

Characteristics of ‘best’ and ‘worst’ clinical teachers as perceived by university nursing faculty and students

Judith Mogan RN MA *Assistant Professor, School of Nursing, University of British Columbia, Vancouver* and Janet E. Knox RN MN *Nursing Consultant—Education, Registered Nurses Association of Nova Scotia, Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada*

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Characteristics of ‘best’ and ‘worst’ clinical teachers as perceived by university nursing faculty and students

This study identified and compared characteristics of ‘best’ and ‘worst’ clinical teachers as perceived by university nursing faculty and students. The Nursing Clinical Teacher Effectiveness Inventory (NCTEI) was distributed to 201 volunteer subjects. This survey instrument, developed by the authors, contains 48 clinical teacher characteristics grouped into five categories. Each participant was asked to rate, using the NCTEI, the ‘best’ and then the ‘worst’ clinical teacher from past observations. Results showed both groups perceived that being a good role model was the highest rated characteristic for ‘best’ teachers and the ‘lowest’ rated characteristic for ‘worst’ teachers. Faculty and students’ perceptions were fairly similar as to highest rated characteristics of ‘best’ clinical teachers. Less agreement was noted about the characteristics of ‘worst’ clinical teachers. When categories of clinical teacher characteristics were compared, there were significant differences between the ratings of faculty and students for ‘best’ clinical teachers, but none for ‘worst’ clinical teachers.

CLINICAL EXPERIENCES

Clinical experience is important in nursing education, although escalating costs and scarcity of locations for practice necessitate keeping clinical experiences to a minimum. Clinical teachers, therefore, must be effective and efficient if students are to make the best use of these practice opportunities.

At present, however, the criteria for effective clinical teaching are poorly defined, and reliable and valid tools for evaluation of clinical teachers are lacking.

This study identified and compared characteristics attributed to ‘best’ and ‘worst’ clinical teachers by faculty and students in order to

provide clinical teachers with a list of characteristics to be developed and/or strengthened and behaviours to be reduced or avoided.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Several investigators have collected data from student and/or faculty members on effective or ineffective behaviours in clinical teachers (Barham 1965, Jacobson 1966, Wong 1978, O’Shea & Parsons 1979, Schimpfhouer *et al.* 1981, Mogan & Knox 1983). Differing methods were used to identify important teacher characteristics in these studies. However, all these investigators identified similar categories or dimensions. The characteristics identified by these investigators can be included in the

Correspondence: Judith Mogan RN MA, The School of Nursing, The University of British Columbia, T.F. 206-2211 Wesbrook Mall, Vancouver, BC V6T 2B5, Canada.

following five categories or dimensions: teaching skills, nursing competence, interpersonal skills, evaluation skills and personality traits.

Other researchers (Lowery *et al.* 1971, O'Shea & Parsons 1979, Stuebbe 1980, Schimpfhouse *et al.* 1981, Brown 1981, Wiley 1984, Knox & Mogan 1985) have compared the relative importance attached to teacher characteristics by different groups; for example, students' perceptions have been compared with perceptions of nursing faculty (Lowery *et al.* 1971, O'Shea & Parsons 1979, Stuebbe 1980, Schimpfhouse *et al.* 1981, Brown 1981, Wiley 1984), of graduates (Knox & Mogan 1985), and of education students (Kiker 1973). Results differed, even when Wiley (1984) replicated Brown's (1981) study and found differences in the perceptions between students and faculty in certain characteristics where Brown did not, and *vice versa*.

Furthermore, direct observation of clinical teachers' behaviours is rarely described in nursing education literature (Schimpfhouse *et al.* 1981, Park 1982, Wang & Blumberg 1983). Nor did any of these studies differentiate between behaviours that help and those that hinder learning.

In summary, although certain critical teacher characteristics have been identified in the literature, their relative importance appears questionable at present. No attempt has been made to identify characteristics most typically ascribed to 'best' clinical teachers and those characteristics ascribed to 'worst' clinical teachers. The present study was designed to explore this issue.

RESEARCH QUESTION

This study addressed the following research question:

- 1 What are the specific characteristics differentiating 'best' from 'worst' clinical teachers?
 - (a) As rated by students. (b) As rated by faculty.
- 2 Is there a significant difference between the five previously identified significant categories of teacher characteristics as rated by students and faculty?
 - (a) Differences between categories for 'best' clinical teachers. (b) Differences between categories for 'worst' clinical teachers.

