

CONTINUING EDUCATION FOR NURSES IN GHANA: THE PERCEPTION OF NON-PROFESSIONAL NURSES

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Continuing education is essential to the growth of the nursing profession due to the dynamic environment of the health industry. The study sought to explore the perceptions of non-professional nurses regarding continuing education. **Methods:** A qualitative descriptive design was employed and the purposive sampling technique was used to recruit twenty-three non-professional nurses from Pantang Hospital in the Greater Accra Region. Thematic content analysis was used to analyze the data. **Results:** The findings of the study showed that non-professional nurses have positive perceptions about continuing education. They believe that engaging in continuing education would improve their caregiving skills, allowing them to provide quality care to their clients. **Conclusions:** The study recommends that non-professional nurses with basic qualifications in the nursing profession should be encouraged to continue education.

Keywords: Continuing Education, Non - Professional Nurses, Perception, Educational Programme

INTRODUCTION

Education is important to the growth and development of individuals, families and society (Singh, 2001; World Bank/UNESCO, 2000; World Bank, 2005). Health workers, particularly nurses, need education because they work in a special field that requires knowledge to enable them to excel in their career. The Institute of Medicine's report on the future of nursing emphasizes that if nurses are to be as effective as possible in helping to provide higher quality and family-centered care, then they need to be better prepared. Healthcare is increasingly becoming more complex and stretching its tentacles into the community (Institute of Medicine, 2010).

Statistics show that the current registered nursing workforce with a Bachelor's of Science in nursing or with a graduate degree was 50% (American Association of Colleges of Nursing [AACN], 2010). In Africa, the phenomenon of there being a low number of nurses with a higher educational qualification also exists (Muliira et al, 2012; Fentahun and Molla, 2012). The low number of nurses continuing education is a major concern in Ghana. Non-professional nurses pursue a two-year basic training course in nursing to assist the

professional nurse in the performance of their duties. There are two groups of non-professional nurses in Ghana: (1) Nurse assistant preventives, also known as community health nurses, who are trained for preventive health services and who work within the community and rural areas, to assist the public health nurse and (2) Nurse assistant clinical, also called enrolled nurses, who work in either the community or a hospital to assist the professional nurse.

Non-professional nurses, after working for three to five years, realize that they are at the lowest level of the nursing profession and that they are deficient in knowledge and skills. There is a need for them to be given the chance to continue their education in a formal way the same as their professional counterparts, who can progress both academically and professionally. However, little is known about the non-professional nurse's perception of continuing education. Whether they would like to further their education or not is not known.

An individual's perception about education influences his or her decision to either participate in continuing education or not (Cross, 1981). Osterman, Asselin and Cullen (2009) found that registered nurses, who

had worked in an acute care hospital between 14 and 34 years and who had received their basic education as an associate degree in nursing, perceived continuing education as expanding their knowledge of the nursing profession as well as enhancing their level of personal satisfaction. These findings were confirmed by Sarver, Cichra and Kline (2015), who posited that nurses perceived engaging in continuing education as a means of increasing their opportunities to get jobs, expanding their knowledge and gaining personal satisfaction. Nurses perceive engaging in continuing education as valuable and of great importance, as the knowledge that they obtain from school enhances their professional skills and competencies (Baxter et al., 2013; Govranos & Newton, 2014; Ni et al, 2014; Nsemo et al, 2013). Continuing education is also perceived by the nurses as being beneficial to their personal and professional growth, as well as augmenting the quality of care delivered to patients (Richards & Potgieter, 2010). Studies corroborate that nurses hold the perception that by engaging in continuing education, they can acquire knowledge that will improve their caregiving skills and increase their job satisfaction (Lerner et al, 2010).

Nurses perceive furthering their education as a means to progressing on the pathway of the nursing profession, fulfilling their dreams as nurses, maintaining their professional status, refreshing their perspectives about the profession and enhancing their social status and self-esteem (Nsemo et al., 2013; Peretto, 2015).

The purpose of this study was to find out the perception of non-professional nurses on continuing education.

