Understanding Academic Best Practices in the Development of Entry-to-Practice Competencies for Public Health Nurses

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Abstract

The researchers sought to identify the best academic practices and approaches relating to three Canadian Association Schools of Nursing (CASN) Entry-to-Practice Domains. Collaborative research was conducted with nursing faculty, public health professionals and Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BScN) students in Northeastern Ontario.

Keywords: Best Academic Practices, Entry-to-practice, Nursing.

Résumé

Les chercheurs ont voulu cerner les pratiques et les approches universitaires exemplaires concernant trois domaines des soins infirmiers de santé publique au niveau débutant au sein de l'Association canadienne des écoles de sciences infirmières. Une recherche concertée a été effectuée avec des membres du corps professoral en sciences infirmières, des professionnels de la santé publique et des étudiants au baccalauréat en sciences infirmières dans le nord-est de l'Ontario.

Mots clés : Meilleures pratiques académiques, Admission à la profession, Soins infirmiers.

Background

Public Health Nurses (PHNs) play a significant role in public health (PH) locally, regionally, and provincially. Ensuring student nurses have entry level competencies as they enter the public health workforce is imperative. The 2014 Canadian Association of Schools of Nursing (CASN) *Entry-To-Practice Public Health Nursing Competencies for Undergraduate Nursing Education* document outlines the competencies and indicators to direct curriculum development for educators teaching public health. Not well understood by the researchers was the academic best practices (curricula, teaching materials and methods) relevant to the Northern Ontario PH context to prepare student nurses to obtain the CASN entry-to-practice competencies.

Purpose

Through collaborative research, the researchers sought to identify the best academic practices and approaches relating to the following three of the five CASN Entry-to-Practice domains:

- Population and Community Health Assessment and Analysis;
- Population Health Planning, Implementation and Evaluation; and
- Partnerships, Collaboration and Advocacy (CASN, 2014).

Methodology

The research project consisted of a literature review and structured interviews initiated in 2016. Literature was reviewed published between 2010 and 2016. The search included full review of 102 articles in nine academic databases and eleven public health grey literature databases.

Interviews conducted by a research assistant utilized prepared scripts of open-ended questions. Participation in the interviews included:

- Phone interviews with six 4th year nursing students attending Laurentian University
- Teleconference focus interviews with fifteen public health professionals
- Phone/in person interviews with nine Laurentian University Collaborative Nursing Program faculty

Findings

A thematic review of the literature on best practices for nursing education revealed key themes as follows:

1. An understanding of the best practices and expectations of public health nurses will help inform what skills and tools will be necessary for students to acquire prior to graduation.
2. Using strategies and tools in the classroom, such as introducing projects in public health, work within teams, simulation, and service learning, helps create student interest in public health.
3. Interagency and interprofessional collaboration provides unique learning experiences.
4. Introducing public health to first year students prior to participation in community placements by incorporating tools such as problem-based learning and the ecological model

Interviews

Curriculum strengths, gaps and practices to prepare entry-to-practice varied among participants.

Strengths in the curriculum included:

1. Collaboration and partnership with community health agencies
2. Implementation of courses that focus on community health content
3. Inclusion of community-based assignments (e.g. community health assessment)

4. Emphasis on the nursing best practice guidelines and the CASN competencies to guide program development and evaluation.
5. Educators with previous or current work experience in PH
6. Using teaching techniques/methods: class discussion of concept and placement experiences; student reflection; listening; group work; demonstration of passion for public health; interactive scenario's; and tests that focus on application and realistic case studies/scenarios.
7. Use of key resources: textbooks, online resources (e.g. standards and area of practice), guest speakers from Public Health, community agencies, and consumers of PH care to illustrate and provide examples of application of theory

Challenges in the curriculum included:

1. the nursing program curriculum major focus on acute care
2. the sequencing of community content that occurs later within the program which impacts students' awareness of PH concepts prior to placements as well as perspective of what nursing is and ultimately their interest in and value of community nursing.
3. the community nursing content is overwhelming and not presented in an interesting and relevant way (particularly for those interested in acute care).
4. the limited placement opportunities in PH compound challenges in developing competencies.
5. the national exam (NCLEX) focusses more on acute care practice.

Implications

Literature and key informant interview analysis provided suggestions for PH and the education sector related to academic practices to improve CASN Entry-to-Practice public health nursing competencies for undergraduate nursing education.

Public Health Sector

- Active nursing student education (e.g. Adjunct Professor, curriculum consultant)
- Ensure preceptors have the knowledge, skills and attitude to provide and support meaningful student placements
- Identify projects/experiences that could involve student participation (e.g. advocacy)
- Advocate for inclusion of NCLEX questions pertaining to Public Health

Education

- Expose students to concepts of PH and Determinants of Health earlier and throughout the nursing curriculum
- Explore flexible placement opportunities coinciding with the delivery of program concepts
- Continue incorporating guest speakers and tools/resources that connect conceptual learning with practical experiences

- Identify and explore opportunities for students to learn and experience the application of competencies (e.g. health policy development, partnerships, coalition building)
- Knowledge exchange between Education sector and Public Health sector
- Continue to employ Nursing faculty with competencies and experience related to PH
- Incorporate PHN Entry-to-Practice competencies in community clinical evaluation tools

Conclusion

There are academic best practice approaches to increase entry-to-practice public health nursing competencies for student nurses. Many of these approaches are currently employed in Northern Ontario BScN programs. However, gaps in practice exist related to sequencing of curriculum, placement opportunities in public health and limited NCLEX content. Strengthening partnerships between academia and practitioners involved in enhancing population health will assist in addressing these gaps and enhance academic practice in building CASN Entry-to-Practice public health nursing competencies for nursing students.

References

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