

**Helping students working in the community for their final consolidation placement make their transition to registered practice.**

**ABSTRACT**

The pressure of role transition on the new registrant has impacted on recruitment and retention which, along with an aging workforce, has resulted in global shortages of nurses now reaching crisis point. This article examines and discusses what can be done to attract and prepare the future workforce in the community focussing on helping students to make the transition to registered practice during their final consolidation of practice placement. There is currently limited evidence on the effectiveness of how community placement teams prepare finalist students for registered practice and this could be argued as an opportunity lost given the urgent need to recruit more registered nurses to work in primary care. Recommendations for enhancing this crucial stage of the student journey are made and a case for the need to know more from students about how they experience their final practice placement when allocated to a community setting is presented.

**KEY WORDS**

Final consolidation of practice placement ♦ student experience ♦ role transition ♦ recruitment ♦ lone working

**Aim**

The aim of this article is to explore ways in which community teams can support nursing students during their final consolidation of practice placement and as they begin to make their transition to registered practice.

**Introduction**

The time has come to dispel the myth that all newly registered nurses should firstly experience a period of time working in acute care (Shelton and Harrison 2011). Instead neophyte nurses should be welcomed into community teams and the challenges this brings embraced. There is currently very limited evidence on the effectiveness of how community placements prepare students for registered practice (Marshall and Shelton 2012) which could be argued as an opportunity lost given the urgent need to recruit more registered nurses to work in primary care (Nursing and Midwifery Council 2007).

This article presents a case for the need to know more from students about how they experience their final practice placement when allocated to a community setting. It examines and discusses what can be done to attract and prepare the future workforce to take up posts in the community by helping students to make the transition to registered practice during their final consolidation of practice placement.

## **Background**

Role transition from student to registered nurse has been the subject of global research and debate for decades and is known to be a very challenging and stressful time (Kramer 1974; Teoh et al. 2012; Rush et al. 2013; Suresh et al. 2013; Whitehead et al. 2013; Phillips et al. 2014). Many strategies have been put into place to ease this difficult journey (Whitehead et al. 2013) yet newly qualified nurses continue to struggle in all areas of practice. It has been well documented for some time, that students under-anticipate and are underprepared for what it will be like to practise as a registered nurse (Holland 1999; Newton and McKenna 2007; Whitehead and Holmes 2011; Doody et al. 2012) and this extends to those wishing to pursue a career in the community.

The pressure of role transition on the new registrant has impacted on recruitment and retention which, along with an aging workforce, has resulted in global shortages of nurses which have now reached crisis point (Centre for Workforce Intelligence 2014). Within a changing landscape of health care there is an urgent need to recruit newly registered nurses to primary care settings to ensure succession planning to replace the experienced community nurses who will retire within the next few years. An ideal time to begin this recruitment process is during the twelve week final practice placement which is mandatory for all students undertaking pre-registration nursing programmes in the United Kingdom. However, currently emphasis is placed on preparing the mentor who must sanction and sign-off that the student is fit for practice and purpose (Cooper 2014) with very little research into how students experience this vital element of their programme.

How pre-registration undergraduate nursing students are prepared for their transition to registered practice remains a challenge internationally to nurse educators and nurses who work alongside assessing and supporting students in practice (Sok Ying et al. 2014). Current research and innovative strategies to prepare and support the

newly registered practitioner focus almost exclusively on those working in the acute setting (Marshall and Shelton 2012). Although there are some longitudinal studies (Mooney 2007; Doody et al. 2012), less attention has been paid to the student who is embarking on this important journey that takes them from undergraduate, student status one day, to paid employment as a registered nurse the next. Even less thought has been given to the student who wishes to pursue a career as a District Nurse or how their final practice placement experience might impact on their role transition.

There are however, a number of factors that are known to influence students' experiences of working in the community and this article focuses on how this knowledge can be applied productively to students experiencing their final practice placements. It is time to refocus attention away from the role of the sign-off mentor and to consider instead how the student experience of the final practice placement might influence future career choices. Community teams need to work together to ensure that the opportunity to attract and prepare potential future applicants is maximised. Looking beyond the sign-off process and encouraging students to consider the prospect of a career in the community at some point in the future is a worthwhile exercise that promises to benefit all staff working in the community, service users and carers and not least the student.

