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**A Qualitative Study on Strategies to Enhance Student Nurses' Engagement in Community
Mental Health Nursing, Central Uganda**

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A Qualitative Study on Strategies to Enhance Student Nurses' Engagement in Community Mental Health Nursing, Central Uganda



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Abstract

Purpose: Mental illness remains a significant global burden, affecting nearly 970 million people as of 2019. Community Mental Health Nursing (CMHN) is pivotal in promoting recovery and reducing stigma, yet limited student engagement poses a challenge, particularly at Butabika School of Psychiatric Nursing (BSPN), Uganda. Records indicate only 34% of student nurses attended CMHN placements, despite institutional efforts. This study aimed to assess strategies to enhance student nurses' engagement in Community Mental Health Nursing at BSPN.

Methodology: A qualitative descriptive cross-sectional design was used. Twenty diploma student nurses who had participated in CMHN placements were purposively selected. Data were collected through face-to-face in-depth interviews and analyzed thematically using NVivo software.

Findings: Four major themes emerged: Individual Strategies –hands-on learning, patient interaction, community outreach, and mentorship improved engagement. Institutional Strategies –structured mentorship, hands-on supervision, feedback sessions, and case-based learning were emphasized. Community Strategies –students highlighted the need for community support, mental health education, and involvement in decision-making. General Improvements –suggestions included early pre-placement training, stronger collaboration with local health workers, and culturally informed orientations.

Unique Contribution to Theory, Practice and Policy: Enhance mentorship and resilience training, foster peer support, and integrate self-directed learning. Institutions should invest in supervision, workshops, and logistics. Community sensitization and government support are critical to reduce stigma and improve practical training environments. A multifaceted approach involving individual commitment, institutional investment, and community collaboration is essential to improve student nurse engagement in CMHN and ensure competent future psychiatric nursing professionals.

Keywords: *Community Mental Health Nursing, Student Engagement, Mentorship, Nursing Education*

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INTRODUCTION

Mental illness is a significant global public health concern. According to the World Health Organization (WHO, 2023), approximately 970 million people or 1 in every 8 individuals were living with a mental disorder in 2019. This increasing burden affects not only the health and well-being of individuals but also has profound social and economic implications for families, communities, and national health systems.

Community Mental Health Nursing (CMHN) is essential in addressing mental health challenges by promoting accessible, community-based care that supports recovery, reduces stigma, and improves health-seeking behaviors. It allows individuals to receive treatment and follow-up within their home environments, facilitating reintegration into society and reducing dependency on hospital-based services (Hagerup et al., 2024; Joag et al., 2020).

The Uganda Ministry of Education and Sports (Ministry of Education and Sports, 2018) requires all student nurses to undergo a one-month CMHN field placement as part of their nursing education. At Butabika School of Psychiatric Nursing (BSPN) Uganda's only specialized psychiatric nursing school students are provided with theoretical training, orientation, and logistical support (such as transport and supervision) to facilitate these placements. However, engagement remains low.

Student nurses report facing numerous challenges during CMHN fieldwork. These include community stigma, rejection of patients by relatives, lack of cooperation from caregivers, inaccessible homes, and insufficient mentorship factors that contribute to absenteeism, stress, and poor participation (Trebilcock & Weston, 2019). If unaddressed, these issues may lead to burnout, loss of motivation, and the production of underprepared mental health professionals.

Although prior studies demonstrate that community-based learning enhances nursing students' skills and confidence, few studies have explored student nurses' perspectives on engagement strategies within community mental health settings in low-income countries. Additionally, limited attention has been given to the combined influence of individual, institutional, and community factors on student engagement. This study addresses these gaps by providing context-specific qualitative evidence from Uganda.

Problem Statement

Despite the recognized importance of Community Mental Health Nursing (CMHN) in promoting accessible, patient-centered mental health care, student nurses' engagement during community placements remains suboptimal. At Butabika School of Psychiatric Nursing (BSPN), records indicate that only 34% of students consistently attended CMHN placements despite institutional support (BSPN Records, 2023).

