



Who Cares for Those Who Care? A Systematic Literature Review of Factors Behind Nursing Excellence

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Abstract

Nursing excellence depends not only on individual clinical competence but also on the organizational conditions in which nurses work, learn, lead, and participate in patient care. This systematic literature review synthesized 17 substantive nursing sources supplied for the revised manuscript to examine nurse empowerment, nursing leadership, professional development, work engagement, workforce well-being, professional identity, cultural values, and community engagement. The literature includes studies and reviews from the Philippines and international settings published from 2021 to 2026. The synthesis identified five interconnected areas: nurse empowerment and participation; nursing leadership and professional support; professional development, education, and incentives; work engagement, well-being, and workforce sustainability; and professional identity, cultural values, collaboration, and community engagement. The reviewed literature indicates that empowerment is associated with professional and organizational outcomes, while supportive leadership and continuing development strengthen nurses' capacity to respond to changing healthcare needs. Evidence also emphasizes the importance of healthy work environments, rewards, professional identity, cultural responsiveness, and collaboration. The review concludes that nursing excellence is best understood as an organizational and professional system in which nurses are empowered, supported, continuously developed, and enabled to contribute to quality nursing practice.

Keywords

nursing excellence, nurse empowerment, clinical leadership, professional development, quality of care

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Author Contributions

The author contributed to conceptualization, methodology, investigation, writing—original draft preparation, writing—review and editing, and supervision. The authors approved the final manuscript.

Ethics Statement

As this study involved the analysis of previously published literature and did not involve human participants or the collection of primary data, institutional ethics approval was not required.

INTRODUCTION

Healthcare systems today ask nurses to do much more than provide bedside care. Nurses are expected to make sound clinical decisions, work effectively with others, lead when needed, adapt to changing demands, and continue learning throughout their careers. Nursing excellence, therefore, is not defined by clinical competence alone. It also reflects how nurses are supported, empowered, and given opportunities to contribute to patient care, organizational improvement, and the work of healthcare teams. The literature reviewed in this study shows that these aspects of nursing practice are closely connected to the environments in which nurses work (Tan & Conde, 2021; Reyes et al., 2024; Al Sabei et al., 2022; Yesilbas & Kantek, 2024).

Empowerment and leadership are particularly important in helping nurses perform at their best. Studies involving Filipino nurses have shown the importance of empowerment in relation to nurses' qualities and performance, while research conducted during the pandemic illustrates how empowerment can help nurses respond to difficult clinical and organizational situations (Tan & Conde, 2021; Reyes et al., 2024). Leadership also plays a significant role in building positive nursing cultures and preparing nurses to respond to broader healthcare needs (Nurmeksela et al., 2025; Hernandez et al., 2024). At the same time, being an excellent nurse involves more than technical skills. Professional values, competence,

identity, and the qualities associated with being a “good nurse” are also important parts of nursing practice (Haddad, 2025; Ejupi et al., 2025).

Nurses also need workplaces that support their well-being and professional growth. Burnout, work engagement, motivation, and the work environment can influence how nurses care for patients and experience their profession (Labrague, 2024; Al Sabei et al., 2022). In the Central Philippine setting, work engagement has been examined in relation to nurse and patient outcomes, while psychological empowerment and professional identity have been linked to job satisfaction (Falguera et al., 2023; Bilgin et al., 2026). Opportunities for continuing education, appropriate incentives, and meaningful rewards can likewise encourage nurses to remain engaged and develop professionally (Kourkouta et al., 2021; Abhichartibutra et al., 2024; Alkhawaldeh & Albashtawy, 2025). Importantly, professional formation begins even before nurses enter full practice, as the clinical learning environment can influence students’ grit, self-esteem, and caring behaviors (Falguera et al., 2025).

Nursing excellence is also shaped by relationships, culture, and the communities nurses serve. Among Filipino Generation Z nurses, values such as *hiya*, *pakikisama*, and *pakikipag-ugnayan* provide a meaningful context for understanding professional relationships and interactions (Avila et al., 2026). Community-engaged research likewise highlights how nursing can contribute to building health capacity in underserved communities (Sumile et al., 2024). The literature suggests that excellent nursing does not depend on one factor alone. It develops when nurses are empowered, well supported, professionally prepared, engaged in their work, and able to practice within a culture that values leadership, collaboration, and care. This review therefore aims to bring these findings together and identify the major factors behind nursing excellence, with particular attention to their practical implications for healthcare organizations and the Philippine context.

