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Turkish nursing students' views of their clinical learning environment: A focus group study

Sevgisun Kapucu¹, Hulya Bulut²

ABSTRACT

Objective: The objective was to determine the views of Turkish nursing students towards clinical learning environment.

Methodology: The study used qualitative approach through semi-structured interviews. Nursing school students were selected for study participants. It was discussed with total 32 nursing students; four groups were formed, each with 8 people about studies themes.

Result: All participants were female and the mean age was 22±0.97. A total of 32 student nurses described the importance of their clinical learning experiences, both negative and positive, and their opinion about the clinical learning environment.

Conclusion: This is one of the studies from Turkey on Turkish nursing students' views regarding the clinical learning environment and showed that the students were affected by their patients, clinical educators and clinical professional's attitudes towards nursing students in the clinical environment.

KEY WORDS: Student, Nurses, Clinical, Environment.

Pak J Med Sci October - December 2011 Vol. 27 No. 5 1149-1153

How to cite this article:

Kapucu S, Bulut H. Turkish nursing students' views of their clinical learning environment: A focus group study. Pak J Med Sci 2011;27(5):1149-1153

INTRODUCTION

Clinical practice is important in nursing education for students to gain problem-solving abilities, cognitive, psychomotor and affective skills in clinical field experience.¹⁻⁵ The student nurse applies on the patient theoretical knowledge learned in the classroom.⁶ The nurse students have opportunities to observe nursing role model in the clinical environment.⁷ In general, about 50% of clinical training

should take place in the nursing school curriculum.⁸ Some studies have examined the effects on the students of clinical practice and reported stress as worries about the first clinical placement. These worries include anxiety over possible criticism from peers, the fear of making a mistake, not knowing enough about technical skills and procedures, communicating with healthcare staff and patients, the approach towards seriously or terminally ill patients, and the clinical nurses' negative attitudes and expectations.^{9,10}

Many nursing studies in the clinical setting have been on the ward learning environment where nursing students have been shown to frequently feel vulnerable, possibly both because they are learning to provide care and are concerned about the nursing staff's reaction towards their efforts.¹¹⁻¹⁴ A nursing programme in Turkey generally takes four years to complete. The clinical learning environment in Turkey; are a compulsory part of the nursing curriculum. These can take place in regional health care services, hospital wards, or nursing homes. Students at nursing schools complete their

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* Received for Publication: February 15, 2011

* Revision Received: August 17, 2011

* Revision Accepted: September 22, 2011

theoretical courses and only then receive practical training. Clinical nursing education in Turkey is taught by nursing school faculty member. The clinical teachers supervise a group of 10 to 15 students while working the same shifts with the staff and students and provide clinical coaching; guide and supervise nursing clinical practice, and help students to fine tune their professional skills.

In Turkey, although there are some studies related to the clinical experiences of nursing students, they are quite limited.¹⁵⁻¹⁷ It has been determined that there are not enough studies in our country which have allowed students to express their opinions regarding the clinical environment. We used this qualitative study to establish students' opinions of their clinical learning environment, by employing the focus group interviewing method. Therefore, this study was carried out to determine the views of Turkish nursing students towards clinical learning environment.

METHODOLOGY

Sample: All study participants were students who had completed the second and third years of the four-year nursing education. Because second and third-year students spend longer periods than other grades in the clinical environment, they were included in the scope of the study. These students had received training in the Departments of Surgery, Internal Medicine, Pediatrics Gynecology and Obstetrics for clinical experience. After information on the research was provided to all second and third-year participating students (160), four groups were formed, each with 8 people (32 altogether).

The study used qualitative approach through semi-structured interviews. Data were obtained by focus groups method. Focus groups can help the interviewees to explore a specific topic or theme so that they can participate in an in-depth discussion.¹⁸ A semi-structured interview form was used, which was prepared in keeping with the aim of the research under the guidance of the literature.

Research Questions:

The focus groups used these questions to stimulate discussion:

1. In your opinion, what constitutes an ideal clinical environment?
2. What do you think of the your clinical environment?
3. What do you think about your interaction with clinical nurses?
4. What do you think about your interaction with patients?
5. What do you think about your interaction with your clinical educator?
6. What are the benefits that the clinical environment provides you?

After reviewing the literature, a semi-structured interview form was prepared. Interview dates and times were arranged and all focus group discussions were held in an appropriate classroom. At first, the researcher explained about study aim. Participants gave informed consent and all discussions were tape-recorded. The investigators used a pilot study with three subject to test the questions for structure and clarity but these pilot study results were not included in the results of this study. Focus group's interview lasted an average of 60 minutes. Data were transcribed and checked to ensure they were a verbatim record of the focus group interviews.