Existing studies largely focus on outcomes of community-based learning but provide limited evidence on student-driven, institutional, and community-level strategies that enhance engagement in CMHN, particularly in low-resource settings such as Uganda. This gap limits the development of targeted interventions to improve training effectiveness. This study seeks to address this gap by exploring strategies to enhance student nurses' engagement in CMHN, with potential benefits for nursing educators, training institutions, policymakers, and mental health service delivery in Uganda.

Theoretical Framework

This qualitative study explores strategies to enhance student nurses' engagement in Community Mental Health Nursing (CMHN) at Butabika School of Psychiatric Nursing using a qualitative theoretical framework. It integrates Hildegard Peplau's Interpersonal Relations. Theory with a conceptual framework showing how individual, institutional and community strategies influence student engagement.

Peplau's theory, emphasizing nurse-patient interactions, provides a process-oriented model with four phases: orientation (introduction to CMHN), identification (forming therapeutic relationships), exploitation (practical application) and resolution (reflection and skill development). This framework helps analyze students' experiences and engagement levels.

The study suggests that mentorship, experiential learning and reflective practice are key strategies to enhance engagement. Through combining Peplau's interpersonal approach with the conceptual framework of engagement strategies, this research offers a comprehensive understanding of student experiences, challenges and best practices in CMHN, ultimately improving mental health outcomes in the community.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative descriptive cross-sectional design conducted at Butabika School of Psychiatric Nursing in Kampala, Uganda. Twenty diploma student nurses who had completed CMHN placements were purposively selected. Data were collected through face-to-face in-depth interviews using a semi-structured guide, audio-recorded, and transcribed verbatim. Thematic analysis was conducted using NVivo software following Braun and Clarke's six-step approach. Trustworthiness was ensured through credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Ethical approval was obtained from relevant ethics committees, and informed consent was secured from all participants.

Findings

Thematic Content Analysis

Individual (Learners') Strategies to Enhance Student Nurses' Engagement in Community Mental Health Nursing

Theme 1: Personal Experiences in Community Mental Health Nursing

Students shared their most engaging experiences during their community mental health nursing (CMHN) placements, highlighting hands-on learning, patient interactions and mentor-ship.

Sub-theme 1.1: Direct patient care and interaction

Many students found that working with real patients was the most engaging aspect of their CMHN experience. It deepened their understanding of mental health conditions and improved their practical skills.

Student 1: *"Engaging with patients suffering from schizophrenia and depression allowed me to see the real impact of mental illnesses beyond theoretical knowledge."*

Student 3: *"Spending time with patients and hearing their stories made me more empathetic and committed to mental health nursing."*

Sub-theme 1.2: Community Outreach and Education

Some students enjoyed participating in community outreach programs where they engaged in mental health education and awareness campaigns.

Student 5: *"Talking to community members about mental health stigma and seeing their perspectives change was very rewarding."*

Student 7: *"I was excited to teach families about mental illness and see them become more supportive of their loved ones."*

Sub-theme 1.3: Supervision and Mentorship

Having supportive mentors and supervisors made the experience more engaging for students.

Student 2: *"My supervisor guided me through patient assessments and counseling, which gave me more confidence."*

Student 6: *"Senior nurses shared their experiences and allowed us to actively participate in care, making learning more practical."*

Theme 2: Suggestions for Improving Community Mental Health Nursing Training

Students provided feedback on the way the CMHN course unit was taught, offering insights into what was useful and what could be improved.

Sub-theme 2.1: More Practical Exposure and Early Placements

Students suggested increasing hands-on learning and starting placements earlier in the course.

Student 4: *"We need more time in the field instead of just classroom learning. Practical exposure should start earlier."*

Student 8: *"It would help if we had longer placements so we can fully engage with patients and understand their conditions."*

Sub-theme 2.2: Use of Case Studies and Real-Life Scenarios

Students found real-life case studies useful and recommended incorporating more of them in class discussions.

