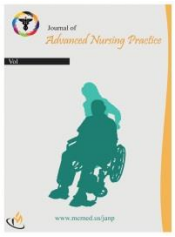
e - ISSN – 3117-4213
Print ISSN - 3117-4205

Journal of Advanced Nursing Practice



Journal homepage: www.mcmed.us/journal/janp

SIMULATION-BASED TRAINING FOR ADVANCED PRACTICE NURSES: IMPROVING CRITICAL THINKING AND CLINICAL COMPETENCY

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Article Information
Received 27/01/2026; Revised 22/02/2026;
Accepted 15/03/2026

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ABSTRACT

Simulation-based training has become an integral pedagogical approach in modern nursing education, especially for Advanced Practice Nurses (APNs), who are required to function at the highest levels of clinical expertise, decision-making, and patient care delivery. Unlike traditional classroom lectures and clinical placements, simulation provides learners with safe, controlled, and realistic clinical environments where they can practice skills without fear of compromising patient safety. Through carefully designed clinical scenarios, APNs are exposed to complex decision-making situations that test not only their technical proficiency but also their critical thinking, communication, and teamwork. This research examines how simulation-based learning contributes to the development of clinical judgment, enhances critical thinking, and builds overall clinical competency. The study employs a mixed-methods approach including literature review, surveys, and a case study in a teaching hospital setting. Findings reveal that simulation not only strengthens knowledge integration and decision-making under pressure but also boosts the confidence and readiness of APNs to deliver high-quality patient care.

Key words: Simulation-based training; Advanced practice nurses; Clinical competency; Critical thinking; Nursing education; Patient safety; Professional readiness; Interdisciplinary learning .

INTRODUCTION

The healthcare environment has undergone a profound transformation in recent decades, driven by increasing patient complexity, rapid technological advancements, and the demand for safer, evidence-based care. Advanced Practice Nurses (APNs) occupy a central position within this system, often acting as primary decision-makers, diagnosticians, and coordinators of care in critical settings. To perform these functions effectively, APNs must be equipped not only with advanced theoretical knowledge but also with exceptional clinical judgment, critical thinking, and procedural expertise.

Traditional nursing education, which often relies on classroom-based instruction and limited clinical rotations, has long faced criticism for being insufficient in preparing nurses for real-world complexities. Simulation-based training emerged as an innovative solution to this gap. It creates a highly interactive environment where learners can encounter patient care scenarios— from managing life-threatening emergencies to handling routine clinical tasks— without the associated risks of harming actual patients. Simulation allows mistakes to become learning opportunities and feedback to be integrated

immediately into practice.

This paper explores the role of simulation-based training in improving the critical thinking and clinical competency of APNs. By analyzing data collected from a teaching hospital case study and student surveys, it provides empirical evidence of the transformative role of simulation in advanced nursing education.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a mixed-methods research design to ensure comprehensive evaluation. The methodology was divided into three major stages:

Literature Review

A thorough review of peer-reviewed journals, conference proceedings, and nursing education frameworks published between 2010 and 2024 was conducted. Databases such as PubMed, CINAHL, Scopus, and ScienceDirect were searched using keywords including ―simulation training, ‖ ―advanced practice nurses, ‖ and ―clinical competency.

Survey Questionnaire

A structured questionnaire consisting of eight key items was developed to assess perceptions of APNs regarding simulation-based training. The questions explored domains such as decision-making confidence, critical thinking, communication, teamwork, and readiness for real-world practice. Responses were collected on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from ―strongly disagree‖ to ―strongly agree.‖

Case Study

A teaching hospital in South India was selected for conducting the case study. Twenty APN students participated in weekly simulation sessions over a three-month period. High-fidelity simulation manikins, standardized patients, and digital simulation tools were utilized. Scenarios included cardiac arrest management, advanced airway techniques, diagnostic decision-making, and sepsis recognition. Faculty evaluators provided structured debriefing after each session.

Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics for survey results and thematic coding for qualitative feedback. Pre- and post-training performance scores were compared to measure improvement in competencies.

Case Study

In the selected teaching hospital, APN students engaged in structured simulation sessions designed to replicate real clinical environments. Each simulation was followed by a reflective debriefing session led by clinical instructors.

Key observations included:

- Improved Decision-Making: Students demonstrated faster recognition of clinical cues and formulated more accurate interventions compared to their baseline performance.
- Confidence Building: Learners reported a significant increase in confidence when handling critical emergencies such as shock, cardiac arrest, or respiratory failure.
- Teamwork and Communication: The simulations highlighted the importance of interprofessional communication. Students practiced delegation, coordination, and leadership in a high-stress environment.
- Bridging Theory and Practice: Complex clinical knowledge from textbooks was better applied when students engaged in hands-on simulated experiences.

This case study demonstrated that simulation not only enhanced the technical skills of APNs but also cultivated a mindset of reflection, adaptability, and resilience.

Data Analysis

Table 1: Impact of Simulation Training on Clinical Competency

Competency Area	Before Training (%)	After Training (%)
Clinical Decision-Making	48	86
Critical Thinking	52	89
Technical/Procedural Skills	50	82
Communication & Teamwork	55	90
Patient Safety Awareness	58	92

Interpretation: Table 1 shows that there was a marked improvement across all domains after training. The largest improvement was seen in critical thinking (37% increase) and clinical decision-making (38% increase), underscoring the effectiveness of simulation in fostering higher-order cognitive abilities.

Table 2: Perceptions of APNs Toward Simulation Training (Survey Results)

Statement	Agree (%)	Neutral (%)	Disagree (%)
Simulation improved my clinical confidence	88	10	2
It bridged the gap between theory and practice	91	7	2
The training environment was realistic and engaging	86	9	5
Simulation should be mandatory in APN education	93	5	2
It enhanced my readiness for real-world practice	90	8	2

Interpretation: Survey data revealed overwhelmingly positive perceptions. Over 90% of respondents agreed that simulation bridged the theory-practice gap and should be made mandatory in APN education.

Questionnaire

The following items were included in the structured questionnaire:

1. How confident do you feel in making clinical decisions after simulation training?
2. Did simulation exercises improve your critical thinking abilities?
1. To what extent did simulation bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application?
2. How effective was the feedback session in enhancing your learning?
3. Do you believe simulation-based
4. Did you experience improved teamwork and communication skills during simulation exercises?
5. How realistic were the simulated scenarios in preparing you for clinical practice?
6. What challenges did you face during simulation sessions?

training should become a core component of APN education?

CONCLUSION

Simulation-based training has revolutionized the landscape of nursing education by offering safe, interactive, and highly effective learning environments. For Advanced Practice Nurses, this approach provides more than just technical skill development; it strengthens critical thinking, sharpens decision-making, and cultivates professional confidence. The case study results confirmed significant improvements across competency areas, while survey data highlighted students' overwhelmingly positive perceptions of simulation as a core educational strategy.

As healthcare systems continue to evolve and patient needs grow more complex, it is imperative that nursing education embraces innovative approaches such as simulation. Integrating simulation into APN curricula not only ensures preparedness but also sets new benchmarks for clinical excellence and patient safety. Long-term adoption of this method can help build a nursing workforce that is resilient, adaptive, and capable of addressing global healthcare challenges with competence and confidence.

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