Definition of terms

Evaluation: the type and amount of feedback the student receives from the teacher regarding clinical performance and written clinical assignments.

Interpersonal relationship: a state of reciprocal interest or communication between two or more people excluding specific therapeutic communication between nurse and patient.

Nursing competence: the clinical teacher's theoretical and clinical knowledge used in the practice of nursing as well as the teacher's attitude toward the profession.

Personality trait: the totality of the individual's attitudes, emotional tendencies and character traits, which are not specifically related to teaching, nursing or interpersonal relationships but may affect all three.

Teaching ability: the process of transmission of skills and attitudes and the creation of an atmosphere in which this is done.

METHOD

Sample

Two hundred and one subjects, 28 clinical teachers and their 173 undergraduate students, participated in this study. Respondents were drawn from seven university schools of nursing, located in the western part of the United States and Canada. All 28 participating teachers had university preparation in nursing. The majority (62%) had master's degrees. Two participants had doctoral preparation. Past teaching experience varied from 0 to 10+ years.

There were 52 fourth-year students, 62 third-year students and 59 second-year students in the study. Since acceptance criteria demanded that students be taught by at least three clinical teachers before participating, students in the first year of the programme were excluded. Students' ages ranged from 19 to 46 years.

Instrument

The Nursing Clinical Teacher Effectiveness Inventory (NCTEI) developed by the authors and described in an earlier study (Knox & Mogan 1985) was the research instrument used

for this study. The NCTEI is a 48-item checklist which describes discrete teacher characteristics clustered into five subscales or categories: teaching ability, nursing competence, personality traits, interpersonal relationship and evaluation. Raters judge, on a seven-point Likert scale, how descriptive a specific characteristic is of a particular teacher. Category scores are obtained by summing scores of all items within a category. Summing all five category scores provides a total score for the teacher. Higher scores imply more positive teacher characteristics.

The instrument was found to be internally consistent ($\alpha=0.79-0.92$), was stable over time (test-retest scores at 4 weeks interval ranged from $r=0.76-0.93$), and was considered to have content and face validity.

Procedure

Data collection for this descriptive study was conducted in seven university schools of nursing located in the western part of Canada and the United States. Ten nurse-educators, attending a nursing education research conference were solicited to participate in this project. The NCTEI checklists, along with explanatory letters and stamped self-addressed envelopes, were mailed to these volunteers with a request to distribute this material to volunteer students and clinical teachers. NCTEI were also distributed to volunteer students and clinical teachers at the researchers' home school.

Respondents were asked to think of their 'best' clinical teacher and rate him or her using the NCTEI. Respondents were then directed to think of their 'worst' clinical teacher and to rate him or her as well.

FINDINGS

Means and standard deviations for each item for 'best' and for 'worst' clinical teachers as perceived by students and by faculty were calculated and the 10 highest rated characteristics of 'best' clinical teachers as rated by students were compared to the 10 characteristics rated highest by faculty. The same comparisons were made for the 10 lowest rated characteristics of 'worst' clinical teachers. (If two items received equal rating, both items were included in the comparison which resulted in 11 items being listed.)

Best clinical teacher characteristics

Highest rated characteristics of best clinical teachers were perceived fairly similarly by both groups (Table 1).

Faculty and students perceived 'best' clinical teachers as good role models who enjoyed nursing and teaching. They were well prepared for teaching, and seen as self-confident, skilled clinicians who took responsibility for their own actions. They were also approachable and fostered mutual respect. Three characteristics were not shared by the two groups. While students perceived 'best' clinical teachers as demonstrating enthusiasm, promoting student independence and correcting students without belittling them, faculty perceived them as teachers who demonstrated breadth of nursing knowledge, who explained clearly and who stimulated students' interest.

Worst clinical teacher characteristics

There was less agreement between the two groups on characteristics of worst teachers (Table 2).

Faculty's perceptions dealt with a lack of enjoyment of nursing, deficient communication skills, inability to objectively identify students' strengths and weaknesses and to help students organize their thoughts about patient problems. Students perceived 'worst' clinical teachers as unapproachable and lacking empathy. They felt that 'worst' clinical teachers did not communicate their expectations clearly and belittled students when they made mistakes. Faculty and students agreed in their perception of 'worst' clinical teachers as poor role models, judgemental and not open minded. These teachers, they believed, failed to recognize their own limitations or to use self-criticism constructively. Finally, 'worst' clinical teachers were perceived as not having provided support and encouragement to students and to have failed to create an atmosphere of mutual respect.