### **The role of the mentor**

The role of the mentor is crucial in helping the finalist student and the relationship that is formed between the two is dependent on the needs of both parties. Mentors must be available and willing to take on this important role (Sedgwick and Harris 2012) and effective support for them must be available from the wider community team and through effective links with education providers at local universities. It is known that mentors can find their role challenging and at times stressful and therefore support must be on-going and flexible allowing the mentor time (Hallin and Danielson 2009) to accommodate students in their final practice placements and the unique needs they bring. Furthermore, Gurling (2011) advises that effective support for the mentor is likely to impact positively on the student and this is reinforced by Kelly and McAllister (2013) who state that mentors play a pivotal role in developing students' confidence and an open and friendly approach is likely to create an environment where students flourish.

Internationally there are many studies which have explored the experiences of the mentor (or preceptor as it is sometimes known), and findings suggest that there is value in examining students' experiences in the learning process (Hallin and Danielson 2009). The limited research that has been done on how student nurses experience working in the community sheds some light onto what helps and hinders their motivation to pursue a career as a District Nurse once qualified. A deeper understanding is needed from the student's perspective if mentors are to be fully informed and can put strategies in place to best support students in their final placement.

### **Sense of belonging and community; kinship; team working**

There is much that can be done by the whole team of healthcare practitioners in the community to influence the prospective graduate's career choice, starting with the final practice placement experience immediately before registration.

Sedgwick and Rougeau (2010) point out that the close knit community of healthcare practitioners working in primary care settings is made up of complex personal and professional relationships. Getting to know the team and navigating these complexities can be an additional challenge for the finalist nursing student who may have had little experience in community nursing thus far on their programme. Getting to know and being accepted by the community team are central features in building students' confidence and competence which in turn, influences their capacity to learn (Sedgwick and Yonge 2008). A sense of belonging is crucial to learning for students and is known to have a real impact on motivation and future career choices (Levett-Jones and Lathlean 2008). Whilst the main responsibility for supporting the student lies with the sign-off mentor, strategies for all staff working within community healthcare teams need to be put into place to promote a sense of belonging for all visiting students. Finalist students who wish to work in the community once qualified must feel motivated and empowered to maximise their learning so that they feel confident, competent and welcome to apply for positions as they arise.

This sense of kinship, fostered by a strong team extending to all those working in the community setting to which the finalist student is allocated, is seen as the single most important factor in determining the success of the experience for the student (Yonge et al. 2013). How students are welcomed and how they settle and integrate

into the team will impact positively or negatively on a potential applicant's desire to work in the future as a registered nurse.

### **Community placement programmes for students on their final practice experience**

Some education providers in the United Kingdom have created, implemented and evaluated innovative programmes to help students allocated to a community placement for their last placement prepare for their future role as a registered nurse (Roberts and Kelly 2007; Watkinson et al. 2009; Marshall and Shelton 2012).

Reports indicate positive outcomes for both the mentor and the student who as a result can develop a greater understanding of the complexities of caring for people in the community. Such programmes also include helping prepare students for recruitment as registered nurses and this also presents an ideal opportunity to discuss potential job vacancies. It is known that students welcome and value any form of preparation and help with securing employment as a registered nurse (Ong 2013). Community teams should therefore actively plan to include discussion on this topic so that students are aware of recruitment processes and feel encouraged to apply. Mentors might also like to take the opportunity to enlighten prospective applicants about preceptorship programmes available to provide further support and development once the student is qualified.

### **Allocation of mini caseloads and lone working**

Middleton and Duffy (2009) suggest that students undertaking their final practice placement should be encouraged to experience some of the same responsibilities that they will be expected to have as a registered nurse. This view is supported by Anderson and Kiger (2008) who reported that students valued the chance to practice on their own whilst working in the community and that it made them feel "like a real nurse" (2008, p. 443). This was also found to be the case more recently by Marshall and Shelton (2012) who questioned finalist students about lone working. They reported that being given their own case load and working autonomously impacted positively on students' experiences of community placements with the result that confidence and competence increased.