METHODS

The qualitative descriptive design was used to explore the perception of three categories of non-professional nurses who have worked for at least five years in the health sector and who work in a psychiatric hospital. The purposive sampling technique was used to select the twenty-three participants, which included non-professional nurses who have completed any form of continuing education, non-professional nurses who were engaged in continuing education at the time of the study and non-professional nurses who have not engaged in any form of continuing education. Ethical

clearance was obtained from the Institutional Review Board at Noguchi Memorial Institute for Medical Research (IRB-NMIMR), in the University of Ghana. Formal permission was obtained from the administrator and deputy director of the nursing services of the psychiatric hospital to allow the study to select the research participants. Non-professional nurses were contacted by the researcher and briefed on the purpose and procedure of the study. An information sheet explaining the purpose of the study was also given for further clarification on the research topic. Non-professional nurses who met the inclusion criteria and who were willing to participate in the study were recruited as the study participants. A convenient day, time and venue were set with each participant for the interview, which was conducted using a semi-structured interview guide with open-ended questions. On the day of the interview, each participant signed a consent form to confirm their willingness to participate in the study and permission was obtained from the participants to record the interview sessions with an audio-tape recorder. Each interview session lasted between thirty to forty minutes. The data obtained from the study was analysed using thematic content analysis (Vaismoradi et al, 2013).

RESULTS

The study found that non-professional nurses have a positive perception about continuing education.

1. Acquisition of additional knowledge and upgrading

- a. The study showed that all of the participants perceived continuing formal education as a means of furthering their education in order to acquire more knowledge and skills, as well as being a way to upgrade themselves in the nursing profession. Lizzy, who has completed a continuing formal education programme stated that:

“I regard continuing formal education as a medium to acquire more knowledge, further my education and upgrade myself in the profession.”

- b. Faustina, who has not engaged in any form of continuing formal

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Participants

Variables	Non-Professional Nurses in School	Non-Professional Nurses who have Completed School	Non-Professional Nurses who are Not yet in School	Total
Number of participants	9	6	8	23
Number of Males	0	1	0	1
Number of Females	8	5	9	22
Age of Participants				
20-30years	2	2	5	9
30-39 years	6	4	4	14
Marital Status				
Married	6	4	4	14
Divorced	0	0	0	0
Single	3	2	4	9
Programmes pursued by Participants:				
Bachelor of Science in Nursing	1	1	0	2
Community Psychiatry Certificate Post Basic Midwifery	0	2	0	0
Health Promotion	8	2	0	10
Health Promotion	0	1	0	1
Age of Children of Participants:				
0-2 years	4	2	2	8
3-5 years	2	2	2	6
Years of Service of participants:				
5-9 years	8	4	8	20
10-14 years	1	2	0	3

education, also said that:

“I perceive continuing formal education as going to school to acquire more knowledge and skills to my basic knowledge and upgrading myself in the nursing profession.”

- c. All of the participants held the view that the knowledge acquired from their initial training as non-professional nurses is basic, and therefore there is the need to upgrade themselves. Sheila, who had not engaged in any form of continuing formal

education, stated that:

“With the health assistant clinical programme, all of the courses we studied were titled Basic! Basic! Basic! E.g. Basic anatomy, Basic physiology and this affects the care that we give to our clients. This is because on the ward, we practice without knowing the rationale behind it.”

Doris, who had completed a continuing formal education programme, affirmed Sheila’s assertion:

“I went back to school, because as

non-professional nurses, what we were taught initially at school was basic knowledge. We were only trained to assist the professional nurse in the performance of her duties.”

- d. The participants who are in school maintained that having worked for sometime after their initial training, their already acquired knowledge and skills became obsolete. As a result, there was a need to acquire additional knowledge. Cynthia, who has completed school, stated that:

“We are just like machines. When a machine works for a while, it breaks down and needs to be repaired, and likewise as we work for a while, we lose the knowledge that we have and so we have to go to school to improve on our knowledge, upgrade ourselves and catch up with the global world. At a point in time, we can no longer apply the basic knowledge that we have.”

Lizzy, who has also completed a continuing formal education programme and is currently enrolled on a distance Bachelor’s of Science in Nursing programme, shared her perception about continuing formal education:

“If you do not educate yourself, with time you lose all your knowledge. You feel that you have become blank and don’t know anything.”

- e. The data further confirmed that all of the participants perceived that acquiring additional knowledge from participating in continuing formal education meant that they had the chance of obtaining higher certificates that would help them pursue advanced programmes. Kezia, who had not engaged in continuing formal education, opined that:

“I want to further my education, because I have a basic certificate in nursing. I want to pursue a diploma and even follow it up with a first degree and Master’s [degree] in the future”

Doris, who has completed school, also said that:

“I regard continuing formal education as going back to school to learn and to

acquire a higher certificate or additional certificate. Acquiring a higher certificate serves as a stepping stone to pursuing advanced programmes like public health nursing.”