Distinguishing characteristics

The major differences between 'best' and 'worst' clinical teacher characteristics emerged when mean ratings of each item were compared (Table 3).

TABLE 1 Highest rated characteristics of best clinical teachers as perceived by students and faculty

| Students | | | Faculty | | |
|---|-----------|------|--|-----------|------|
| Item | \bar{x} | s.d. | Item | \bar{x} | s.d. |
| * Is a good role model (N) | 6.63 | 0.68 | * Enjoys teaching (T) | 6.60 | 0.69 |
| * Enjoys nursing (N) | 6.52 | 0.72 | * Is a good role model (N) | 6.57 | 0.63 |
| * Demonstrates clinical skills and judgement (N) | | | * Demonstrates clinical skill and judgement (N) | 6.54 | 0.51 |
| * Enjoys teaching (T) | 6.48 | 0.92 | * Enjoys nursing (N) | 6.54 | 0.64 |
| * Is well prepared for teaching (T) | 6.40 | 0.83 | Stimulates student interest in the subject (T) | 6.50 | 0.98 |
| * Takes responsibility for own actions (N) | 6.38 | 0.76 | Explains clearly (T) | 6.21 | 0.69 |
| * Is approachable (R) | 6.38 | 0.93 | Demonstrates a breadth of knowledge in nursing (N) | 6.18 | 0.86 |
| * Is self-confident (P) | 6.36 | 0.80 | * Takes responsibility for own action (N) | 6.18 | 0.86 |
| Demonstrates enthusiasm (P) | 6.31 | 0.88 | * Is well prepared for teaching (T) | 6.14 | 0.89 |
| Promotes student independence (E) | 6.29 | 0.85 | * Is self-confident (P) | 6.07 | 0.98 |
| Corrects students' mistakes without belittling them (E) | 6.29 | 1.01 | * Is approachable (R) | 6.07 | 1.02 |

Note: The means and standard deviations reported here were calculated from a seven-point response set where 1 = not at all descriptive, 7 = very descriptive.

*Characteristic included by students and faculty

(T) Teaching ability

(N) Nursing competence

(P) Personality

(E) Evaluation

(R) Interpersonal relationship

There was agreement between faculty and students on four of the 10 most discriminating characteristics. Two of these came from the *nursing competence* category—'Is a good role model' and 'Enjoys nursing'. These were followed by two items from the *interpersonal relationship* category—'Is approachable' and 'Encourages a climate of mutual respect'.

The perceptions of the two groups (faculty versus students) diverged on other discriminating characteristics, however. Faculty identified three more *nursing competence* items as important in distinguishing between 'best' and 'worst' teachers ('Recognizes own limitations', 'Demonstrates communication skills', and 'Demonstrates a breadth of knowledge in nursing'). Students did not identify as important discriminating factors any other *nursing competence* items.

Faculty also listed four more *teaching ability* items as most discriminating characteristics between 'best' and 'worst' clinical teachers ('Stimulates students' interest in the subject', 'Explains clearly', and 'Enjoys teaching').

Students did not identify any *teaching ability* items as an important discriminating factor.

Indeed, students attached more importance to items related to *interpersonal relationship* ('Is approachable', 'Provides support and encouragement to students', and 'Demonstrates empathy'), to *evaluation* ('Corrects students' mistakes without belittling them', 'Gives students positive reinforcement for good contributions, observations or performance', 'Does not criticize students in front of others', and 'Identifies students' strengths and limitations'), and to one *personality trait* item ('Is open minded and non-judgemental'). Faculty members did not identify any more items in these last three categories as relevant discriminators between 'best' and 'worst' clinical teachers.

