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Using Doctoral Education and Research-Based Learning to Advance the Nurse Leader

Dr. Kara De La Fosse

ABSTRACT

Nurse leaders perform in highly autonomous positions in two dimensions; academia, and the clinical setting with the awesome responsibility to serve and protect others. To guide nursing practice, research-based skills are crucial to ensure leadership decisions are founded in evidence-based practice. Random controlled studies are gold-standard in healthcare compared to correlation or descriptive studies and employ a systematic review to strengthen findings (Schmidt & Brown, 2021). Research skills are prominent in numerous components of the leadership scope to perform at a stellar level.

Keywords: Research-Based Learning, Higher Education, Doctoral Student, Nurse Leader

Nursing is founded on the art, science, innovation, and evidence-based research; but most importantly critical thinking and rapid problem-solving skills are vital (Anthony, 2020). Nursing is a vast profession and leaders must employ a wide array of intricate problem-solving skills within their scope. A five-step approach guides problem-solving: 1. Identifying the problem, 2. Evaluating the problem, 3. Use data to drive decision-making, 4. Communicate with the team members, and 5. Establish solutions and evaluate for efficacy. Kocoglu et al., (2016), assert nurse leaders need formal education on problem-solving skills to be adequately prepared for the persistently transforming and emerging healthcare demands. Active listening, communication, decision-making, team building, innovation, research, and data analysis are critical in problem-solving in the healthcare field.

Competencies for Effective Nurse Leaders

Nurse leaders endure exponential challenges remaining adept to competencies necessary for the healthcare arena in a vastly advancing and unpredictable profession (Huston, 2008). For successful management and guidance, eight critical competencies are identified for nurse leaders (Huston, 2008).

1. **A global perspective of or mindset of healthcare and professional nursing that closes cultural and equity gaps.** Dr. Patricia Benner, a nurse theorist, asserted competency is the ability to achieve preferred results under a myriad of conditions throughout the world (Allgood, 2014). Clinical judgment in nursing is integral to providing safe and effective care regarding the patient's cultural preferences (Sharifi et al, 2019). Beliefs, rituals, values, food choices, and alternative therapies must be considered when caring for patients to promote regime adherence and optimize health outcomes. Nursing must omit personal biases and remain aware and cognizant of cultures' unique characteristics to deliver meaningful care to cope with illnesses, and health prevention across the lifespan (Allgood, 2014).
2. **Adeptness with technology.** Electronic Health Records (EHR), Telehealth, and high-fidelity simulation are prominent technology components essential in nursing. Huston,

(2020) argues biometrics, analyzing aggregate data, and clinical decision support determines what information is collected and how it is stored and maintained. Nurse leaders in the clinical setting rely heavily on technology for rapid diagnostic results, immediate communication with the healthcare team, and resources online to assess medication compatibility, and review past medical history to guide current and future care for patients. Academia relies on technology for high-fidelity mannequins in simulation to train emerging healthcare professionals. High-fidelity simulation provides a safe atmosphere for students to learn and does not cause patient harm (De La Fosse, 2021).

3. **Critical thinking and sound decision-making skills founded in evidence-based research.** Nurse leaders are expected to make decisions using scientific approaches for optimal outcomes in the best interest of stakeholders, patients, staff, and the community (Huston, 2008). Nurse leaders are frequently under scrutiny for decisions that do not align with the lens of others and must be able to justify actions taken.
4. **Ability to deliver quality care with a high focus on safety.** Sherwood, (2017) argues there is overwhelming evidence of preventable death in healthcare arenas globally and safety and quality are vital. The Institute of Medicine (IOM) provides guidelines to maximize patient safety and mitigate risks (Fallon, 2002).
5. **Knowledge of politics within the system.** Grasping the hierarchical chain of command and understanding resources is significant for nurse leaders to lead organizations and others (Huston, 2008).
6. **Collaboration and teambuilding skills.** Nurse leaders must employ strong team building and collaboration skills to promote the retention of staff and increase patient satisfaction (Brinkert, 2011).
7. **Authenticity within the role as leader and aligning values and beliefs with performance expectations.** Congruent governance is the alignment of the nurse leadership values to the role without pressure and motivation to compromise personal convictions (Huston, 2008).
8. **Adaptability and proactivity to ensure quality improvement and retention of staff in a high burnout profession.** Quality improvement and changes transpire rapidly, and nurse leaders must be receptive to innovation to meet the quality demands of the profession (Huston, 2008).