METHODOLOGY

Design

This study employed a systematic literature review design to synthesize published evidence concerning the factors associated with nursing excellence. The review followed a structured process of defining the focus of the review, establishing eligibility considerations, examining the selected literature, extracting relevant information, and organizing the findings through thematic synthesis. The review focused on nursing empowerment, leadership, professional development, work engagement, workforce well-being, professional identity, cultural values, collaboration, incentives, and community engagement as dimensions potentially contributing to nursing excellence.

The evidence base consisted of 17 substantive nursing sources published between 2021 and 2026. The selected literature included empirical studies, qualitative research, a meta-analysis, scoping and systematic reviews, and community-engaged research representing Philippine and international settings. Because the included sources differed in research design, participants, settings, and outcomes, thematic synthesis was used rather than statistical aggregation (Cariaga, 2025).

Scope and Selection of Literature

The literature was selected based on its direct relevance to nursing excellence and to the major professional and organizational conditions that influence nursing practice. Sources were considered relevant when they addressed one or more of the following areas: nurse empowerment, nursing leadership, professional development, continuing education, incentives and rewards, work engagement, burnout and workforce well-being, job satisfaction, professional identity, cultural values, collaboration, clinical learning, or community engagement.

The evidence set included studies involving practicing nurses, nurse leaders, nursing students, and other groups directly connected with nursing practice and professional development. Both Philippine and international literature were considered to provide a broader understanding of nursing excellence while allowing attention to factors particularly relevant to the Philippine healthcare context. Sources were retained when their findings could contribute to the identification, interpretation, or contextualization of factors associated with effective and sustainable nursing practice.

Eligibility Considerations

Sources were included when they were scholarly publications published between 2021 and 2026 and when their content addressed at least one dimension relevant to nursing excellence. Eligible evidence included quantitative studies, qualitative studies, reviews, meta-analyses, and relevant community-engaged research. The inclusion of different research designs allowed the review to capture organizational, professional, psychological, educational, cultural, and community dimensions of nursing practice. Sources were excluded from the substantive synthesis when they did not directly contribute evidence concerning nursing practice, professional development, leadership, empowerment, workforce well-being, professional identity, organizational support, cultural responsiveness, or community engagement. Publications that did not provide findings relevant to the objectives of the review were likewise not considered part of the substantive evidence base.

Evidence Organization and Data Extraction

Information from each selected source was examined and organized according to its principal research focus, population or professional group, context, and major findings relevant to nursing excellence. Particular attention was given to evidence describing conditions that enable nurses to perform effectively, remain engaged in their work, develop professionally, participate in decision-making, and contribute to quality patient and organizational outcomes.

The extracted evidence was compared across sources to identify recurring concepts and relationships. Similar findings were grouped together, while distinct but related findings were considered in relation to the broader concept of nursing excellence. This process allowed evidence from different research designs and settings to be considered together without treating their findings as statistically equivalent.

Thematic Synthesis

A thematic synthesis approach was used to identify recurring patterns across the selected literature. The analysis proceeded by identifying concepts appearing in individual sources, comparing related findings across studies, grouping

conceptually similar findings, and developing broader themes that represented the collective evidence. The synthesis resulted in five interconnected themes: nurse empowerment and participation; nursing leadership and professional support; professional development, education, and incentives; work engagement, well-being, and workforce sustainability; and professional identity, cultural values, collaboration, and community engagement.

The themes were interpreted not as independent factors but as interconnected dimensions of nursing excellence. Empowerment may create opportunities for participation, while effective leadership can provide the organizational conditions necessary for empowerment to be sustained. Similarly, professional development and incentives may strengthen motivation and competence, while attention to burnout and work engagement may help maintain nurses' capacity to provide quality care. Cultural responsiveness, professional identity, collaboration, and community engagement further extend nursing excellence beyond individual clinical performance.

Trustworthiness of the Synthesis

To strengthen the consistency of the review, findings were compared across sources rather than relying on a single study or research design. Greater interpretive emphasis was placed on concepts that appeared across multiple sources or were supported by different forms of evidence. Differences in research context, population, and methodology were considered when interpreting findings to avoid presenting context-specific results as universally applicable.

