BUILDING CLINICAL JUDGMENT IN NURSING STUDENTS:
A PROGRESSIVE SIMULATION APPROACH

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ABSTRACT

The development of clinical judgment is a fundamental objective in nursing education, as it directly influences patient outcomes and the quality of healthcare delivery. With the increasing complexity of clinical settings and the limitations of traditional clinical placements, there is a growing need for innovative teaching strategies that can effectively bridge the theory-practice gap. This review article explores the role of progressive simulation as an evidence-based educational intervention to enhance clinical judgment among prelicensure nursing students. Progressive simulation refers to a structured, staged approach to simulation-based learning, where students engage in sequential clinical scenarios that gradually increase in complexity and realism. This method aligns with the cognitive development of learners and allows them to integrate foundational knowledge, refine decision-making skills, and build confidence over time. The article examines the theoretical foundations of clinical judgment, particularly Tanner's Clinical Judgment Model, and evaluates how progressive simulation supports each phase-noticing, interpreting, responding, and reflecting. Current literature and empirical studies are analyzed to demonstrate the effectiveness of progressive simulation in improving critical thinking, diagnostic reasoning, and reflective practice. The review also addresses key elements of designing and implementing a progressive simulation curriculum, including scenario development, learner assessment, faculty facilitation, and debriefing strategies. Furthermore, it highlights challenges such as resource intensity, faculty training needs, and variability in student readiness. By synthesizing existing evidence, this article provides practical recommendations for nurse educators and academic institutions seeking to adopt progressive simulation as a core pedagogical tool. It concludes that progressive simulation offers a promising and adaptable approach for cultivating clinical judgment competencies in nursing students, ultimately preparing them for safe and effective practice in dynamic healthcare environments

Keywords: Clinical Judgement, Nursing, Teaching-Learning, Simulation.

INTRODUCTION

Clinical judgment is the cornerstone of competent nursing practice. It involves the ability to observe patient conditions, interpret data, prioritize care, and make sound decisions under pressure. In today's rapidly evolving healthcare environment, nurses must not only apply theoretical knowledge but also demonstrate critical thinking, problem-solving, and ethical reasoning in real-time clinical scenarios. As such, cultivating strong clinical judgment skills in nursing students has become a primary goal of nursing education programs worldwide.

Traditionally, clinical judgment has been developed through classroom instruction and hands-on clinical experiences. However, several challenges have emerged in recent years that hinder the effectiveness of these conventional methods. Limited access to diverse clinical placements, increased student enrollment, concerns about patient safety, and variability in clinical exposure contribute to inconsistent learning outcomes. These limitations underscore the urgent need for alternative teaching strategies that are both safe and pedagogically sound.

Simulation-based education has emerged as a powerful instructional method that replicates clinical environments in a controlled setting. It allows students to engage with realistic patient care scenarios without the risk of harming actual patients. Simulation provides opportunities for experiential learning, critical reflection, and immediate feedback, all of which are essential for developing clinical judgment. Among various simulation strategies, progressive simulation stands out as a structured, step-wise approach that gradually builds students' competence through increasingly complex clinical encounters.

Progressive simulation involves the deliberate sequencing of scenarios that align with a learner's developmental stage, beginning with simple tasks and advancing to more intricate situations that require integrative thinking and prioritization. This approach mirrors the natural learning curve and promotes deeper understanding through repetition, scaffolding, and reflective practice. It allows students to internalize theoretical concepts, practice clinical reasoning, and refine their decision-making skills in a cumulative manner.

The purpose of this review article is to explore the effectiveness of progressive simulation in enhancing clinical judgment among prelicensure nursing students. The review will discuss the theoretical foundations of clinical judgment, the design and implementation of progressive simulation, and its impact on learning outcomes. It will also highlight best practices, potential challenges, and recommendations for integrating progressive simulation into nursing curricula. Through this exploration, the article aims to contribute to the advancement of nursing education by supporting evidence-based innovations that prepare students for the complexities of modern healthcare practice.

