

ORIGINAL RESEARCH

Undergraduate nursing students' perceptions of integrating evidence into practice in a psychiatric-mental health nursing clinical course

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Received: March 6, 2019

Accepted: May 16, 2019

Online Published: May 24, 2019

DOI: 10.5430/jnep.v9n9p1

URL: <https://doi.org/10.5430/jnep.v9n9p1>

ABSTRACT

Faculty in a baccalaureate nursing program recognized the need to make intentional efforts to assist nursing students in integrating evidence-based knowledge in their clinical learning. This paper aims to describe ways in which evidence-based practice (EBP) was incorporated into Psychiatric-Mental Health Clinical Course (P-MHCC) assignments, and summarize students' perceptions about their use of evidence in their clinical practice. Content analysis was performed on 64 student essays. Four themes were identified following analyses of students' written self-reflections: clinical assignments created opportunities to incorporate EBP, assignments promoted exploration of resources and fostered development of a professional self-concept, use of evidence in mental health nursing, and students' views on future use of EBP and barriers. Clinical assignments and educational experiences were influential in students' utilization of EBP. Students agreed on the value of EBP in their development as nurses and as being necessary to provide the best care to patients. Three future recommendations were proposed. First, faculty facilitating clinical courses must integrate EBP as a consistent component across all clinical assignments and employ specific rubrics to help students recognize the importance of evidence in clinical practice. Second, faculty must be proactive to explore and address students' barriers to integration of EBP in a P-MHCC. Finally, clinical faculty should consider the use of EBP in clinical assignments as one of the strategies to promote students' professional self-concept. Future research should include systematically exploring and testing the teaching strategies used by nursing faculty at all levels of the baccalaureate program to determine their effectiveness in improving baccalaureate-nursing students' knowledge and skills.

Key Words: Nursing students, Evidence-based practice, Psychiatric-mental health clinical teaching, Clinical assignments

1. INTRODUCTION

The consistent implementation of evidence in clinical practice impacts the provision of safe and high quality care, improves patient health care specific outcomes, reduces cost, empowers clinicians, and promotes teamwork and job satisfaction.

[1-3] For nursing professionals to integrate evidence into their clinical practice, they need formal preparation during their baccalaureate education. One of the key barriers to consistent implementation of evidence-based practice (EBP) stems from lack of academic preparation including knowl-

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edge and skills.^[2,4,5]

A systematic review of pedagogical strategies to teach baccalaureate nursing students EBP revealed that students are often unable to comprehend how nursing research findings impact clinical practice.^[6] The author suggested moving beyond education about research and information literacy in nursing programs. One strategy that emerged involved linking student learning to real clinical situations to pique student interest and make the learning relevant. The existing literature on EBP is limited in how to teach this critical skill in a Psychiatric-Mental Health Clinical Course (P-MHCC). Nursing faculty must create opportunities for students to integrate EBP in clinical care through design of specific clinical assignments, and then follow up with student perceptions about such integration. Such intentional effort could assist nursing students to appreciate the clinical value of using evidence and make it one of their life-long approaches to clinical practice. In an effort to achieve this outcome, the purpose of this project was twofold—to describe ways in which EBP was incorporated into a P-MHCC, and to summarize students' views about their use of evidence in their mental health clinical practice.

2. METHODS

A team of four psychiatric-mental health nursing faculty members from a baccalaureate nursing program at a large Midwestern public university met to strategize how best to integrate EBP in a junior-level P-MHCC. At this juncture of the curriculum, students had already taken a nursing research course. Faculty made a focused effort to design assignments to address the domains prescribed by the baccalaureate nursing curriculum, including the EBP course objective (*viz*, “demonstrate evidence-based nursing practice with related technical competencies to care for individuals, families, and groups in order to promote mental health and restore health and functioning”). To help students meet this objective, assignments were created to facilitate students' learning of critical mental health concepts, specifically including demonstration of use of evidence-based literature. The assignments included: a) a student-led group/activity plan and evaluation paper, b) a therapeutic communication process recording, and c) six weekly clinical reflections. At the outset, faculty established that at the end of the term they would use the last clinical reflection to determine students' perceptions about how they incorporated EBP in their P-MHCC. According to the Federal Policy for Protection of Human Subjects, this project was considered exempt research as it was “conducted in established or commonly accepted educational settings, that specifically involves normal educational practices that are not likely to adversely impact students' opportunity to

learn required educational content” (section 27.104, paragraph d.1).^[7] Anonymity of student respondents was maintained since essay title pages were removed prior to data extraction. A previously published paper addresses the number and type of references most used by students.^[8]

Each of the four clinical faculty members taught two clinical courses during the term, which resulted in 64 students. In addition to a narrative description of each assignment in the syllabus, there was also a detailed grading rubric. In the P-MHCC, the student-led group assignment required them to develop a teaching plan, facilitate a patient group during their clinical, and write a post-session evaluation paper. The assignment rubric clearly explicated that students would be evaluated on their use of group theory principles and current literature in their teaching plan and post-session evaluation paper.

