

Continuing Education and Support of Preceptors in the Clinical Setting: A Collaborative Action Research Project.

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Introduction

In the Irish context a preceptor is defined as an experienced nurse or midwife who has been specially prepared to guide and direct student learning, by acting as a role model and resource during their clinical placement (Government of Ireland 2000). Staff preparation is an essential element of implementing the preceptor role however education and training are not the only factors associated with effective preceptorship; formal and informal support is essential (Finn 2007, McCarthy and Higgins 2003). A collaborative approach to preceptor preparation and support is required to enhance the transfer of skills from classroom to practice and is therefore the joint responsibility of both service providers and education institutions (Burns and Paterson 2005).

Although there is much international literature on initial preceptorship preparation there is insufficient research, particularly within an Irish context, to provide an evidence to inform the development of effective strategies to reinforce learning, develop competence and support preceptors in fulfilling their role and responsibilities. This collaborative action research project aimed to develop learning and support strategies that reinforced prior learning and facilitated preceptor competence development in practice.

Action Research Methodology

Action research ‘adds the promotion of change to traditional research purposes of description, understanding and explanation’ (Robson 2005, pg 215) and is an evolving methodology within healthcare as a means of developing knowledge and improving practice (Reid 2005). The overall purpose of this study was to bring about a change in practice in relation to preceptor competence, continuing education and support. Sustainable change can only be achieved through engagement and participation with all key stakeholders (Koch and Kralik 2006) therefore a collaborative approach was required for this project. Collaborative action research involves “the exploration of issues in their natural context through the empowerment of people, allowing interpretations, explanations and solutions to come from the practitioners involved” (McNiff et al 2000, pg 131).

The Action Research Cycle

McNiff’s (1988) Action Research Cycle was used as framework to guide this study and consists of a process of identifying problems, generating solutions, implementing solutions and evaluating solutions. A Collaborative Action Research Group (CARG), consisting of key stakeholders with a vested interest in preceptorship, was established early in the project and included representatives from the Health Care Organisations and the Higher Education Institution. The group met on a monthly basis throughout the

duration of the project over a two year period to facilitate work within each stage of the action research cycle.

Identifying Problems

The first step of the project was to identify the problems that were to be addressed through the Action Research Project. Although previous research, and more specifically a study that examined Preceptor Preparation and Support in the South East (Finn 2007), highlighted the need for continuing education and further support for preceptors, the CARG further explored these issues within their local context and own experiences. A process of group reflection and analysis of the literature helped the CARG to clearly articulate and agree the project focus which consisted of addressing five key problems: 1) the lack of documented competencies specific to the preceptor role, 2) minimal attention paid to learning transfer following initial training, 3) insufficient preceptor support in clinical practice, 4) poor communication between the college and clinical practice, and 5) the need for continuing education for preceptors.

Generating Solutions

The process of generating solutions to the identified problems also involved a process of individual and group reflection over several CARG meetings. Ideas were explored then examined from a pragmatic and economic perspective before being agreed and 'owned' by CARG. It was clear that competencies specific to the preceptor role needed to be developed so the role could be clearly articulated to staff and students alike. Once identified, competencies would underpin preceptor training and continuing education courses and form the basis for preceptor ongoing development.

The solution relating to promoting learning transfer involved several actions. The first being the development of a 'learning transfer log' that was to be implemented prior to, during, and following training. This would enable the student to take responsibility for their learning and promote the transference of knowledge, skills and competencies developed during training to their clinical practice. It would also promote the involvement of nurse managers in the learning transfer process by ensuring they reviewed the learning log and agreed a plan for further development with the preceptor.

The CARG agreed that a newsletter could promote communication between nurse lecturers and clinicians, be used to disseminate information and provide an opportunity to reward, recognize and thus support preceptors in their practice. The newsletter could also have an education focus and therefore would be a solution that helped address several of the problems identified by the CARG. Following a brief cost benefit analysis, the group proposed the formation of a newsletter subgroup to design and implement this solution.

To address the issue of continuing education for preceptors it was proposed that e-learning be explored and piloted as a National e-Learning Preceptor Programme (O'Connor et al 2009) had been developed aimed at promoting continuing education for preceptors. The task of the CARG would be to promote the e-learning programme and facilitate preceptors to access it. The group agreed that posters would be developed and

information sessions held throughout the region to raise awareness and promote the on-line continuing education programme as a valuable resource.

Implementing Solutions

Preceptor competencies were identified following a review of the literature and negotiation within the group. The competencies were integrated within the revised preceptor initial training programme and underpinned the learning outcomes, content and teaching and learning strategies within the workshop. The competencies also informed the development of the learning transfer log which was implemented to promote learning transfer.

The bi-annual newsletter named 'Preceptor News and Views' was launched to offer a unique and easily accessible method to support preceptors, reward and recognize excellence in the role, share information regarding student placements, list current publications and identify continuing education opportunities such as the national e-learning programme for preceptors (O'Conner et al 2009). Developed by a subgroup from CARG and other co-opted members (preceptors and nurse lecturers) the newsletter is distributed to all clinical sites that support students during their placements.

Evaluation

Action research is known to utilise a variety of methods to evaluate the actions undertaken. A key consideration in planning evaluation methods in any project surrounds the issue of what is to be evaluated, who should undertake the evaluation and how should this be carried out. Pluralistic evaluation is a method that shares such decisions amongst key stakeholders (Hall 2004). It supports the notion of wider participation versus unitary decision making processes and was therefore chosen as the most appropriate approach for evaluating the actions within this collaborative action research project.

The generation of success criteria was the first task the CARG had to undergo in planning the evaluation methods. By determining what 'success' was in relation to the effectiveness of solutions, the group could then agree the best methods of evaluating if such criteria were met (Owens and Rochford 2008). Success criteria were agreed within the four main categories of actions: 1) development and integration of preceptor competencies, 2) implementation of the learning transfer log, 3) development and distribution of the newsletter, and 4) promotion and utilisation of the e-learning programme. Several methods of data collection were planned by the CARG that included focus groups; a survey and documentary analysis. Initial exploration of the data shows positive response to the CARG activities and the meeting of success criteria however further analysis is currently being undertaken.

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