Student 9: *"Using real patient cases during lectures helped me relate theory to practice."*

Student 10: *"We should analyze more real-life cases before going into the field to prepare for what we will experience."*

Sub-theme 2.3: Increased Mentorship and Supervision

Students recommended better guidance and structured mentorship during fieldwork.

Student 11: *"Having dedicated mentors would make learning easier and help us feel more confident."*

Student 12: *"We need more supervision and feedback during field placements to improve our skills."*

Sub-theme 2.4: Integration of Counseling and Communication Skills

Students emphasized the need for more focus on counseling techniques and communication skills.

Student 13: *"Mental health nursing is not just about medical treatment; we need more training in counseling and communication."*

Student 14: *"I learned a lot through interacting with patients, but I wish we had more structured lessons on how to handle difficult conversations."*

Discussion:

Individual Strategies

The majority of respondents highlighted that direct patient care and interaction were the most engaging aspects of their community mental health nursing (CMHN) experience. This could be because hands-on exposure allows students to deepen their understanding of mental health conditions and enhances their practical skills. This is in agreement with a study by (Munangatire & Indjamba, 2023; Nuuyoma et al., 2022; Zeydani et al., 2021), who demonstrated that exposing students to community engagement intentionally integrates theory and practice, helping them develop human skills and contribute to community healthcare. The similarity in the studies is because both emphasize the importance of real-life interactions in reinforcing theoretical knowledge and improving student engagement in CMHN.

Additionally, community outreach and education were considered highly engaging by many students, as it allowed them to participate in mental health awareness campaigns and directly impact the community. This could be because engaging in such initiatives helps students develop communication and advocacy skills while fostering a deeper understanding of mental health issues. This is in agreement with a study by (Gibbs et al., 2017), which reported that students gained insight into community needs and resources when they moved outside traditional healthcare settings, increasing their understanding of their role in community health. The similarity in these studies is because both emphasize the role of community-based learning in enriching students' perspectives and preparing them for real-world challenges.

Furthermore, mentorship and supervision were cited as key factors in making CMHN placements more engaging. This could be because structured mentorship provides students with guidance, confidence and hands-on learning opportunities. This is in agreement with a study by (May et al., 2021) in Myanmar, which found that mentoring and guidance from senior colleagues (63.3%) were the most effective strategies to mitigate challenges faced by community health workers during their community experiences. The similarity in the studies is because both recognize mentorship as a fundamental component in professional development and skill acquisition for nursing students.

Regarding suggestions for improving CMHN training, most students recommended more practical exposure and early placements. This could be because earlier field experiences allow students to gain confidence and competency in handling real-life cases. This is in agreement with studies by (Hagrass et al., 2023; Mínguez Moreno et al., 2023; Mubeezi & Gidman, 2017), which found that community-based experiential learning provides an opportunity for students to confirm theories learned in class, helping them evaluate how these theories are implemented in real community contexts. The similarity in the studies is because both highlight the importance of hands-on experiences in bridging the gap between theoretical learning and practical application.

Students also emphasized the importance of using case studies and real-life scenarios in classroom discussions. This could be because analyzing real patient cases enhances students' ability to relate theoretical concepts to actual clinical situations. This is in agreement with a study by (Mahdi et

al., 2020; Seshan et al., 2021; Vlachopoulos & Makri, 2024), which reported that case-based learning (CBL) should be encouraged among nursing students as it promotes team-based learning and helps them apply theoretical knowledge to real-life situations. The similarity in the studies is because both stress the significance of practical case discussions in preparing students for fieldwork.