For the process recording, students were expected to record verbatim a part of one of their patient interactions, document the specific communication techniques utilized, analyze their interactional process, and provide evidence to support their analyses from current literature. Additionally, students were asked to provide patient demographics, psychiatric history, and a description of environmental factors influencing the interactional process.

Students were expected to write a total of six reflection papers. The first five reflection assignments each focused on students articulating a specific clinical problem and then searching the literature to determine how best to manage it. Their final reflection differed from the previous five in its focus on the entire clinical rotation. In the final reflection paper, students were expected to describe how they “demonstrated evidence-based nursing practice” throughout the P-MHCC, and share their “views about continuing EBP” in clinical practice in the future.

After the semester completed, title pages with student names were removed from the final reflection papers. Two faculty members read all 64 essays, and content analyses were performed. Content analysis is a qualitative analysis procedure for methodically making sense of the transcriptions using three basic techniques: (a) deciding on the unit of analysis, (b) borrowing or developing a set of categories, and (c) developing the rationale and illustrations to guide the coding of data into categories.^[9] Notes were made in the margins where students indicated how they demonstrated EBP in their mental health practicum, including their comments about using EBP in their future clinical courses. After reading through the notes and categorizing each item, themes were developed.

3. RESULTS

Students shared several perspectives regarding their use of EBP during their mental health clinical practicum. These clustered into four areas: a) clinical assignments provided motivation to incorporate EBP, b) assignments promoted exploration of resources and fostered development of a professional self-concept, c) use of evidence in mental health nursing, and d) student's views on future use of EBP and barriers. Exploration of these themes follows.

3.1 Clinical assignments created opportunities to incorporate EBP

Students indicated that the P-MHCC promoted their use of EBP through structured clinical assignments. This enhanced student comfort in using EBP over time in their clinical work. One student wrote, "During this rotation I finally integrated evidence-based practice into my learning." Others specifically identified the importance of the academic expectation as the reason for utilizing EBP. For example, "throughout the semester, I have spent many occasions researching and analyzing evidence-based nursing practice. Often the prompt for doing so was to complete assignments."

Weekly reflections were the most reported assignments that students mentioned stimulated them to use evidence-based literature. Repeated, structured reflection assignments helped students recognize the importance of evidence in clinical practice. For example, "I was so surprised to find how much literature existed about the significant events that [I] experienced [*sic*] during my clinical. There is a reason behind everything that nurses do." EBP-focused reflections were also helpful in validating or appraising nursing actions implemented during clinical. For example, "I was able to take situations that happened in clinical and find evidence that both supported and rejected my interventions. In turn, I was able to correct or continue my nursing skills."

Students identified that using EBP literature for the student-led group assignment helped them expand their knowledge about both the process of leading groups and the content used to educate patients. For example, "In my research for my group yoga class I found more evidence based articles on the benefits of yoga, deep breathing, and meditation and their capacity to help with depression, anxiety, and insomnia." Regarding leading groups, students found EBP useful in learning about the promotion and creation of supportive group environments for patients.

The process recording assignment revealed less use of evidence-based literature, possibly due to the nature of the assignment. Specifically, this assignment required the ability to analyze thought content and process in complex interper-

sonal interactions, and for that purpose, their course textbook was a relevant resource.

3.2 Assignments promoted exploration of resources and fostered development of a professional self-concept

Students reported that although their earlier research course exposed them to university library resources, they gained more experience in utilizing these resources when expected to do so in this clinical course. Resources identified to uncover EBP-related literature included: a) their textbook, b) nursing journal articles, c) the National Guideline Clearinghouse, d) Nursing Reference Center, and e) handouts available on the unit. Students used search engines such as CINAHL, EBSCO, and PUBMED. Some employed online computer applications designed to keep nurses current with the latest nursing practice.

Students noted professional growth as future registered nurses through clinical use of evidence. For example, some noted that the use of EBP assignments enhanced their self-confidence, capability, and sense of feeling more accomplished, knowing they were providing the most appropriate care for their patients. Others realized that using current literature validated what they were learning during clinical, making clinical education more meaningful. One student concluded that frequent engagement in EBP was "beneficial" in promoting a sense of "self-efficacy".

3.3 Use of evidence in mental health nursing

Students shared valuable insights about using evidence in the mental health nursing clinical. Some noted that it deepened their understanding of mental illness and psychiatric nursing practice. It helped them understand the impact mental illness has on the overall well-being of patients. One student noted, "the evidence-based research helped me understand how the illness affects individuals socially, physically, cognitively, chemically, and genetically". Additionally, students found that evidence-based literature assisted them in addressing personal biases and stigma regarding mental illness, which helps nurses provide empathetic patient care, dispel societal biases, and encourage patient help-seeking behavior. For example, literature on stigma helped one student realize that mental illness is not completely "under the control of the patient." As she stated, "It helped me communicate and therapeutically relate to my patients on a deeper level when I could understand how the illness was affecting them." Through using an evidence-based approach, many students learned the value of understanding mental health and illness to provide quality care in every nursing practice area, "not just psychiatric nursing."