Data Analysis: The various codes were compared by the investigator according to differences and similarities and sorted into categories. The categories were then formulated into 5 themes to ease data analysis. The Statistical Package for Social Sciences for Windows was used to evaluate data by frequency and percentages.

RESULTS

In this study, all the participants were female with a mean age of 22±0.97 and had received clinical experience in some wards (departments of of Surgery, Internal Medicine, Pediatrics Gynecology and Obstetrics).

Five descriptive themes emerged from the data of this study: (1) ideal clinical environment, (2) interaction with clinical nurses, (3) interaction with patients, (4) interaction with your clinical educators, (5) the benefits that the clinical environment.

Theme One: Ideal clinical environment: According to students, an ideal clinical environment should encompass the following elements: the internship period must be adequate; there should be educators representing every clinical field; there should be clinics where a diversity of patients exists; the physical environment and conditions should be adequate (there must be a meeting room, dressing room and a library); the number of students should be low; there should be sufficient materials; educators should conduct themselves in a friendly manner; there should be nurses educated/cultured in the clinical field; team members must be respectful

to all students; cooperation is very important; students need to be included in each practice and decision; the clinic must be organized for clinical practice and students must be introduced to the team. Most of the participants stated that ideal clinical environment involvement was described as one where good co-operation between staff members and a positive atmosphere was present. Students are appreciated and given proper opportunities to study so that they can meet their objectives on good wards.

The following are examples of responses from participants about ideal clinical environment:

"Nurses use us students in order to make their own workload easier. There's work-centered care; however there must be patient-centered care." All the group agrees, nodding.

"I would love to be... A good nurse... To have dignity... To be more practical.. To see nursing perspective.."

Another student indicates that her expectations of being, working, and learning in the clinic were not realized.

"I had expectations such as practicing on the patient, evaluating the patient as a whole, making decisions and learning more effectively; however, some of my expectations have never been met."

In our study, students pointed out that they only occasionally participate in the decision making in patients' care.

"I was able to make decisions in a patient's care. My patient had pain in the mouth, and he could not eat. I discovered that. I provided the proper treatment. That made me happy."

Theme Two: Interaction with clinical nurses:

Most of the participants stated that they expect clinical nurses to respect them, give positive feedback, encourage them and include them in practices. Some examples;

"There was a patient we took care of. The charge nurse told us that she had given the patient to us and we had taken great care of him. Positive feedback increased the interaction."

By student nurses mostly mentioned as health professionals in clinical environment are nurses.

".....Nurses' attitudes are important. They may prevent us from working. Our educators are with us all the time in the clinic; patients listen to us carefully. However, nurses question and criticise us. This situation is significant."

"Attitudes of service nurses cause mistrust & insecurity in us. You work more comfortably when you are accepted and respected as a part of the working team....."

Theme Three: Interaction with patients:

Patient is seen as one of the factors that affects students most in the clinical environment. Students demonstrate positive attitude towards the patients in clinical practice helps to get satisfaction. Determine the most positive influences of the group of students and patients. Some examples;

"We get satisfaction if we see that there are things changing in the patient as a result of nursing care that we perform."

"There was a situation with my patient which he found difficult to speak about. Since my patient trusted me, he shared it with me; and this information benefited his treatment. That my patient trusted me was very gratifying to me."

"We organize everything. We noticed that the patient had hemorrhoids, and we then began treatment. That made me happy."

Theme Four: Interaction with your clinical educators:

Student nurses expectations from clinical educators are being respected, being empathic and not being questioned by them. Students have indicated their expectations in the following examples:

"We learnt to question. I had educators who discouraged me. The fact that they humiliated me made me frustrated. I suffered a lack of self-confidence. How questions are asked is important; humiliating attitudes are important; they affect communication considerably."

The clinic educator might also be a source of stress as well as someone who can make learning easier. One of the students expresses her opinion on clinic educators.

"Educators are important (they all confirm). For instance, I had the problem of communication with patients. My patient in that clinic was a surgeon general. Since I thought that he knew everything, I could not communicate well with him. Our educator helped me and taught me that I could communicate with any patient, no matter who he was. In the second week, I took care of a patient who was a nurse, and this time I did not have any communication problems."

"The educator's facial expression is very important when we go near him to ask something. The educator's bad facial expression can affect our whole day very negatively."

"Getting pleasure from the clinic completely depends on the educator."

Furthermore, students want clinic educators to be experienced and knowledgeable.

"Rather than emphasizing our deficiencies, they should be guiding us on how to remedy them."

"Educators with inadequate experience ask questions; yet when we also have questions, they tell us to go and research it and come back. I feel used."

