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Systematic review as a research method in post-graduate nursing education

Wilma ten Ham-Baloyi*, Portia Jordan

Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University, Department of Nursing Science, Port Elizabeth, South Africa

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ABSTRACT

In South Africa, there appears to be poor understanding about using a systematic review as an acceptable research method in post-graduate nursing education. The lack of understanding may result in research supervisors being unable to guide post-graduate students, such as masters and doctoral students, in using the systematic review methodology in the completion of an academic qualification. Furthermore, they might not be able to assist post-graduate students in completing their studies, or conducting studies, in particular systematic reviews, which are of high quality. Valuable opportunities can thus be missed that might add to the body of knowledge to inform and improve research, education, and clinical practice. This article may set the field for an informed debate on systematic reviews as a useful and acceptable research method to be used by post-graduate nursing students in South Africa. We conclude that a systematic review could be a useful and acceptable method for research in post-graduate nursing education. However, the method's benefits and disadvantages should be considered before a post-graduate student embarks on such a journey.

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* Corresponding author. Tel.: +27 (0)41 504 2959; fax: +27 (0)41 504 2616.

E-mail address: wilma.tenham-baloyi@nmmu.ac.za (W. ten Ham-Baloyi).

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1. Introduction

A 'systematic review' refers to a literature review associated with a clearly formulated research question that uses systematic explicit methods to identify, select, and critically appraise relevant research from previously published studies related to the question at hand ([The Cochrane Collaboration, 2005](#)). The systematic review process employs literature review methods to select only those studies that meet specific criteria which reasonably confirm the rigour of the 'evidence' produced by a previously published study. The primary characteristic of a systematic review is that it uses a rigorous set of criteria by which to appraise the reliability and validity of previously published research.

Systematic reviews are increasingly being used as a preferred research method for the education of post-graduate nursing students ([Bettany-Saltikov, 2012](#); [Sambunjak & Puljak, 2010](#)) as these reviews provide a mechanism for identifying the most robust evidence-based research from among the range of research studies being published ([Lam & Kennedy, 2005](#)). As a result, a systematic review plays an increasingly important role in formulating evidence-based nursing practice by including only the highest quality evidence for the development of best-practice guidelines, and to better direct nursing practice ([Dixon-Woods et al., 2006](#); [Scott et al., 2007](#)).

A strong international community of discourse currently exists regarding the use of systematic reviews as a research method for master nursing students and this method is increasingly being used as an acceptable method for clinical doctorate students owing to its evidence-based nature, and its results being relevant for clinical practice ([Kung et al., 2010](#)). Publishing a systematic review or conducting a high-quality integrative literature review as part of a doctoral is, however, not yet accepted ([Olsson, Ringnér, & Borglin, 2014](#); [Sambunjak & Puljak, 2010](#)) as the doctoral degree holds expectation of knowledge discovery, but not necessarily synthesis and application of knowledge.

Globally, ensuring high quality of post-graduate nursing education is the priority of many organisations. For example, one of the aims of the International Network for Doctoral Education in Nursing (INGEN) is to enhance doctoral education by promoting networking between doctoral educators to address issues of shared interest globally ([The Johns Hopkins University School of Nursing, 2015](#), and the Sigma Theta Tau International has a centre for excellence in nursing education, including post-graduate nursing education ([Sigma Theta Tau International, 2015](#)). In South Africa, clear post-graduate requirements exist, and the need to generate an increased number of masters and doctorates as well as postgraduate research supervision, increases. The Academy of Science in South Africa (ASSAF) concurs in stating that a quality PhD should enhance the student's systematic understanding of the field of study as well as the research methods associated

with the field, have made a contribution through original research, and should be able to critically analyse, evaluate and synthesise complex ideas ([ASSAF, 2010](#)). This is in line with the National Qualification Framework (NQF)'s level descriptors for Masters (NQF level 9) and PhD (NQF level 10), which outlines the abilities of problem solving, in-depth knowledge about the topic researched, and the research method ([South African Qualifications Authority, 2012](#)). A systematic review could be a good research method to be used for post-graduate education because it not only enhances problem solving by using critical and analytical thinking and acquiring in-depth knowledge of a variety of research methods, but it can provide opportunities for networking by contacting different authors of publications nationally and globally ([Sambunjak & Puljak, 2010](#)). A systematic review is a cost-effective research method which does not require a lengthy ethical approval process, and may generate more high-quality masters and doctoral graduates who will fulfil the need for postgraduate education and supervision ([Academy of Science in South Africa, 2010](#)). However, in South Africa there is little understanding of the systematic review process and its scientific rigour as a research method in post-graduate nursing education. There exists only a limited research community of nurse educators who share a common understanding of systematic review methods, who can act as post-graduate research supervisors and mentors ([Boland, Cherry, & Dickson, 2008](#)). Because of this limited availability, missed opportunities prevail for adding to the body of evidence-based nursing science and practice, including the development of robust nursing practice clinical guidelines to inform clinical practice, which is fundamentally based on a systematic review ([Hemington & Brereton, 2009](#)).

As a result of the relative newness of the systematic review process in post-graduate nursing education in South Africa, there exists a paucity of information and clear understandable guidelines to produce a rigorous systematic review. This article aims to provide a clear roadmap for conducting a systematic review, as well as discussing its potential and limitations for use by post-graduate nursing students. 'Post-graduate nursing students' in this context refers to masters and doctoral students who conduct research at an academic institution towards obtaining an academic qualification. Cognisance is taken of a clinical doctorate, but in South Africa, obtaining clinical doctorates is not general practice.

2. Nursing research methods

Nursing research dates as far back as the 1850s when Florence Nightingale identified problems in nursing practice and began to produce a systematic collection of data to address these problems ([Cantelon, 2010](#); [Moule & Goodman, 2009](#)).

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