The synthesis was guided by the view that nursing excellence is a multidimensional concept. Consequently, evidence concerning empowerment, leadership, professional development, workforce well-being, professional identity, culture, collaboration, and community engagement was considered collectively. This approach provided a basis for developing an integrated interpretation of the conditions that may support sustainable nursing excellence, particularly within Philippine healthcare organizations.

Scope and Methodological Limitation

The review should be interpreted within the scope of its selected evidence base. The revised manuscript analyzes a predefined set of 17 substantive nursing sources rather than reporting a new database search of all potentially available literature. Therefore, the findings should not be interpreted as an exhaustive representation of every study published on nursing excellence. Instead, the review provides an integrated thematic synthesis of the selected scholarly evidence and identifies recurring factors that can inform nursing practice, organizational policy, professional development, and future research.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The synthesis of the 18 supplied sources produced five interconnected themes: nurse empowerment and participation; nursing leadership and professional support; professional development, education, and incentives; work engagement, well-being, and workforce sustainability; and professional identity, cultural values, collaboration, and community engagement.

Nurse Empowerment and Participation

Nurse empowerment emerged as a foundational condition of nursing excellence. Empowerment among Filipino nurses has been examined in relation to demographics, qualities, and performance, suggesting that empowerment is connected to how nurses function as professionals (Tan & Conde, 2021). Nurse empowerment has also been examined within a tertiary university hospital during a pandemic crisis, demonstrating its importance in demanding clinical environments (Reyes et al., 2024). Structural empowerment has been linked with nurses' job satisfaction, reinforcing the importance of organizational structures that enable nurses to perform effectively (Yesilbas & Kantek, 2024). Psychological empowerment has likewise been examined as a predictor of nurses' job satisfaction, with professional identity considered as a mediating factor (Bilgin et al., 2026). These findings indicate that empowerment includes both organizational and psychological dimensions. Nurses need opportunities to participate, access support and resources, experience professional capacity, and develop a strong sense of identity and confidence in their roles (Tan & Conde, 2021; Reyes et al., 2024; Yesilbas & Kantek, 2024; Bilgin et al., 2026).

Nursing Leadership and Professional Support

Leadership provides the organizational direction through which nursing excellence can be developed and sustained. Excellent nursing leadership has been examined in relation to Magnet culture among nurse leaders, highlighting the importance of leadership in building an excellence-oriented organizational environment (Nurmeksela et al., 2025). Leadership development has also been addressed through an online nursing leadership program for global health in the Western Pacific Region, demonstrating the value of structured opportunities for leadership capacity building (Hernandez et al., 2024).

The professional meaning of excellence extends beyond managerial performance. A scoping review of the characteristics of the good nurse emphasizes professional qualities, while a systematic review of nursing as a profession and science identifies factors shaping nursing within healthcare systems (Haddad, 2025; Ejupi et al., 2025). These sources support an understanding of leadership as an enabling function that includes professional role modeling, learning, organizational development, and the capacity to support nurses in changing healthcare environments (Hernandez et al., 2024; Nurmeksela et al., 2025).

Professional Development, Education, and Incentives

Professional development emerged as an important pathway toward nursing excellence. Continuing education and incentives have been examined as mechanisms for supporting nurses' professional development and motivation (Kourkouta et al., 2021). Total rewards preferences among nurses in rural and remote Thailand demonstrate that reward systems are an important workforce consideration, while discussion of nursing incentives further emphasizes the need to examine how organizations motivate and retain nurses (Abhicharttibutra et al., 2024; Alkhawaldeh & Albashtawy, 2025).

Professional formation also begins during nursing education. The post-pandemic clinical learning environment of nursing students has been examined in relation to academic grit, self-esteem, and caring behaviors, suggesting that educational and clinical environments can shape professional readiness and caring orientations (Falguera et al., 2025). Thus, nursing excellence requires continuity between education, professional development, organizational support, and recognition.

Work Engagement, Well-being, and Workforce Sustainability

Nursing excellence cannot be sustained without attention to nurses' well-being and work experiences. Job burnout has been examined in relation to nurses' caring behaviors through work engagement and job motivation, emphasizing the relationship between nurses' well-being and their capacity for caring practice (Labrague, 2024). Burnout has also been examined in relation to work environment, empowerment, and psychological stress, highlighting the organizational context in which nurse well-being develops (Al Sabei et al., 2022).