Theme Five: The benefits that the clinical environment:

Student nurses have many expectations from clinical environment as development of professionalism in students will be realized only in such an environment. Participating in a patient's care and decisional process will help students put their theoretical knowledge into practice. Receiving education and training in a positive clinical environment will help students become good nurses in the future. Students have indicated that there should be unity of education methods among clinic educators. They have indicated that discussions of cases which occur in the clinical environment and short discussions are very effective.

"Short discussions are effective."

"Only the person whose patient is discussed gets prepared for the clinical meetings conducted; the others just listen or do not listen. Short discussions are much more effective."

The entire group agreed with this. Students point out that clinical meetings are not relevant to the purpose, and they are bored by the repetition of theoretical information.

"Theoretical information must not be debated in the clinic. There must be case discussions in order to allow more time for patients."

"Practices and approaches that can be observed on patients must be shown."

DISCUSSION

The basic of nursing education and training is the preparation of the learner for a professional role as students. The clinical environment provides important role in this preparation.¹⁹ Thorell-Ekstrand and Bjorvell, (1995) have proposed that clinical environment ensures the student with optimal facilities to observe role models, to practice by oneself and to reflect upon what is seen, heard, sensed and done.²⁰ Clinical experiences for undergraduate nursing students are basic and significant to the development of each student's quality professional development. Hart and Rotem (1995) defined the clinical learning environment as the attributes of the clinical work setting which nurses perceive to impress their professional development. Educators, nurses, doctors and patients in the clinical placement influence the students' feelings and attitudes towards the nursing profession positively or negatively.²¹

Interpersonal relationships within the clinical learning environment were very significant. Staff and manager nurse, and the patients were the most important people in the development of these rela-

tionships. Studies related to clinical practice environment show that students are affected by clinic personnel, especially the clinic nurse and clinic educator.^{7,13,22-24}

Hart and Rotem (1994) and Papp et al (2003) have suggested that students precious positive relations with clinical staff members and appreciated recognition for their contribution to patient care.^{21,22} The needs to be accepted by the ward staff were common themes. Students enjoyed being busy with a proper degree of autonomy, but found this difficult to obtain when their role as a student was not clear to clinical staff members.

Nurses are responsible for both patient care and training student nurses. According to what students pointed out in this study, nurses considered students as part of their own workload and did not want to work with them. The development of a positive clinical learning environment was significantly influenced by interpersonal relationships between the participants. We found that nurses' positive attitudes and role sharing were of particular importance in becoming professionals. The present study supports the findings made by Jackson (2001) that student nurses regard staff behaviours and attitudes within the clinical field to be an important factor in the learning experience.²⁶

Nurse educators should develop effective clinical teaching behaviour, especially related to patients care. Nurse educators should also be flexible and modify their teaching behaviour appropriately to meet students' learning needs.²⁷

In our study, students were judged by the educators in the clinical training ward. They stated that their motivation was affected negatively and they felt serious anxiety when they could not answer the questions. Elcigil and Sari obtained similar findings in their study.⁶ The success of clinical practice is known to be influenced by the communication between the educator and the student during clinical training. The student can become aware of his/her deficiencies and benefit from self-development thanks to feedback. In a qualitative study by Lofmark and Wikblad, students maintained that receiving positive feedback made them feel more confident.²⁸

The importance of the nursing student-patient relationship in clinical learning is acknowledged widely.²⁹ The relationship provides many benefits for both students and patients. Students are provided an opportunity for personal and professional development and gain confidence regarding patient encounters instead of simply following rules

or role-playing according to routines.³⁰ This study showed that the students were most positively affected in the clinical sense by their patients. Patients' attitudes towards the students have a major impact on students' becoming autonomous.

In addition a clinical environment allows various disciplines to work together. Students learn team work there as well as the nurse's role. Unlike other studies, students were adversely affected by negative attitudes of other team members, such as doctors. Being accepted and respected in the clinical environment is important for students' personal and professional development.

Limitations: The nursing students that made up the subjects were from a single Turkish university nursing school and the findings may therefore not be representative of nursing students in general as regards their clinical environment experiences.

Ethical Consideration: The Human Research Ethics Committee at the University where the study was conducted is primarily concerned with experimental studies for the protection of human subjects; thus the necessary written approval was obtained from the Administration Department of the nursing school prior to the study. The researchers also obtained permission and informed consent from the nursing students. The guidelines presented in the Declaration of Helsinki were used. Information on the aim and design of the study was provided to all participants. The interviews were scheduled at the academic term's end, after students' grades were announced to the students.

CONCLUSION

Clinical education is a vital component of the nursing curriculum. A supportive clinical learning environment is of paramount importance in attaining the required teaching and learning process goals. It has been determined that the most influential elements affecting the students in the area of clinical practice are the clinic nurses, educators and patients. Students' progress towards developing professionalism in their chosen nursing careers increases substantially when the atmosphere of the clinical environment is positive.

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