- f. The participants who have completed school and those currently on a programme of study argued that continuing formal education is different from in-service training (workshops). They held the perception that continuing formal education offers nurses more time to learn and acquire more knowledge. Rose, who is currently pursuing a post-basic midwifery programme, acknowledged that:

“Workshops cannot be compared to continuing formal education; they are being compressed or are limited in nature. Continuing formal education offers the nurse a longer duration to learn so many things.”

Naomi, who has completed school, also expressed her view:

“Continuing formal education is better than workshops, because the things you will learn within one year at school, whereas the workshop will use only a week in imparting that knowledge as a result of a lack of resources. The nurse may not capture all of the salient points being taught.”

2. Improvement in Care Delivery

- a. Generally, all of participants acknowledged that by engaging in continuing formal education, they could acquire knowledge that would enhance the delivery of quality care to their clients. Eugene, who has engaged in continuing formal education to become a health promoter, had this to say:

“Continuing formal education affects the care that one gives to their client, I studied health promotion at school and this has helped me in studying the community members, to get to know their problems which they may not be aware of. I help them solve it.”

Doris, who now holds a Bachelor of Science in general nursing, also expressed her view:

“In community health nursing, we studied obstetric nursing but I did not understand so many things. Personally, continuing formal education helped me to know the rationale for history taking, and why it is important to take the family and medical history of the clients. Acquiring this new knowledge has made me understand my work and appreciate what I do.”

- b. The participants who had completed continuing formal education programmes and who worked within the community and rural areas were of the view that the knowledge obtained from school would assist them in their preventive nursing work, thereby reducing the pressure on the hospitals. For instance, Naomi, who has completed school, expressed her opinion:

“I love the community nursing work because when I educate my clients to wash their hands after visiting the toilet, not to put their hands on the floor, to sleep under insecticide-treated net and to exclusively breastfeed their babies. This way, they do not fall sick and the curative nurse will get more work to done, thereby reducing the burden on our hospitals”

- c. The participants who are pursuing continuing formal education programmes to become midwives hoped that, after school, they would be skilled enough to curb maternal and infant mortality. Rachel, who is currently in school, stated that:

“By acquiring new knowledge at school, I will come back to contribute to the work force. I believe that after school, I can help in reducing maternal and infant mortality.”

- d. The study found that the participants who were currently in school perceived continuing formal education as contributing to enhancing their client’s satisfaction. Loretta, who was in school, maintained that:

“At my facility, we always record a low number of antenatal attendants; this is

because we are not midwives. With regard to palpation and examination, we resort to “trial and error” and this affects our work. The majority of our clients are not coming for antenatal services. When they compare our services to that of other facilities, they are not motivated to come back to us. This sort of pushed me to upgrade in midwifery to improve the quality of care for my clinic.

3. Impact on Knowledge and Practice

- a. The data revealed that all of the participants perceived continuing formal education as having a greater impact on knowledge and practice, which augments care delivery. The participants felt that once they are educated, they can transfer the knowledge that they have acquired to their colleagues and the upcoming generation of nurses. Charlotte, who has not enrolled on any continuing formal education programme, shared her perception:

“I believe by furthering my education, I can influence my nursing care and I can also impart knowledge to my colleagues and to the younger generation of nurses.”

Sheila, who has not returned to school, emphasized Charlotte’s assertion:

“As you grow in your job, you become a senior and get the opportunity to impart knowledge to the younger generation. The only way to teach colleagues, students and newly qualified nurses to maintain the standards of nursing practice is by furthering your education.”

4. Exposure to current trends in the nursing profession

- a. All of the participants perceived continuing formal education as exposing them to current trends in the world and broadening their knowledge about the nursing profession. Some of the participants maintained that living in a technological era requires that non-professional nurses

continue their education so as to meet the standards of current nursing practices. Kezia, who has completed a continuing formal education programme, had this to say:

“We live in an ever-changing world which is advancing in technology, so there is the need for one to stay abreast of current trends in nursing. If not, then one will be left behind or when confronted with a new challenge, it will be difficult tackling it.”

