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Supporting nurse mentor development: An exploration of developmental constellations in nursing mentorship practice

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ABSTRACT

Supervised practice as a mentor is currently an integral component of nurse mentor education. However, workplace education literature tends to focus on dyadic mentor-student relationships rather than developmental relationships between colleagues. This paper explores the supportive relationships of nurses undertaking a mentorship qualification, using the novel technique of constellation development to determine the nature of workplace support for this group.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with three recently qualified nurse mentors. All participants developed a mentorship constellation identifying colleagues significant to their own learning in practice. These significant others were also interviewed alongside practice education, and nurse education leads. Constellations were analysed in relation to network size, breadth, strength of relationships, and attributes of individuals.

Findings suggest that dyadic forms of supervisory mentorship may not offer the range of skills and attributes that developing mentors require. Redundancy of mentorship attributes within the constellation (overlapping attributes between members) may counteract problems caused when one mentor attempts to fulfil all mentorship roles. Wider nursing teams are well placed to provide the support and supervision required by mentors in training. Where wider and stronger networks were not available to mentorship students, mentorship learning was at risk.

1. Introduction

Although mentorship of student nurses is well explored in the literature and premised in current professional standards, the same cannot be said of the relationships that support nurses in their development as mentors. Nurses regulated by the Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC) in the United Kingdom and Northern Ireland have a statutory duty to promote the learning and development of students and colleagues (NMC, 2015). However, current mentorship literature tends to focus on the learning relationship between pre-registration student nurse and mentor rather than collegial learning and developmental relationships required in post-registration learning.

Completion of an NMC validated mentorship programme currently qualifies nurses and midwives to mentor pre-registration student nurses, as well as to supervise colleagues undertaking mentorship preparation themselves. Where mentors are involved in this post-registration mentorship of colleagues the term 'supervising mentors' is used to distinguish the roles. Supervising mentors need the skills to facilitate mentorship learning amongst learners who hold a different status and place within the work environment than pre-registration nursing students. Assumptions of a central dyadic relationship between supervising mentor and mentorship student tend to be made: an assumption that the relationship directly mirrors that between mentors and pre-registration nursing students.

A move away from a reliance on dyadic forms of mentorship is proposed in the draft education framework and standards for nursing within the UK (NMC, 2017). This document suggests that the prescriptive models of mentorship provision influenced by the SLAiP standards (NMC, 2008b) may be discarded in favour of more innovative approaches to student support. The draft standards suggest that all nurses should play a broader, more supervisory role in student nurse education in practice (NMC, 2017). The standards also allow for the strengthening and legitimisation of the contributions of members of other professions as well as non-registered healthcare workers to pre-registration nursing support and supervision (Morley, 2015; Hasson et al., 2012). The assessment component of clinical practice education is proposed to be the

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domain of specifically prepared nurses who will act as clinical assessors. In the current UK context, mentors of pre-registration nurses must achieve the stage two outcomes of the Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC, 2008b) Standards to Support Learning and Assessment in Practice (SLAiP). It is not yet clear from consultation documents what preparation assessors will require and how this role differs from that of supervising nurses, however the principles of good mentorship and student support are likely to remain influential.

This paper challenges and explores the assumption of dyadic mentorship as the main paradigm for supervision of mentorship students through the exploration of supportive relationships facilitating learning in practice for this group. The creation and analysis of developmental networks (constellations) informed by relationships has been used in a diverse range of social research worldwide. Such constellations gather information on the number, strength and attributes of relationships in order to gain a picture of how individuals perceive mentorship and development opportunities. Most studies tend toward large scale surveys utilising quantitative methods and statistical analysis. However, Souza et al. (2009) and Kram and Isabella (1985) offer qualitative insights into the use of constellations as a research tool, which have influenced this research. This is the first analyses of mentorship developmental networks with a nursing setting, offering a new lens through which to view mentorship preparation in nursing. It represents a complex but low-tech method to gauge the support of mentorship students in practice. The constellations presented here focus almost exclusively on what was drawn by mentors during qualitative interviews, in order to consider the research questions, Which learning relationships in the practice setting are significant for nurses undertaking the mentorship module, and those supervising them? What developmental attributes are offered by these significant relationships?