Conversley, in their study which explored the role of the mentor in supporting and assessing students in their final practice placement Middleton and Duffy (2009)

revealed that allocating a mini caseload to students was particularly challenging mainly due to issues around lone working. Despite mentors recognising the potential learning for students to whom the mini caseload might be allocated, the decision to assign was ultimately based on the ability of the student (which took some weeks to assess), the patient (whom the mentor selected on the basis of care needs such as wound dressings) and lastly the willingness of the mentor (whose accountability and registration is put on the line) to relinquish control. Effective support for mentors both through training and from their peers is needed to overcome this barrier if students are to be allowed to maximise on a full range of opportunities available to them.

### **Reflective diaries**

For finalist student nurses learning through lone working carries the risk of mistakes being made. However situated learning such as this, Benner et al. (2010) would argue ultimately heightens students' awareness of the profound responsibility that registered nurses have to take when caring for clients and their families. This is particularly significant for the student about to qualify and reflection offers a powerful way of analysing what happens in practice enabling student to deepen insights and learn through experiences (Johns 2010). The use of reflective diaries for students working in community settings as their final practice placement is a useful way of helping students to reflect and may provide a prompt for mentors and nurse educators to enable students to make sense of the complexities of practice as they embark on their transitional journey (Cooper et al. 2005).

### **Links between a student's final practice placement and future employment**

According to Major (2010) the allocation of a final placement is crucial to students wishing to take up employment in the same area once registered. This is for a number of reasons, not least because they are exposed to the team they may potentially work with once qualified and students are more willing to apply for a post in a placement where they have received good support. Given that students' experiences of their final placement is such a powerful determinant of choice for future employer (Andrews et al. 2005; Shelton and Harrison 2011), community teams working with students in their final placement are in a strong position to influence potential applicants by offering meaningful experience of what it is like to work as a

District Nurse. It stands to reason that those contemplating a career in primary care should therefore be encouraged to request such a placement as their final practice experience and education and service providers must work together to facilitate this.

### **The student's perspective of a longer final practice placement**

There is a scarcity of research into the impact that a longer final practice placement has on the student experiencing it. This applies to all undergraduate nursing students (Morrell and Ridgway 2014) and those working in the community as their final practice placement are no exception. If education and service providers are to help students seek employment and begin to make a successful transition to registered practice in a community setting, more needs to be known from students experiencing a longer twelve week placement at the end of their programme.

### **Conclusion**

It has been known for some time that role transition is challenging and stressful for students who under-anticipate what it will be like to enter the world of work as a registered nurse. In relation to the mandatory final practice placement that students undertake immediately before qualifying, interest to date has largely centred on the role of the sign-off mentor. There is a clear need to understand more about the experience of the student within this process and further research is urgently required to complete the picture. There is much that can be done to help students aspire to a career in the community and the experience of the final practice placement is likely to influence this. The community team steered by the assigned sign-off mentor are ideally placed to welcome students into their team and through fostering a sense of kinship and belonging can actively influence career choice. Encouraging and enabling students to take on their own mini caseload gives insight into what it will be like to work autonomously as a registered nurse and students confidence will grow as a result. Finally, an informal community placement programme designed by the community team specifically for finalist students, offers the opportunity to coach students about local recruitment processes and inform them of current and future job vacancies for which they are welcome to apply.

<b>Key Recommendations</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Educate and support the assigned sign-off mentor who will liaise with the</li></ul>

team regarding students' development during their final practice placement.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Foster a welcoming environment and sense of kinship from the whole team.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Design an informal community placement programme tailored for finalist students.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Promote and facilitate students autonomous practice through lone working and the allocation of mini case loads.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Encourage students to write reflective diaries about their experiences working in the community.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Include discussions on how to seek employment, educate students about preceptorship prospects and take advantage of the opportunity to alert students to future vacancies in the community.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mentors and universities should work together to support finalist students and ensure that requests to be allocated to community placements are managed.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Further research is needed to explore what it is like for students to experience a longer final practice placement in the community immediately before they qualify.</li> </ul>

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