTRODUCTION

Nursing education is a combination of acquiring theory from lectures in the classroom and practical experience from the clinical placement (Haghes & Quinn, 2013). During their clinical placement, nursing students can develop their practical skills as well as knowledge and attitudes when the theoretical part of the curriculum are applied, developed and integrated (Newton *et al.* 2010). Since the operating theatre (OT) is one of the most specialised and important clinical learning environments in which nursing students can learn OT skills, it creates a positive learning environment that is of paramount importance.

As shown in previous studies, nursing students face many challenges in the clinical learning environment. A qualitative study conducted in Iran has explored the clinical learning challenges of nursing students. In this study, three themes of challenges, including ineffective communication, inadequate readiness and emotional reactions (Jamshidi *et al.*, 2016), emerged. Another study in Jamaica reports anxiety among most nursing students (>75%) during their clinical placement (Lawal *et al.*, 2015) due to several reasons such as adapting to a new unit, fear of making mistakes and unsupportive staff etc. High levels of stress and anxiety, poor interpersonal relationships, the negative attitudes of students and a lack of interest in nursing were identified as challenges that inhibited clinical performance. A descriptive cross-sectional study was conducted in Nigeria to identify the perceptions of nursing students and preceptors about the challenges influencing the clinical performances of nursing students (Dlana *et al.*, 2015). High levels of stress and anxiety, poor interpersonal relationships and a lack of feedback were identified as challenges that inhibited clinical performance. Moreover, preceptorship and mentorship, good relationships with nurses, quality supervision, simulation and peer teaching were identified as being facilitators of clinical performance.

Previous studies in the global context describe clinical learning experiences and the challenges faced by nursing students on OT clinical placement. Reid (2007) explains (as cited by Motseki, 2013) the OT as an alien, hostile, overwhelming and uninviting environment for inexperienced student nurses. In line with this view, Silen-Lipponen *et al.* (2004) demonstrate the OT as a stressful learning environment that has no methods to deal with mistakes, and also discusses its dichotomy between emotional and technical responsibilities. Another study highlights that those negative attitudes and behaviours of the OT staff towards teaching the student nurses also left them anxious (Motseki, 2013).

While there are studies conducted to assess the learning challenges of nursing students globally, there is a lack of relevant evidence from the Sri Lankan context. Therefore, identifying the challenges that nursing students face during their clinical placement at an OT is vital to facilitate their knowledge and skills, as well as to instil favourable attitudes. Thus, the aim of this study was to examine the learning challenges experienced by the final-year nursing students of the School of Nursing in Ratnapura during their OT clinical placement.

METHODOLOGY

This was a descriptive cross-sectional study conducted among final-year nursing students



during May 2019 at the premises of the School of Nursing in Ratnapura. All final-year nursing students (n=71) were invited to voluntarily participate in the study. Data was collected using a content validated, self-administered questionnaire that was designed by referring to existing literature and the researchers' experiences. The questionnaire comprised 12 questions related to learning challenges, which were divided into three parts with part A focusing on learning challenges related to communication, part B focusing on learning challenges related to self-failure and part C focusing on learning challenges related to physical and psychological aspects. All questions were to be answered on a Five-point Likert scale (1=strongly disagree, 2=disagree, 3=neutral, 4=agree, and 5=strongly agree). In addition, socio-demographic information of the participants was collected. Data was analysed using SPSS version 21. Frequencies and percentages were used for demographic variables and to describe the scores of the study variables. Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the Ethics Review Committee of the National Hospital of Sri Lanka while written informed consent was obtained from all the participants. Permission for data collection was obtained from the relevant school authorities.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Of the total 71 nursing students invited, 67 (91.5%) (females n=65) participated in the study. All nursing students were Sinhalese and their age ranged between 20 and 30 years while 55.2% of the participants belonged to the age group of 20 – 24 years. As self-reported by the student nurses, their level of English language competency was manageable (16.4%), good (56.7%) or excellent (26.9%).