Jennifer, who was in as school, maintained that:

“Continuing formal education is good. We are now advancing with technology as a profession and so everybody needs to explore. Now the world is changing and things are being upgraded. As a result, we need to go to school and acquire new knowledge so then we can do away with some old practices we used to perform”

- b. The non-professional nurses who had completed continuing formal education programmes maintained that continuing their education exposed them to different educational programmes in the health sector. Lizzy, who was in school, shared her sentiment:

“When I got study leave to pursue a diploma programme in nursing, I thought that was the highest qualification in academia but at school, I realized that some of my senior colleagues were pursuing their first and second degrees in nursing. Believe you me that was the first time I heard about such programmes.”

5. Raised Economic Standard

- a. All of the participants held the view that engaging in continuing formal education leads to an enhancement in salary. Sandra, who has not engaged in continuing formal education, expressed her opinion as:

“Everyone works because of money. All the work that we do is about money; first and second-degree holders receive a better salary than I do so I have to

continue my education so then I can also earn more salary.”

Eugene, who has completed school, also stated that:

“The health system makes you broke, so as a man, you need to upgrade yourself so as to have a rise in your salary.”

Some of the participants maintained that continuing formal education creates the opportunity for the non-professional nurse to be promoted to a higher level in the nursing profession. Ruby, who is in school, opined that:

“My salary is not enough. By furthering my education, I will be promoted to a higher rank and it will bring an incremental increase to my salary.”

DISCUSSIONS

Continuing education is perceived by non-professional nurses as necessary and important to nursing practices (Baxter et al., 2013; Govranos & Newton, 2014; Nsemo et al., 2013). Non-professional nurses hold the perception that embarking on continuing education offers them the opportunity to acquire more knowledge and skills which will help them upgrade themselves in the profession (Osterman, Asselin, & Cullen, 2009; Saver et al. 2015). This perception being held by non-professional nurses is essential, as it necessitates the need for more continuing education programmes to be instituted for non-professional nurses who find themselves at the basic level of the nursing profession and who seek to gradually build on their nursing practices.

The initial training received by nurses at school becomes obsolete with time; therefore non-professional nurses perceive continuing education as beneficial, as they hope to build on their basic knowledge in the nursing profession (Richards & Potgieter, 2010; Shahhosseini & Hamzehgardeshi, 2015). The acquisition of a higher educational qualification is perceived by non-professional nurses as an essential factor as to why they would engage in continuing education (Richards & Potgieter, 2010). There is the need for non-professional nurses to be encouraged

to pursue continuing formal education as the majority of the study participants who had either completed or were engaged in continuing formal education could only boast of their highest academic qualification as a certificate.

The desire to deliver quality health services to their clients in order for them to enjoy a shorter stay in the hospital and to avoid developing complications is another perception that non-professional nurses discerned that continuing formal education can provide (Lerner et al., 2010; Nsemo et al. 2013; Richards & Potgieter, 2010). The non-professional nurses conceived that by engaging in continuing formal education, they would be abreast with contemporary nursing skills and techniques which they would, in turn, impart on their colleagues and nursing students (Nsemo et al. 2013; Perfetto, 2015; Ni et al, 2014; Richards & Potgieter, 2010). This perception is paramount as most non-professional nurses' work in remote villages where there are an inadequate number of nurses. As a result, the few nurses who are able to pursue continuing formal education would be better and more adequately prepared to transfer the insights that they have acquired from school to their colleagues through in-service training programmes.

Promotion to a higher designation in the nursing profession is another perceived factor related to why non-professional nurses would engage in continuing education (Pool, Poell & Ten, 2013). This finding is significant as the majority of non-professional nurses are unable to give their best on the ward as they feel inferior to the other health care team members such as professional nurses and doctors. There is the need for the nurse assistants to be encouraged to continue with their education (Nsemo et al., 2013; Perfetto, 2015).

CONCLUSIONS

Non-professional nurses have a positive perception about continuing education as they believe that returning to school would enhance their caregiving skills in order to meet the health needs of their clients. The study recommends that non-professional nurses with basic educational qualifications should be encouraged to pursue continuing education. Further studies are needed to find out the factors that motivate non-professional nurses related to going to school. Additional studies are needed to ascertain whether there are barriers which make it

difficult for non-professional nurses to return to pursue further studies.

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