UNDERSTANDING CLINICAL JUDGMENT

Clinical judgment is a vital component of nursing practice that encompasses the ability to make informed, timely, and patient-centered decisions in complex healthcare settings. It involves the cognitive, psychomotor, and affective processes that enable nurses to assess patient situations, interpret relevant information, respond with appropriate interventions, and reflect on outcomes to inform future actions. Unlike routine decision-making, clinical judgment is dynamic, context-dependent, and deeply rooted in both theoretical knowledge and practical experience. One of the most influential frameworks for understanding clinical judgment in nursing is Tanner's Clinical Judgment Model (2006), which outlines four key phases: noticing, interpreting, responding, and reflecting. In the noticing phase, nurses observe and gather critical cues about the patient's condition. The interpreting phase involves analyzing these cues to understand the clinical situation. This is followed by the responding phase, where appropriate actions are taken, and finally, the reflecting phase, where the nurse evaluates the effectiveness of the intervention and learns from the experience. Clinical judgment develops progressively throughout a nurse's education and practice, moving from reliance on rules and checklists to intuitive, experience-based reasoning. For nursing students, this development requires repeated exposure to realistic clinical situations, structured guidance, and opportunities for reflection. Traditional clinical placements often fall short in providing consistent and diverse experiences needed for this growth. As a result, simulation-based education, particularly progressive simulation, has gained attention for its ability to replicate clinical complexity in a controlled, supportive environment. By engaging students in incremental, thoughtfully designed scenarios that mirror real-life challenges, progressive simulation nurtures the gradual and meaningful development of clinical judgment, ultimately preparing students for competent and confident practice in the healthcare field.

SIMULATION IN NURSING EDUCATION

Simulation has emerged as a transformative teaching strategy in nursing education, providing learners with experiential opportunities to apply theoretical knowledge in safe, controlled environments. It encompasses a range of modalities designed to mimic real clinical situations and allow students to practice clinical skills, communication, critical thinking, and decision-making. Simulation can be broadly categorized into three levels based on fidelity: low, medium, and high. Low-fidelity simulation includes basic task trainers and models used for practicing specific psychomotor skills, such as IV insertion or wound care. Medium-fidelity simulation often involves manikins with limited physiological responses and may be used for practicing scenarios like medication administration or vital signs monitoring. High-fidelity simulation, the most immersive type, utilizes advanced computerized

manikins that can simulate complex physiological functions and respond dynamically to student actions. These high-tech simulations are often conducted in environments that closely resemble actual clinical settings and are used for more advanced scenarios, such as cardiac arrest, sepsis management, or labor and delivery.

The educational benefits of simulation-based learning are extensive. It provides a risk-free space where students can make mistakes and learn from them without endangering patient safety. Simulation promotes active learning, enhances clinical reasoning, and improves communication and teamwork skills. It allows educators to standardize learning experiences, ensuring that all students are exposed to essential scenarios regardless of variability in clinical placements. Furthermore, it encourages reflective practice through structured debriefing sessions, where students analyze their performance and gain deeper insights into their clinical decision-making processes.

Numerous studies support the effectiveness of simulation in skill development. Research has shown that students who participate in simulation demonstrate greater confidence, competence, and preparedness for real clinical environments. Simulation has been associated with improved performance in areas such as patient assessment, prioritization, and emergency response. In particular, high-fidelity simulation has been shown to closely replicate the stress and complexity of real-life clinical situations, making it a valuable tool for bridging the gap between classroom learning and clinical practice. As such, integrating simulation—especially progressive and high-fidelity models—into nursing curricula has become a key strategy for building clinical competence and judgment in future healthcare professionals.

PROGRESSIVE SIMULATION: CONCEPT AND FRAMEWORK

Progressive simulation is an innovative and structured approach to simulation-based learning that involves the sequential delivery of clinical scenarios with gradually increasing levels of complexity and realism. Unlike isolated or one-time simulation events, progressive simulation is designed as a continuum, where each session builds on the knowledge, skills, and clinical reasoning developed in previous simulations. This method mirrors the natural learning process by starting with simpler tasks—such as basic assessments or vital sign monitoring—and advancing to more intricate and high-stakes situations, including multi-system clinical deterioration, critical care, or interdisciplinary collaboration. The structure of progressive simulation typically includes clearly defined learning objectives, integrated clinical themes, and deliberate scaffolding, which helps learners connect theory with practice in a cohesive and developmental manner.

The integration of progressive simulation into the nursing curriculum enhances educational coherence and strengthens students' clinical judgment over time. By embedding simulation throughout the academic program-beginning in the early semesters and continuing through advanced clinical courses-

educators can align simulation activities with specific course content and student competency levels. This alignment allows for a holistic approach to learning, where students progressively acquire cognitive, psychomotor, and affective skills in a coordinated and reinforced manner. Moreover, when combined with structured debriefing and faculty guidance, progressive simulation becomes a powerful tool for reflective learning and professional growth.

When compared to traditional simulation methods, progressive simulation offers several pedagogical advantages. Traditional simulation often consists of isolated, single-session experiences that may not be connected to a broader learning sequence. While these can be effective for specific skill training or assessment, they may not fully support the development of clinical judgment across time. In contrast, progressive simulation provides continuity and context, enabling students to deepen their understanding, recognize patterns, and develop decision-making strategies in a stepwise fashion. It supports a longitudinal view of learning that mirrors the complexity and unpredictability of real clinical practice. As a result, progressive simulation is increasingly recognized as a best-practice approach in nursing education for preparing students to transition confidently and competently into clinical roles.