Work engagement is similarly important. Research among nurses in Central Philippines examined work engagement in relation to nurse work and patient outcomes, indicating that engagement has implications beyond individual employee experience (Falguera et al., 2023). Structural empowerment and job satisfaction, as well as psychological empowerment, professional identity, and job satisfaction, further demonstrate the importance of positive organizational and professional conditions (Yesilbas & Kanteke, 2024; Bilgin et al., 2026). These findings suggest that workforce well-being should be treated as part of nursing quality rather than as a separate employee concern. Organizations that seek sustainable nursing excellence need to consider empowerment, healthy work environments, engagement, motivation, satisfaction, and professional identity together (Al Sabei et al., 2022; Labrague, 2024; Falguera et al., 2023; Bilgin et al., 2026).

Professional Identity, Cultural Values, Collaboration, and Community Engagement

Nursing excellence is also shaped by professional identity, cultural values, and relationships with communities. A cultural values model examining *hiya*, *pakikisama*, and *pakikipag-ugnayan* among Filipino Generation Z nurses highlights the importance of cultural and relational dimensions of nursing practice (Avila et al., 2026). This is particularly relevant in the Philippine setting, where professional interactions are influenced by social and cultural relationships.

Community engagement provides another dimension of excellence. Community-engaged research has been used toward capacity building in an underserved community, demonstrating the value of partnerships that connect health professionals with the communities they serve (Sumile et al., 2024). Together with broader literature on the characteristics of the good nurse and nursing as a profession and science, these studies support a relational understanding of nursing excellence (Haddad, 2025; Ejupi et al., 2025). The evidence therefore suggests that nursing excellence is not limited to technical competence. It is expressed through professional relationships, cultural responsiveness, collaboration, community engagement, and the ability of nurses to contribute meaningfully to healthcare systems (Avila et al., 2026; Sumile et al., 2024).

The five themes show that nursing excellence is multidimensional and depends on the interaction of individual, professional, and organizational conditions. Empowerment provides nurses with opportunities to participate and exercise professional capacity, while leadership helps translate organizational support into an environment where excellence can be sustained. Professional development and appropriate incentives further strengthen nurses' competence and motivation, while attention to burnout, work engagement, and workplace conditions supports the sustainability of quality practice.

The findings also show that nursing excellence extends beyond organizational performance. Professional identity, cultural responsiveness, collaboration, and community engagement provide a broader understanding of what it means to practice nursing effectively. In the Philippine context, these dimensions are particularly relevant because nursing practice is shaped not only by professional standards but also by relationships, cultural values, and community needs. Thus, nursing excellence may be better understood as a continuing process supported by organizations, professional leaders, educational institutions, nurses themselves, and the communities they serve.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This systematic literature review shows that nursing excellence is not the result of a single professional quality but of several factors that work together. The reviewed literature points to five closely connected areas: nurse empowerment and participation, effective leadership and professional support, professional development and incentives, work engagement and workforce well-being, and professional identity, cultural responsiveness, collaboration, and community engagement. These factors influence one another. Nurses are more likely to perform effectively when they have a voice in decisions, supportive leaders, opportunities to grow, appropriate recognition, and a work environment that protects their well-being. For Philippine healthcare organizations, including hospitals in the Davao Region, the findings emphasize that caring for nurses is an important part of caring for patients. Creating workplaces where nurses feel valued, supported, empowered, and professionally respected can help sustain quality nursing practice. Nursing excellence should therefore be viewed not only as an expectation placed on individual nurses but also as a shared responsibility of healthcare leaders and organizations that provide the conditions in which nurses practice.

Healthcare organizations should strengthen mechanisms that allow nurses to participate meaningfully in clinical and organizational decision-making. Nursing leadership programs should also provide opportunities for continuing professional learning, leadership development, and the development of positive workplace cultures. Professional development pathways should connect continuing education with recognition, incentives, rewards, and career advancement so that nurses have clear opportunities to grow and remain motivated in the profession. Healthcare organizations should also make workforce well-being an important part of their quality-improvement efforts. Programs addressing burnout, work engagement, motivation, empowerment, and workplace conditions should be strengthened. Professional identity and culturally responsive leadership should be promoted, particularly as younger generations of Filipino nurses enter the workforce. Nursing schools, healthcare institutions, and communities should work together to support professional formation and

community-responsive practice. For hospitals in the Davao Region, a localized nursing excellence framework may be developed to integrate empowerment, leadership, professional development, workforce well-being, cultural responsiveness, and community engagement as interconnected priorities for sustainable nursing excellence.

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