Differences between faculty and students' category scores

Analysis of variance of category for 'best' teachers showed significant differences between ratings by the two groups for three of the five

TABLE 2 Ten lowest rated characteristics of worst clinical teachers as perceived by students and faculty

| Students | | | Faculty | | |
|---|-----------|------|---|-----------|------|
| Item | \bar{x} | s.d. | Item | \bar{x} | s.d. |
| * Is a good role model (N) | 2.36 | 1.47 | * Is a good role model (N) | 2.39 | 1.45 |
| * Uses self-criticism constructively (P) | 2.63 | 1.51 | * Recognizes own limitations (N) | 2.46 | 1.11 |
| * Is open-minded and non-judgemental (P) | 2.67 | 1.67 | * Uses self-criticism constructively (N) | 2.48 | 1.28 |
| Demonstrates empathy (R) | 2.70 | 1.66 | Enjoys nursing (N) | 2.50 | 1.53 |
| Corrects students' mistakes without belittling them (E) | 2.71 | 1.86 | * Encourages a climate of mutual respect (R) | 2.50 | 1.35 |
| * Encourages a climate of mutual respect (R) | 2.72 | 1.62 | Demonstrates communication skills (N) | 2.61 | 1.26 |
| * Provides support and encouragement to students (R) | 2.81 | 1.63 | Stimulates student interest in the subject (T) | 2.61 | 1.10 |
| Communicates clearly expectations of students (E) | 2.68 | 1.66 | Identifies students' strengths and limitations objectively (E) | 2.64 | 1.34 |
| Is approachable (R) | 2.87 | 1.76 | * Is open-minded and non-judgemental (P) | 2.74 | 1.61 |
| * Recognizes own limitations (N) | 2.90 | 1.64 | * Provides support and encouragement to students (R) | 2.86 | 1.46 |
| | | | Helps students organize their thoughts about patient problems (T) | 2.86 | 1.30 |

Note: The means and standard deviations reported here were calculated from a seven-point response set where 1 = not at all descriptive, 7 = very descriptive.

*Characteristic included by students and faculty

(T) Teaching ability

(N) Nursing competence

(P) Personality

(E) Evaluation

(R) Interpersonal relationship

categories: *personality trait*, $F(1188) = 18.2$, $P < 0.001$; *evaluation*, $F(1188) = 20.64$, $P < 0.001$; *interpersonal relationship*, $F(1178) = 17.64$, $P < 0.001$. There was no significant difference in rating of *teaching ability*, $F(1178) = 21$, $P = 0.15$. *Nursing competence* was rated similarly by faculty and students, $F(1187) = 0$, $P = 1$.

Differences for 'worst' clinical teacher characteristics were not significant: *teaching ability*, $F(1187) = 1.95$, $P = 0.13$; *personality trait*, $F(1184) = 0.76$, $P = 0.38$; *evaluation*, $F(1185) = 0.24$, $P = 0.63$; *interpersonal relationship*, $F(1187) = 0.04$, $P = 0.85$; *nursing competence*, $F(1178) = 2.05$, $P = 0.15$.

DISCUSSION

This study was designed to explore whether there are characteristics that differentiate 'best' from 'worst' clinical teachers, what these characteristics are, and whether students and faculty have similar or dissimilar perceptions about these characteristics.

Results show that students and faculty in this study did indeed ascribe different characteristics to 'best' and 'worst' clinical teachers. Both groups agreed that being or not being a good role model was the most critical characteristic differentiating the good from the less desirable clinical teacher.

Although no other study comparing 'best' and 'worst' clinical teachers could be located in the nursing literature, some authors (O'Shea & Parsons 1979, Rauen 1974, Kiker 1973, Stuebbe 1980) have cited role modelling as a critical clinical teacher behaviour. However, what a teacher does to be perceived as a good role model needs to be further explored.

Data presented here suggest that faculty and students have fairly similar views regarding specific characteristics of 'best' teachers: eight of ten items rated highest by students were among those rated highest by faculty. There was greater divergence between the two groups when worst teachers were rated. Nonetheless, six of the ten lowest rated characteristics were similar.

TABLE 3 Most discriminating characteristics between best and worst clinical teachers

| Students | | Faculty | |
|---|------------|--|------------|
| Item | Difference | Item | Difference |
| * Is a good role model (N) | 4.27 | * Is a good role model (N) | 4.18 |
| Corrects students' mistakes without belittling them (E) | 3.59 | * Enjoys nursing (N) | 4.04 |
| * Encourages a climate of mutual respect (R) | 3.56 | Stimulates student interest in the subject (T) | 3.89 |
| * Enjoys nursing (N) | 3.53 | Recognizes own limitations (N) | 3.54 |
| * Is approachable (R) | 3.48 | Demonstrates communication skills (N) | 3.43 |
| Gives students positive reinforcement for good contributions, observations or performance (E) | 3.48 | Explains clearly (T) | 3.35 |
| Provides support and encouragement to students (R) | 3.48 | Demonstrates a breadth of knowledge in nursing (N) | 3.21 |
| Is open-minded and non-judgemental (P) | 3.39 | Encourages a climate of mutual respect (R) | 3.18 |
| Demonstrates empathy (R) | 3.32 | Enjoys teaching (T) | 3.15 |
| Does not criticize students in front of others (E) | 3.29 | * Is approachable (R) | 3.11 |
| Identifies students' strengths and limitations objectively (E) | 3.48 | Offers special help when difficulties arise (T) | 3.11 |

Note: The means and standard deviations reported here were calculated from a seven-point response set where 1 = not at all descriptive, 7 = very descriptive.