Increased mentorship and supervision were also suggested as critical improvements in CMHN training. This could be because structured supervision provides students with necessary feedback, boosts their confidence, and ensures effective learning. This is in agreement with a study by (Henderson et al., 2020; Li et al., 2022) which confirmed that mental health practitioners place high importance on being person-centered, collaborative, and supportive in a range of community mental health settings to ensure successful engagement. The similarity in the studies is because both recognize structured mentorship and feedback as essential elements in improving learning experiences.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the findings emphasize several strategies to enhance student nurses' engagement in community mental health nursing (CMHN) and identified key areas for improving training. Findings revealed that direct patient interaction, community outreach, and supportive mentorship were the most engaging aspects of CMHN placements. These experiences enabled students to bridge theory and practice, deepen their clinical understanding, and develop critical communication and advocacy skills. The study further highlighted the need for more practical exposure, early field placements, use of real-life case studies, and strengthened mentorship structures to better prepare learners for community mental health practice. Overall, the results emphasize that experiential learning, community involvement and guided supervision are essential for producing competent, confident and community-responsive mental health nurses.

Recommendations

Training institutions should increase the duration and frequency of community-based practical sessions and introduce placements earlier in the CMHN course. This will allow student nurses to build confidence, gain hands-on experience, and better integrate theoretical knowledge with real-life community mental health practice.

Nursing schools and clinical sites should establish a structured mentorship program where trained supervisors and senior mental health nurses provide consistent guidance, feedback, and role modeling. Strengthened supervision will enhance students' clinical skills, improve engagement, and ensure quality learning experiences during fieldwork.

Nursing Educators/Teachers should incorporate more real-life case studies, scenario-based discussions, and structured sessions on communication and counseling techniques into classroom teaching. This approach will improve students' critical thinking, prepare them for patient interactions, and strengthen their ability to apply theoretical concepts in community settings.

BSPN should strengthen experiential and hands-on learning by increasing structured opportunities for direct patient care and introducing earlier and longer CMHN placements within the BSPN curriculum to enhance empathy, clinical confidence, practical competence, and sustained engagement with patients and communities.

Nursing Council should standardize clinical supervision and preceptorship by developing and enforcing national CMHN supervision guidelines, including appropriate mentor–student ratios, and requiring training and certification for mental health clinical preceptors supporting students.

Ministry of Health and Ministry of Education should increase support for community mental health training by allocating funding to strengthen community-based training sites, outreach programs, and supervision capacity, while providing resources and incentives to health facilities and community units that host nursing students.

Limitations of the Study

This study relied on self-reported experiences that may have introduced response bias; however, participants were assured confidentiality and anonymity to encourage honest and accurate reflections.

The study used qualitative design and relatively small sample size that may have not fully represented all student experiences; to mitigate this, data saturation was used to ensure that themes were well-developed and consistently emerging before concluding data collection. L

Recall bias was anticipated since students reflected on past placements, but interviews were conducted shortly after their community mental health rotations to ensure experiences were still fresh and reliable. These strategies helped enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings.

What Is Already Known

Community Mental Health Nursing (CMHN) training is essential for preparing nursing students to understand mental health conditions and provide patient-centered care within community settings. Previous studies have shown that hands-on exposure improves students' confidence, clinical competence, and ability to integrate theory with practice. Research also indicates that community-based learning enhances communication, empathy, and advocacy skills, allowing students to appreciate the social and cultural factors influencing mental health. Furthermore, structured mentorship and supportive supervision have been widely recognized as key contributors to effective student learning and engagement during community placements.

What This Study Adds

This study provides new insights into the specific individual strategies that enhance student nurses' engagement during Community Mental Health Nursing (CMHN) placements. It highlights the central role of direct patient interaction, community outreach, and mentorship in shaping meaningful learning experiences. The study also identifies key improvements needed in CMHN training, including earlier and extended practical exposure, increased use of case-based teaching, and strengthened supervision structures. By capturing students' voices, this study contributes evidence that experiential learning, guided mentorship, and skills-focused pedagogy are essential for preparing competent and community-responsive mental health nurses.

Author Contributions

All authors generally contributed equally to the development of this study

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Abbreviations and Acronyms

CMHN: Community Mental Health Nursing

BSPN: Butabika School of Psychiatric Nursing

WHO: World Health Organization

UHIREC: Uganda Heart Institute Research Ethics Committee

P: Participant (used for coding interviews, e.g., P1–P20)