Table 1 shows the scores obtained for learning challenges by nursing students for individual questions measured by the Five-point Likert scale. The study revealed that for learning challenges in relation to communication, most nursing students (83.5%) believed they have good interaction with OT staff nurses while 65.6% said they had adequate knowledge of the tasks they have performed at the OT. A previous study has shown that nursing students enjoyed their OT placement due to interpersonal characteristics such as staff being approachable, supportive, friendly, and willing to teach and explain their skills (Hughes, 2006). Moreover, as shown by Hughes (2006), students accepted that the OT placement was a valuable and interesting experience. The study also revealed that the proportion of nursing students who reported language difficulties and a lack of confidence are higher than those who were not (47.7% vs. 39.4% and 47.8% vs. 26.9%, respectively). In line with these findings, an Iranian study demonstrates higher confidence among staff nurses than nursing students (Makarem *et al*, 2019). As suggested by Crookset *et al.* (2005) the personal confidence of nursing students can be improved through support and feedback from peers and colleagues.

Nursing students also indicated some physical and psychological challenges during their OT clinical training. While the majority of nursing students (90.9%) showed greater interest in spending their clinical time at the OT, a minority of nursing students (26.9%) responded that they felt stress during their OT clinical placement. As described by Jamshidi *et al* (2016), nursing students became distressed and overwhelmed in dealing with new experiences within the clinical learning environment.

More than 70% of nursing students in the present study were agreeable that working in an air-conditioned environment does not cause any inconvenience. In contrast, more than 47.7% of nursing students reported inconvenience due to the long hours required in the OT. This may cause students to be dissatisfied with their placement. As described by Hughes (2006), nursing students do not enjoy theatre placement due to having to hang around, stand for long and long days, which they cited as reasons for non-participation in OT work.

Table 1. Clinical Learning Challenges Experienced by Nursing Students (N=67)



1=Strongly disagree, 2=Disagree, 3=Neutral, 4=Agree, 5=Strongly agree

Item	1 n (%)	2 n (%)	3 n (%)	4 n (%)	5 n (%)
Learning challenges related to communication					
• I did not have good interaction with staff nurses in the OT.	3 (4.5)	3 (4.5)	5 (7.5)	52 (77.5)	4 (6.0)
• I did not know exactly what has to be done in the OT.	2 (3.0)	10 (14.9)	8 (11.9)	36 (53.7)	11 (16.5)
• I did not understand the verbal instructions of the OT staff.	-	21 (31.3)	22 (32.8)	23 (34.3)	1 (1.5)
• I experienced language difficulties at the OT.	-	32 (47.7)	9 (13.4)	22 (32.8)	4 (6)
Learning challenges related to self-failure					
• I had less confidence to work in the OT.	1 (1.5)	32 (47.8)	16 (23.9)	16 (23.9)	2 (3)
• I had a recurrent absence during my clinical experience in the OT.	2 (3)	3 (4.5)	9 (13.4)	26 (38.8)	27 (40.3)
Learning challenges related to physical and psychological factors					
• I was getting stress in the OT.	-	18 (26.9)	14 (20.9)	30 (44.8)	5 (7.4)
• I did not like to spend my learning time in the OT.	-	3 (4.5)	3 (4.5)	34 (50.7)	27 (40.2)
• I was in fear of getting infections from the OT.	-	3 (4.5)	13 (19.4)	34 (50.8)	17 (25.3)
• I felt inconvenience during working in an air-conditioned environment.	-	14 (20.9)	6 (9)	36 (53.7)	11 (16.4)
• I had fear about the completion of educational tasks during a limited time in the OT.	11 (16.4)	26 (38.8)	8 (11.9)	15 (22.4)	7 (10.5)
• I felt inconvenience due to long-standing hours in the OT.	7 (11.9)	24 (35.8)	12 (16.4)	19 (28.4)	5 (7.5)

CONCLUSIONS

Most of the student nurses felt that the operation theatre was a comfortable and supportive learning environment, but there is a need to take appropriate action to overcome the challenges they face, such as language difficulties, stress, fear and a lack of confidence.

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