The perceptions of professional nurses on student mentorship in clinical areas: A study in Polokwane municipality hospitals, Limpopo province

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Article history:
Received 16 February 2015
Accepted 16 January 2017

Keywords:
Mentoring
Perceptions
Professional nurses
Qualitative

Abstract
The purpose of the study was to explore the perceptions of professional nurses on student mentorship in clinical areas. A qualitative hermeneutic phenomenological research was conducted to determine the meaning of mentoring as perceived by professional nurses and to identify the successes and challenges encountered by professional nurses with regard to student mentorship during clinical practice.

Data was collected using in-depth individual interviews to collect data from sixteen operational managers who were managing all unit activities, including student mentoring. Each interview lasted for ±45 min. A hermeneutic data analysis (hermeneutic circle) was used to analyse data. Four (4) themes and fourteen (14) sub-themes emerged from data collected from operational managers.

The findings revealed that mentoring was perceived as a valuable tool to apply in the preparation of student nurses for future professional role. In the process of mentoring, the caring attitude is important. Factors that facilitated the mentoring process were good communication, time and available resources.

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1. Introduction

Quality of patient care is a primary concern for health care providers and consumers. In 1997, in an effort to improve the quality and accessibility of all public services, including health care services, the Department of Public Services and Administration (DPSA) introduced the White Paper for the Transformation of Public Service Delivery, which included the Batho Pele (“Putting people first”) Principles, and the Department of Health (DOH) introduced the White Paper for the Transformation of the Health System in South Africa. Despite these means of sustaining quality patient care, the government and the health professionals still indicate that quality in health care services remains clouded (Department of Public Services and Administration, 1997).

Quality patient care is impacted by various factors, including shortage of personnel, availability of material resources, clinical competence, and strategies employed in the
training of student nurses for this profession that values quality. Focussing on strategies like mentoring in the training of students, affects issues of quality in the health care (Johnson, Billingsley, Crichlow, & Ferrell, 2011, p. 122). Mentoring is a way of socialisation and a supportive teaching–learning strategy for those new to the practice (Lloyd & Bristol, 2006, p. 130). It is valued in industries for reasons of socialisation, competency in execution of duties, and quality in the end product. Provident (2005, p. 2) states that the construct of mentoring remains unclear as there is lack of agreement in the literature on a single definition of mentoring. Mentoring is defined best by those in a specific area of practice where prevailing conditions are suitable and thus defining mentoring is contextual. In occupational therapy, Provident (2005, p. 2) refers to Torres-Guzman and Goodman’s definition of mentoring as an intense, dyadic relationship in which a mentor furthers the professional and personal development of the protégé by providing information, assistance, support and guidance.

Although a long-standing legacy of informal mentoring has served as a primary method of professional socialisation in academic medicine, health care specialties that have traditionally focused on practice and service face a dearth of senior mentors to assist junior faculty as academicians (Pololi & Knight, 2005, p. 867). This is also the situation in nursing today. Mentoring in nursing, medicine and other disciplines in the health sector faces increasing challenges, including time limitations; dual responsibilities; high workload; limited personnel; burnout; a high attrition rate, and poor productivity (Ali & Panther, 2008, p. 38).

The purpose of the article was to explore the perceptions of professional nurses on student mentorship in clinical areas. The objectives were to: determine the meaning of student mentorship by professional nurses and identify professional nurses’ successes and challenges encountered with regard to student mentorship during clinical practice.

Mentoring as a supportive teaching strategy in the practice of nursing is gradually detaching from the process of student training (Pololi & Knight, 2005, p. 867). This, in turn leads to a decline in students’ skills acquisition including clinical competency and problem solving. If mentoring is not intensified at student level, they feel inadequately prepared for their future role and are challenged during transition to professional level where they are expected to practice independently (Ali & Panther, 2008, p. 38). There is a conflict of interest in the professional nurses’ roles between rendering of care and facilitating the professional aspirations of students. This is further compounded by a conflict of values between education and management that prevails in the units where students do their clinical practice (Kilcullen, 2007, p. 100).

2. Materials and methods

2.1. Research design

A qualitative and hermeneutic phenomenological design following the Heidgergarian approach was used to explore professional nurses’ perceptions on student mentorship. An exploratory design was selected as the researcher intended to assess and understand the participants’ experiences and understanding of mentoring. It was intended to increase knowledge of the field of study and not to generalise findings to large populations (Burns & Grove, 2009, p. 359).

According to Heidegger, the aim of hermeneutic enquiry is to elucidate the subjective and humanistic meaning of an experience. It is a way of studying all human activities with the aim of allowing the text to speak for itself (Ajjawi & Higgs, 2007, p. 616). According to McConnell-Henry, Chapman, and Francis (2009, p. 3) no interpretation is devoid of judgement or that interpretive research is never free from the researcher’s judgement or influence.

Heidegger’s concepts of “being” (dasein), care (sorge), space and disposition were relevant to the study. “Being” referring to being-in-the-world and, most importantly, a persons’ awareness of being in the world (Joubert, 2005, p. 66). In this study, it meant that the participants had to know themselves and the reasons for their being in the units not only in relation to patient care, but also to students who are learning.

Space and disposition are other concepts that are related to this study. Heidegger refers to space as a feeling of being in a particular place and a sense of what it means and this influences one’s experience (Joubert, 2005, p. 66). Professional nurses who are supervising the rendering of patient care by subordinates, including students, find themselves in that space of being a supervisor and a mentor. Disposition is explained as a mood in which the experience is lived and how it affects how one approaches the situation (McConnell-Henry et al., 2009, p. 6). The experience of being a professional nurse in a given unit and the understanding of one’s role in a given situation influence one’s mood. This can ultimately affect the mood of approaching mentoring.

2.2. Population and sample

The target population in this study was all professional nurses at operational managers’ level working in hospitals accredited by the South African Nursing Council (SANC) for training of students under Regulation 425 (SANC, 1992), which is a comprehensive nursing programme leading to registration as a professional nurse in accordance with the requirements of Regulation 425 (SANC Regulation R425 of 22 February 1985). Students are placed in these hospitals in various units (wards) for clinical practice.

A non-probability, purposive and convenience sampling was used to select the study participants from the accessible population. According to Creswell (2007, p. 180), convenient sampling saves time, money and effort at the expense of information and credibility. In non-probability sampling the researcher judges and selects those participants that know most about the phenomenon and are able to explain and relate the differences within the information provided (Burns & Grove, 2009, p. 132). In purposive sampling, information-rich cases are selected for in-depth study of a phenomenon (Burns & Grove, 2009, p. 355). Professional nurses at operational manager’s level were considered information-rich participants based on their position and categories, the knowledge level relating to years of training, and the mentorship role they have to acquire as they have the expected SANC teaching responsibility to all subordinates, including student nurses.
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