This article primarily presents a comparison and analysis of learning constellations, considering the similarities and differences in relationship constellations drawn by newly qualified mentors and their significant supporters in mentorship learning. Secondarily it will explore organisational maps created from combining constellations with those of senior nurses working within the two London NHS Trusts examined, providing a snapshot of provision and reciprocity of learning support, and making recommendations for future research and development.

2. Methods

2.1. Population and sampling

As part of a wider case-study exploring the experiences of nurses undertaking a mentorship preparation programme, initial semi-structured interviews were held with three registered nurses, working in two NHS Trusts (referred to as 'Nightingale' and 'Seacole' NHS Trusts for anonymity) who had completed their mentorship preparation studies within the last 18 months. Initial participants were volunteers, responding to a speculative email to past students. Ethical approval was obtained from the NHS Trusts and individual participants; adhering to both the British Educational Research Association ethical guidelines (BERA, 2004) and the NMC (2008a) Code of Conduct (in place at the time of research).

In this section, the development of 'relationship constellations' is discussed. As part of the interviews, participants were asked to create hand-drawn 'spider' diagrams, with the participant at the centre of the diagram and lines radiating out to connect with those individuals thought by the participant to be significant in their mentorship learning. The resulting star shape influenced the decision to name them constellations. The constellations were annotated with comments from participants to denote relative strength of the relationship and the attributes contributing to the relationship. The constellations presented here are based on what was drawn during the interview, augmented with what was said.

Snowball sampling allowed the initial participants to identify colleagues they felt to be significant to their mentorship learning and development in their constellations, and brokered their engagement in subsequent rounds of interviews (Faugier and Sargeant, 1997; Noy, 2008). Interviews with two Practice Education Facilitators, and Nurse Education Leads for both Trusts were also conducted in order to gauge reciprocity of relationships (see Table 1). Demographic details of all participants are shown in Table 1. This paper deals with the creation and analysis of workplace relationship constellations, and does not address the wider content of the interviews undertaken.

2.2. Constellation units of analysis

The relationship constellations represent a self-selected egocentric network around each participant at a fixed point in their mentorship or educational development. Constellations were converted into a digital format for clarity, and subjected to analysis in terms of three key units of network analysis (2012). These are *Attribute* (properties and characteristics of relationships), *Relational* (number of relationships), and *Ideational* data (meanings, motives, definitions and typifications themselves). Whilst Scott argues that not all network analysis research will use each type of data, elements of each type are present in this research. Attributes are presented as labels on each of the constellations and descriptively analysed to show what is perceived of significant others. There is a difference in focus of the constellations at each level. RQMs were asked to document people significant to their mentorship learning whilst undertaking the mentorship course. Senior educational participants were asked about supporters in their mentorship or practice education roles.

2.3. Ideational and relational data analysis

The strength of relationships between the initial interviewee and those identified as significant in their learning (and in subsequent interviews with these individuals) was gauged through applying a four point grading system to each of the relationships, where one equalled least significant, and four equalled the most significant relationship. Thus different options for line thickness were employed to correspond with the strength and currency of relationships with directional arrowheads used to show relationship reciprocity. This offered a way of gauging how significant each person was in relation to development within either their mentorship role, or current post.

Ideational and Relational data are analysed using a framework which focuses on two main elements of analysis: namely the make-up of individual networks, and the strength of individual developmental relationships within them. This framework developed organically from observations within the data collection phase, but has since been refined using a typology of network relationships (Higgins and Kram, 2001) which formalises these concepts as network diversity, and network strength. The concept of network diversity concerns the flow of information, with Higgins and Kram (2001: 269) noting that:

> "The less redundant the information provided by one's network, the greater the focal individual's access to valuable resources and information."

In this context a network has greater redundancy if information