DESIGNING A PROGRESSIVE SIMULATION PROGRAM

Creating an effective progressive simulation program requires strategic planning and a strong pedagogical foundation. One of the core elements is scenario development and sequencing, which involves designing realistic clinical cases that gradually increase in complexity, based on student learning levels and course objectives. Early scenarios may focus on basic assessments, communication, and safety practices, while later ones introduce critical thinking, prioritization, and management of complex or deteriorating patient conditions. This sequencing ensures a logical progression that aligns with curricular content and facilitates the development of clinical reasoning and judgment over time. Each scenario should be grounded in clearly defined learning outcomes and provide opportunities for both technical and non-technical skill application, including teamwork, leadership, and decision-making. Another essential component is the role of debriefing and reflection, which is widely regarded as the most impactful part of the simulation experience. Debriefing allows students to revisit and analyze their actions, thought processes, and emotional responses in a supportive environment. Using structured frameworks such as the Debriefing for Meaningful Learning (DML) model, facilitators guide students to identify what went well, recognize errors, and understand how their decisions influenced patient outcomes. This reflective practice enhances self-awareness, reinforces learning, and fosters critical thinking, ultimately contributing to the development of clinical judgment.

Equally important is the preparation of faculty and allocation of resources, which are often underestimated aspects of implementing a successful simulation program. Faculty involved in

simulation-based education must be trained not only in scenario facilitation and debriefing techniques but also in the principles of adult learning and learner-centered instruction. Ongoing professional development and collaboration among simulation educators are crucial for maintaining consistency and quality. In addition, simulation requires adequate infrastructure, including manikins, audiovisual equipment, realistic clinical supplies, and dedicated simulation spaces. Institutions must also ensure sufficient staffing and technical support to manage simulation logistics and evaluate program effectiveness. By addressing these elements-scenario design, reflection, and faculty readiness-educators can build a sustainable progressive simulation program that significantly enhances the clinical competence and judgment of nursing students.

IMPACT ON CLINICAL JUDGMENT DEVELOPMENT

The implementation of progressive simulation in nursing education has shown significant positive impact on the development of clinical judgment, particularly in enhancing cognitive skills, building confidence, and improving decision-making abilities. Through structured and repetitive exposure to simulated clinical situations, students develop cognitive skills such as critical thinking, clinical reasoning, and problem-solving. The gradual increase in scenario complexity allows learners to integrate theoretical knowledge with practical application, facilitating deeper understanding and pattern recognition. These cognitive advancements enable students to interpret patient data more effectively, anticipate clinical changes, and select appropriate interventions-key components of sound clinical judgment.

Progressive simulation boosts student confidence and decision-making capabilities. As learners engage in increasingly complex scenarios and successfully navigate them, they build self-assurance in their clinical abilities. This enhanced confidence reduces anxiety in real clinical settings and encourages students to take initiative, prioritize care, and communicate effectively with healthcare teams. The opportunity to practice decision-making in a safe environment, without fear of causing patient harm, allows students to make and learn from mistakes, refine their choices, and reflect critically on their actions. Over time, this contributes to faster, more accurate, and more autonomous clinical decisions.

There is also a growing body of research evidence supporting the effectiveness of progressive simulation in academic settings. Studies have demonstrated that students who participate in well-designed progressive simulation programs outperform their peers in both theoretical assessments and clinical performance evaluations. Research indicates improvements in clinical judgment scores, confidence levels, communication skills, and teamwork behaviors. Moreover, academic institutions that have integrated progressive simulation into their nursing curricula report higher levels of student satisfaction, better preparedness for clinical practice, and positive feedback from clinical preceptors. These outcomes

underscore the value of progressive simulation as a pedagogically sound method for fostering clinical judgment, preparing students for complex clinical roles, and ultimately enhancing the quality of nursing care.

CHALLENGES AND LIMITATIONS

While progressive simulation offers numerous benefits in developing clinical judgment among nursing students, it also presents several challenges and limitations that educators and institutions must consider. One of the primary concerns is resource and cost constraints. High-fidelity simulators, simulation labs, audiovisual recording systems, and the staffing required to plan, conduct, and debrief simulations demand significant financial and logistical investment. Smaller institutions or those with limited budgets may find it difficult to acquire or maintain the necessary equipment and trained faculty. Additionally, scheduling simulation sessions for large cohorts can strain faculty workload and infrastructure capacity, further complicating implementation.