Deliberative Nursing Practice

Ida J. Orlando's model for deliberative nursing practice (1961) supports nursing leadership as she emphasizes the nursing methods which closely model the research process through investigation and assuring validity; assessment, diagnosis, planning, implementation, and evaluation (Laurent, 2020). Nurse leaders must formulate a hypothesis based on the data obtained and devise a plan of care for the patient similar to the research process to promote sound rationales for the approach for optimal outcomes (Laurent, 2020). The nursing process theory is the foundation for nurse leaders to guide patient care as a team approach, investigate evidence-based research, and shape future nurses. Toney (2022) declares the nursing process Orlando designed underpins the fundamentals of consulting the body of literature to guide care based on empirical evidence, critical thinking, and providing goal-orientated tasks. Nurse leaders must use their judgment to provide quality, safe care, and guidance for those entrusted under them

(Mobolaji-Olajide et al., 2020). Evidence-based practice is salient in nursing and must be respected to drive current practices and policies continually reviewed for accuracy and necessary modifications.

Importance of Research Skills to Inform Practice

Evidence-based practice is critical for nurse leaders requiring proficiency in utilizing research to guide practice to ensure safe patient care and stellar education for students. Florence Nightingale initiated the concept of evidence-based striving to deliver safe, sanitary, and competent care was fostering competent care (Macky & Bassendowski (2017). The International Council of Nurses (2012) argues that evidence-based practices permit the mitigation of gaps between theory and practice providing an opportunity for nurse leaders to distribute sound foundational knowledge (Macky & Bassendowski (2017). Nurse leaders must consult trustworthy databases pertinent to the field and analytically evaluate research studies for authenticity in the medical framework (Horntvedt et al., 2018). Leaders in healthcare are challenged to deliver scholarly education in the discipline to meet learning outcomes and adhere to the code of ethics in nursing centered around doing no harm to patients. Leaders in healthcare must possess strong research skills to scrutinize policies, and procedures, based on the finest accessible knowledge founded in research (Ellis, 2016).

Making Meaning of Data

After mastery of research skills, leaders must have the ability to apply understanding to aggregate data and formulate action plans. Nurse leaders must be able to manage budgets, meet the needs of staff, patients, and the unit, and utilize data to solve problems. Nurse leaders must have the ability to quantify data, and make meaning from quality metrics (Huston, 2008). Nurse leaders must be proficient in analyzing quality metrics to support the medical team and enhance patient outcomes and safety for all parties. Statistical analysis of data drives decision-making in nursing after analyzing patient outcomes and exploring the efficacy of treatment modalities (Kim & Mallory, 2016). Examples include lab values, patient length of stay, patient-staff ratio, acuity levels, nosocomial infection rates, sentimental events, staff compliance, patient and staff satisfaction, readmission rates, adherence to evidence-based practice, and nutritional status (Ruth, 2009). Clinical nurse leaders are responsible for quality improvement for data garnered guiding decisions, but carefully balancing contentment with staff to best understand the rationales driving conclusions (Bombard, 2010). Nurse leaders are called upon to assume financial obligations at a larger capacity than historically while delivering stellar patient care (Abernethy, 1988).