3.4 Students' views on future use of EBP and barriers

Students described the profession of nursing as influenced by “ever-changing information” and “constantly evolving evidence-based practice.” To ensure provision of the best quality of care in the future, students indicated that the process of using evidence-based literature in their current practice would equip them with “the best tools and techniques possible” to care optimally for their patients. Students identified EBP as “the foundation of nursing care”, as it provided “the proper structure for the nursing process.” Hence, it was appreciated as a valuable asset in all facets of nursing practice.

Students identified current and future outcomes of having used evidence in this course, including educating themselves about the rationale behind nursing actions and supporting improved advocacy for their patients. Additionally, students realized that using evidence in their practice could assist in designing patient care-focused policies, ultimately contributing to a more beneficial hospital stay for patients.

Although students recognized the value of incorporating EBP in clinical, they also shared some barriers. For example, since locating and reviewing literature was time consuming, students actually relied heavily on their textbook, rather than articles, during clinical hours. Similarly, utilizing EBP in the care of their emotionally ill patients was seen as comparatively harder to do than with their medically ill patients. Every emotionally ill patient was seen as an individual, requiring different nursing approaches for each. In contrast, finding “evidence” about best care for diabetes or heart failure was perceived as easier than finding “best evidence” for psychiatric patients with complex emotional histories and comorbidities.

4. DISCUSSION

Based on students' views and perceptions of EBP, faculty concluded that the P-MHCC assignments and clinical educational experiences were helpful in motivating students to incorporate EBP into their clinical practice. Horntvedt, Nordsteien, Fermann, and Severinsson (2018) asserted that course assignments integrating a variety of interactive teaching strategies can promote EBP knowledge and skills in baccalaureate nursing students, and our experience supported this.^[10]

The P-MHCC faculty believe that concerted efforts from instructors across the entire baccalaureate nursing program would assist students to integrate EBP at all levels of this program. Hande, Williams, Robbins, Kennedy, and Christenbery (2017) indicated that nursing faculty must make an intentional effort to leveling EBP (both EBP specific objec-

tives as well as teaching and learning strategies) across both the baccalaureate and graduate nursing curriculum.^[11] Students used a variety of resources to find literature related to mental health nursing care practice concepts. They agreed on the importance of incorporating EBP into their clinical experiences, and indicated its value to their development as future nurses, and their abilities to provide the best possible care to patients. However, students reported that searching the literature for relevant research to address clinical practice questions was time-consuming. The “demands and rigors of clinical practice” (p. 148) have been cited as a reason why clinicians often find it difficult to investigate the literature.^[12] Wallis (2012) indicated that the two most common barriers to implementing EBP are “lack of time and an organizational culture that didn't support it” (p. 15).^[13] The clinical faculty members' focused effort to design all the clinical assignments in a given P-MHCC was one of the important strategies that helped students recognize the value of integrating EBP into clinical practice in a multitude of ways, though not without a few barriers.

Horntvedt, Nordsteien, Fermann and Severinsson (2018), in their thematic literature review on strategies for teaching EBP in nursing education, asserted “a need for more qualitative research investigating interactive and clinically integrated teaching strategies towards further enhancing EBP undergraduate nursing students' knowledge and skills” (p. 1).^[10] The integration of EBP across all of the P-MHCC assignments was a unique strategy, and the findings of this project support the integration of such a strategy in other clinical courses.

With respect to future implications, this project provided insight into the need for research to determine the quality and depth of students' integration of EBP in their assignments and practice. Based on the findings of this project, three future recommendations are proposed. First, faculty facilitating clinical courses must make integration of EBP a consistent component across all clinical assignments, and use specific rubrics, as such an effort helps students recognize the importance of evidence in clinical practice. Second, faculty have to be proactive to explore and address students' barriers to integration of EBP in a P-MHCC. Finally, clinical faculty might consider the use of EBP in clinical assignments as one of the strategies of promoting students' professional self-concept.

Future research should include the extent of student engagement in EBP as seniors and graduate nurses. For example, would the interest and skills gained during a nursing program be sustainable and sufficiently internalized to facilitate continued use of evidence in one's clinical practice? More-

over, there is a need to explore whether this approach to teaching EBP in mental health nursing is applicable in other practice specialties. Finally, more research to systematically determine the effectiveness of clinically integrated teaching strategies that further baccalaureate nursing students' knowledge and skills should be conducted.

Our educational project had limitations. We employed a convenience sample of only one nursing school in the U.S. and relied on students' self-reports of how they had benefited from the use of evidence in their practice. There was no follow-up after the course to ascertain how this assignment impacted developing a routine of consistently using evidence to inform practice.

5. CONCLUSION

This project was a concerted effort by the P-MHCC faculty to incorporate EBP into all clinical assignments. Students indicated that the assignments and clinical education experiences were influential in their utilization of evidence in their clinical practice. They agreed on the value of EBP in their development as nurses in order to provide the best care to their patients.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST DISCLOSURE

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

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