Another challenge lies in student variability and preparedness. Nursing students enter simulation experiences with differing levels of knowledge, confidence, learning styles, and clinical exposure, which can influence how effectively they engage with the simulation. Some students may excel in high-pressure scenarios, while others may struggle with anxiety or lack the foundational knowledge to participate meaningfully. Without individualized support or appropriate scaffolding, there is a risk that simulations may overwhelm some learners or fail to challenge others, thereby limiting the developmental potential of the experience.

A further limitation is the difficulty in accurately measuring improvements in clinical judgment. Although tools such as the Lasater Clinical Judgment Rubric and other validated assessment frameworks exist, clinical judgment is inherently complex, subjective, and influenced by multiple contextual factors. Assessments may not fully capture the depth of cognitive and reflective learning that occurs during simulation. Additionally, short-term improvements observed in simulation may not always translate directly to performance in real clinical settings, making it challenging to evaluate long-term outcomes. These limitations highlight the need for ongoing research, the development of more sensitive assessment tools, and the careful design of simulation programs that are inclusive, scalable, and evidence-based. Despite these challenges, progressive simulation remains a promising educational strategy when implemented with thoughtful planning and institutional support.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRACTICE AND FUTURE RESEARCH

To maximize the effectiveness of progressive simulation in nursing education, several best practices should be followed. Firstly, simulation activities must be thoughtfully integrated into the curriculum,

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aligned with learning objectives, and appropriately sequenced according to students' developmental levels. Scenarios should reflect realistic clinical challenges that promote critical thinking, collaboration, and decision-making. Incorporating structured pre-briefing and debriefing sessions-guided by established frameworks such as the Promoting Excellence and Reflective Learning in Simulation (PEARLS) or Debriefing for Meaningful Learning (DML)-ensures that learners reflect on their actions, internalize lessons, and apply insights to future situations. Faculty development is also crucial; educators involved in simulation must receive training in scenario design, facilitation, and learner-centered debriefing techniques.

In terms of evaluation, a combination of qualitative and quantitative tools is recommended to assess students' progress. Tools such as the Lasater Clinical Judgment Rubric (LCJR), Creighton Simulation Evaluation Instrument, and Simulation Effectiveness Tool–Modified (SET-M) can provide structured, reliable assessments of clinical judgment, communication, and teamwork. These instruments, when used consistently, can help track students' development across multiple simulation encounters. Furthermore, self-assessment and peer feedback can be integrated to encourage reflective learning and promote self-awareness.

Despite growing evidence supporting progressive simulation, several areas for future research remain. Longitudinal studies are needed to determine how simulation experiences influence clinical performance after graduation and in actual patient care settings. Additional research is also warranted to explore how progressive simulation affects different learner populations, including those with varied cultural, educational, or experiential backgrounds. Investigating the cost-effectiveness and scalability of simulation programs in low-resource settings can also contribute to equitable access in nursing education. Finally, advancing simulation technology—such as virtual and augmented reality-offers new opportunities for immersive learning and should be further explored for its potential in supporting progressive, flexible, and personalized clinical education. Together, these recommendations aim to guide nurse educators in implementing evidence-informed simulation practices while encouraging ongoing innovation and scholarly inquiry in this evolving field.

CONCLUSION

This review has highlighted the critical role of progressive simulation in developing clinical judgment among nursing students. The key findings indicate that progressive simulation, through its structured and staged approach, offers a powerful pedagogical method for enhancing cognitive skills, building clinical confidence, and fostering sound decision-making. Unlike traditional one-time simulations, progressive simulation provides continuity and depth in learning, allowing students to gradually transition from novice to competent practitioners. By incorporating realistic scenarios, reflective

debriefing, and incremental complexity, this method aligns with how students best learn and apply clinical knowledge in dynamic healthcare environments. The review also underscores the importance of intentional curriculum integration, trained faculty facilitation, and the use of validated tools to assess student growth over time.

From a broader perspective, the implications for nursing education and policy are significant. Educators and academic leaders should advocate for the inclusion of progressive simulation as a core component of nursing curricula, ensuring that simulation is not seen as supplementary, but as essential to clinical training. Policymakers and institutional stakeholders must recognize the value of simulation in addressing the limitations of clinical placements, standardizing learning experiences, and enhancing graduate readiness. Investment in simulation infrastructure, faculty development, and ongoing research will be vital to sustaining and expanding its impact. Ultimately, the integration of progressive simulation can lead to the development of a more competent, confident, and patient-centered nursing workforce—well-prepared to meet the challenges of modern healthcare.

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