*Characteristic included by students and faculty

(T) Teaching ability

(N) Nursing competence

(P) Personality

(E) Evaluation

(R) Interpersonal relationship

In contrast to overall agreement between the two groups about specific characteristics, when ratings of categories of clinical teacher characteristics by students and faculty were compared, the picture became less clear. Ratings of the two groups differed significantly for 'best' clinical teachers' *personality traits*, *interpersonal relationships*, and *evaluation* but were similar for best clinical teachers' *nursing competence*, and *teaching ability*. High ratings by students in the first three categories accounted for the differences. High ratings in these categories might reflect high student anxiety in the clinical area which interfered with their learning. Thus, best teachers were perceived by students as those who were best able to reduce their anxiety, those whose personality was warm, and who could relate well to them. Discrepancies might also have been due to students' greater emphasis on characteristics that affected them personally. They perceived their best teacher as a nice person who was able to relate well to them. Faculty, less affected by the 'pleasantness' of the clinical teacher, rated these categories lower. Both groups, however, valued 'best' teachers' nursing

competence and teaching ability. Their ratings thus were similar. Students' tendency to rate teachers on personal qualities has often been criticized by researchers, calling teacher evaluations by students more a popularity contest than an evaluation (MacKay 1974, Bronstein 1979).

Ratings for worst clinical teachers, although not similar for any category (including *nursing competence*) never reached statistically significant differences. This is probably due to greater variability within groups, thus reducing differences between the two groups. Why there is greater variability in the perception of participants regarding the 'worst' clinical teacher than regarding 'best' clinical teachers is difficult to explain. However, students' reluctance or inability to comment on their clinical teachers' weaknesses has been noted by several authors (Mogen & Knox 1983, O'Shea & Parsons 1979).

Inconsistencies in findings

Although comparisons of results of this study with findings by other researchers is difficult, in

view of the exploratory stage of research in the area of clinical teaching, it is worth noting that inconsistencies in findings are quite general. Differences between students' and teachers' perceptions were found by Stuebbe (1980) and O'Shea and Parsons (1979) although not by Barham (1965) or Mogan and Knox (1983). A replication of Brown's (1981) study by Wiley (1984) provided differing results. How might these inconsistencies be interpreted? Are students' perceptions different from those of faculty or do they differ according to circumstances and differing research approaches? If they differ, whose judgement is valid? That is, do students learn more from teachers they perceive to be effective or from teachers whom faculty consider to be good but students do not?

Questions raised by the findings of this study are intriguing but in no way unexpected. The teaching/learning process is a complex human transaction, dependent on a multitude of variables—psychological, sociological, and environmental—which have to be studied before definitive results can be forthcoming and recommendations for effective teaching can be advanced. The complexity of this process is multiplied by the milieu in which clinical teaching takes place. Pain, suffering, and the ever present threat of death, found in most clinical settings, create an atmosphere unsuitable for learning. Added to this highly charged atmosphere is the fear of possible grave consequences resulting from errors the learner might commit. The ability to transform this unsuitable milieu into one conducive to learning is a skill needed by an effective clinical teacher — a skill not often shared by teachers in other settings.

Recommendations for further study

Results of this study show that being a good role model is viewed by subjects of this study to be the most important characteristic distinguishing 'best' from 'worst' clinical teachers. Although findings of this exploratory study cannot be generalized, the unequivocal opinion of both faculty and students about this characteristic

lends this finding sufficient credence to warrant further exploration by repeating this study and also by researching the concept of a role model in nursing. In view of inconsistent findings of this and other studies regarding the perception of faculty and students about different clinical teacher characteristics, it is recommended that survey research is supplemented with studies involving direct observation of clinical teacher behaviours and assessing the effectiveness of these behaviours.

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