Enhancing Instruction Through Research-Based Learning

Nurse leaders in academia shape future nurses and must consult the body of literature to instill best practices promoting successful outcomes with student nurses. Utilizing research-based strategies enhances critical thinking skills in students and enriches scholarly learning outcomes (Usmeldi et al., 2017). Research-based learning strategies have been supported by the literature to promote student success as scholars matriculate through higher education and enter the industry (Boyer, 2020). Pedagogical strategies are challenged when instructors implement research-based learning approaches aiming to increase student engagement in preparation for

future endeavors (Brew, 2020). Jacobson et al. (2018) argue that research-based learning strategies in graduate programs develop competencies paramount for student mastery of content. Hallinger (2017), posits that research-based learning utilized by educators contributes to doctoral student success and accommodates diverse learning needs. Implementing research-based learning strategies in higher education promotes students' mastery of content, especially observed through lectures, case-based studies, and the incorporation of technology (Harrington & Zakrajsek, 2017). Instructors in higher education are urged to employ research-based learning strategies to promote student success, however, various attributing factors in the methodology correlate with a lack of compliance. Nurse leaders must remain cognizant of research-based learning strategies to guide and mold their leadership approach for student and patient success.

Cohort model

Arora et al., (2017) emphasize the benefits of utilizing research-based learning encompassing inspiration, critical thinking, continued desire for learning, and cultivating new and updated skill sets. Nurse leaders in academia can enrich training by using the cohort model. Cohort models in higher education advance through programs together establishing a sense of community supporting one another depending on the structure to promote motivation and persistence (Holmes et al., 2010). Cohorts remain together from the beginning to the end of academic programs (Lake et al., 2018). Engagements among members establish trust, and comradery, and fortifies relationships (Holmes et. al, 2016). Engagement within the cohort model provides support systems that contribute to program completion (Radda, 2012). Cohort models enable faculty and students to establish rapport and enhance relationships in comparison to programs not embracing this methodology (Golde, 2005). Intentional program design orchestrating opportunities for student/faculty engagement enables a strong community academically and informally correlating with optimal mentorship (Lake et al., 2018). Partnerships within cohort models expand expertise amongst members from teamwork and contribute to enhanced academic results (Page et al., 2017).

Cohort models with online programs require academic socialization via virtual collaboration to achieve success (Kent et al., 2020). Regardless of program presentation, face-to-face, online, or hybrid, the cohort model has proven successful in assisting students to reach the finish line to achieve academic aspirations. During the global pandemic devising a sense of community in an overwhelming isolating period was paramount to mitigate attrition rates in higher education, most noteworthy in doctoral programs. Graduate students rely on additional support to feel worthy and included in academic programs (Willis et al., 2022). Strategic onboarding in graduate programs and the cohort model fosters group participation (Westbrooks et al., 2020). The cohort model creates a robust atmosphere for academics and contributes significantly to mitigating attrition rates in graduate programs (Lowery et al., 2018). Holmes et al., (2014) argue that doctoral programs battle soaring attrition rates that significantly enhance with the online modality up to 70%, higher than face-to-face programs. Cohesive cohorts are integral for fostering the successful completion of doctoral programs (Holmes et al., 2014).

Actionable feedback

Nurse leaders in academia and the clinical setting are able to employ research-based learning strategies such as actionable feedback to optimize outcomes for students, faculty, and

patients alike. Higher education aims to provide authentic guidance and instruction setting students up for success in academics as they matriculate through programs and enter the industry by utilizing research-based tools such as actionable feedback (Gibson et al., 2017).

Nurse leaders in higher education aim to provide authentic guidance and instruction setting students and patients up for success by utilizing research-based tools such as actionable feedback (Gibson et al., 2017). Feedback must be established in evidence and encompass the following components: 1. Provide the context necessary to establish the desired outcomes, 2. There is additional or new insight garnered from the feedback provided, 3. It is applicable to the desired end project and 4. The feedback is able to be understood and prioritized by the receiver (Jones, 2022). Providing feedback in academia, especially doctoral programs, must position the student with the ability to achieve the necessary outcomes. Providing feedback might be difficult and uncomfortable to extend to students; however, supporting learning to enhance academic growth is critical, and formulating carefully crafted guidance is essential (Morgan, 2020). Developing an environment for receptiveness to the feedback provided encompasses focusing on the outcomes, sharing feedback in a timely fashion to provide adequate time for adjustments, and also sharing specific expectations (Morgan, 2020). Sharing actionable feedback with students encourages confidence between students and faculty, ultimately increasing motivation and compliance to advancing academic performance (Chamberlin & Chiang, 2018).

Problem Solving

Nurse leaders must address a myriad of problems relying immensely on research-based strategies. Problems encompass staffing issues, academic and non-academic behaviors, finances, and restructuring organization operations are more prominent concerns. Nurse leaders must be careful with their approach to controversial topics, however, demonstrating to colleagues, students, and subordinates that proposed solutions or decisions are decided from research-based strategies is beneficial. Making clear objectives, recognizing and respecting different lenses viewing the problems, collaborating with similarities to strengthen the outcomes, clear and transparent feedback are strategies to guide decision-making for nurse leaders. Academe and clinical nurse educators are challenged to make rapid and critical evaluations that affect the lives of students and patients. Executing decisions to mitigate problems and promote satisfaction from all parties involved is the aim.

Nursing is founded on research and continues to be driven by studies guiding current practices for safe patient care. Nurse leaders across all disciplines must remain adept with the skills necessary to investigate evidence-based research when problem-solving. Utilizing trustworthy sources is imperative and obtaining proper training to employ databases and conducting searches positions the nurse well to locate up-to-date and scientifically proven guidance for patient care and instructing others. Research supports that compliance rates significantly increase when rationales are provided to patients, and they understand the risks versus the benefits of treatments recommended. Problem-solving skills must be grounded in the research and easily accessible for prompt accurate decisions.

Reflection from personal experience

Matriculating through a doctoral program founded on research-based learning strategies contributed to an invaluable experience. Intentional positioning of academic residency in the library and connecting learners to campus-wide resources demonstrated the passion for student success. Replicating this concept in the current role as assistant professor of nursing, the first class of the semester students are connected with resources the university offers to enable mastery of content. Consulting the body literature to employ evidence-based practices modeled in the doctoral program is duplicated currently when devising curriculum and resources. Executing meaningful learning for students is integral; but more important is having the ability to demonstrate that concepts are established on research-based learning strategies. The cohort model, one example, exemplified the unique bonds established among students and the support extended necessary to strengthen academic performance. Actionable feedback throughout the program modeled how to advance in leadership roles to provide meaningful responses to students to enable growth. From the student lens, it provides guidance on how to grow academically to become a stronger scholar. Leadership stressed the significance of refocusing on the learning process and not on the letter grades. Although not an easy task, once accomplished great strides in academic performance was possible. Assuming this stance as a nurse leader, instilling this concept in students proves challenging and sometimes impossible, however, it is necessary to optimize learning. Although a terminal degree was earned; more significantly, the research-based strategies demonstrated are replicated as a nurse leader and will advance students' academic success. When problems arise in the nursing program, decisions and resolutions are always data-driven. Exploring program pass rates, completion rates, and criteria for entry offer guidance on best practices to incorporate. Promoting student success is central to all decisions executed. Assisting students to keep their passion for learning is essential for motivation and persistence. Program structure and decisions grounded on evidence-based practice and research promotes student and nurse leader success.

About the author

Dr. Kara R. De La Fosse is an assistant professor of nursing at Minnesota State University, Mankato. She also serves as the director of the Nurse Aide Program at the university. Her research interest focus on pedagogical approaches promoting success with online instruction and faculty mentorship for student success. She earned a doctorate in education from Winona State University. Dr. De La Fosse obtained her master's degree in nursing and holds dual bachelor's degrees in Early Childhood Education (Pre-K- 3rd) and Nursing and maintains a public health nursing license. She is passionate about educating and serving others.

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