



Review

A critical analysis of the literature and theoretical perspectives on theory–practice gap amongst newly qualified nurses within the United Kingdom



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SUMMARY

Objectives: This critical analysis of the literature examines the factors and theoretical perspectives contributing to the theory–practice gap for newly qualified nurses within the United Kingdom. This article aspires to inform, guide and promote effective nursing education both academically and practically.

Design: A systematic search strategy was conducted to identify relevant literature covering the period of 2000–2014, to include only contemporary theoretical perspectives coinciding with the dearth of contemporary literature post Project 2000.

Data Sources: The literature was systematically investigated utilising nursing research databases, the Cumulative Index of Nursing and Allied Health Literature, Allied and Complementary Medicine, the U.S. National Library of Medicine and Internurse.

Review Methods: To satisfy the search criteria only articles conducted within the United Kingdom and written in the English language were included. Only literature including nurses and newly qualified nurses were included. To identify relevant literature a series of key words were utilised.

Results: Systematic review of the literature revealed that newly qualified nurses feel unprepared for practice, lacking confidence in their own abilities. It was also felt by newly qualified nurses that not enough time was dedicated to the production of clinical skills during their training. The use of preceptorship programmes was found to reduce the transitional stress associated with becoming a qualified nursing practitioner.

Conclusions: Despite the increasing research being undertaken in the area of theory–practice gap there is still a need for nursing educators, practice areas and regulatory bodies to invest further in research. The effects of preceptorship and simulation exercises in particular require more research to provide regulatory bodies with enough evidence to make an informed decision as to whether their use should be mandatory.

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Introduction

The last 20 years have seen vast changes in nursing education, culminating in a move away from apprenticeship style teaching to learning based on theoretical knowledge (Glen, 2009). The inception of Project 2000 in 1986 was aimed at producing future nurses who were 'knowledgeable doers' (United Kingdom Central Council for Nursing, Midwifery and Health Visiting (UKCC), 1986), this curriculum has seen some changes yet is still the main blueprint for which today's undergraduate nurses are taught. It sees nursing students split their time equally between practice placements and higher education. By having two segregated units to student learning, whereby a gap of several months can be placed between academic learning and practical placements, the challenge lies in seamlessly incorporating the two. The inability to relate and implement ideological knowledge gained in education to

the realities of modern day healthcare practice is often referred to as 'the theory–practice gap' (Clark and Holmes, 2007). For newly qualified nurses (NQN) this gap between theory and practice is most pronounced as they undergo the transition from supervised learner to autonomous practitioner (Whitehead and Holmes, 2011). The gap between what theory states should happen, and the reality of what actually does is something that has been recognised for several years. Kramer (1974) first highlighted this transitional 'reality shock' within a sample of NQN's in The United States of America (USA). The theory–practice gap has also been noted within the United Kingdom (UK), where the ability of pre-registration courses to prepare students with the necessary skills to become qualified nurses has been brought into question (Bradshaw and Merriman, 2008; Glen, 2009).

This critical analysis of the UK based literature will therefore provide a rationale to support the choice of topic, followed by the search strategy which will identify key words and examine the numerous databases used to identify relevant literature. Then, the more prominent theoretical perspectives and issues emerging from the literature will be critically

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analysed. From the key findings implications for clinical practice will be discussed. Finally, a conclusion will synthesise the contents and key findings of this literature review, considering whether gaps in knowledge have been addressed and suggesting future directions for research in the area.

Rational

Gerrish (2000) points out that nurses feel inadequately prepared for their roles as graduate nurses, with the distances both physical and psychological between theory and practice ever growing. This view is echoed by Whitehead and Holmes (2011) who describe nurses as being thrown into the deep end upon registration. These feelings have ultimately manifested themselves in the number of newly graduated nurses leaving the nursing profession. In the UK a staggering one-third leaves inside their first year or choose not to register at all (ICN, 2003). With a shortage of nurses being predicted (The Royal College of Nursing (RCN), 2013; Buchan and Secombe, 2011) clearly it is important to fully prepare NQN's for the transitional challenge ahead, ensuring that they provide a high quality of care and remain within the profession.

There is currently a dearth of contemporary literature on the transition from student nurse to staff nurse in relation to the theory–practice gap, with a large portion of earlier research undertaken to coincide with the inception of Project 2000. This critical analysis aspires to provide a better understanding of the reasons that gaps between theory and practice occur, outlining strategies to close this gap. It is hoped that this will provide information for educators and practice areas on how this gap may be closed not simply bridged, creating NQN's better prepared for their new roles, delivering a higher quality of care and increasing staff retention.

Search Strategy

In order to guide the search towards relevant literature a number of key words were used either singularly or in combination. These were 'theory–practice gap', 'newly qualified', 'graduate', 'perception', 'transition' and 'experiences'. The literature was systematically investigated utilising the nursing research databases, CINAHL (Cumulative Index of Nursing and Allied Health Literature), AMED (Allied and Complementary Medicine), MEDLINE (U.S. National Library of Medicine) and Internurse. The search period used was 2000–2014 to coincide with the dearth of contemporary literature post Project 2000.

CINHAL and AMED were the more prolific databases, collectively yielding 23 relevant articles consisting of 11 review articles, 8 research/case studies, 3 position papers and 1 systematic review. MEDLINE generated 12 results, however all 12 generated results had already been sourced through CINHAL or AMED. Internurse yielded only 2 relevant research studies and 1 review article. Any results yielded that were not within the time period between 2000–2014 were discarded, as was any literature based outside the UK and not directly related to NQN's. For a summary of the inclusion and exclusion search strategy criteria, refer to Table 1 below.

The search strategy was confined to the UK; this decision was taken as findings and subsequent recommendations from international literature may prove difficult to implement into a different healthcare system, with the vast cultural and funding variations being particularly pertinent. For a summary of the search strategy, refer to Table 2 below.

Literature Review: Theoretical Perspectives & Emerging Themes

While reviewing the literature three emerging themes were discovered, which included 'Confidence to Increased Responsibility', 'Requirement for Clinical Skills', and 'Use of Preceptorship Programmes'.

Table 1
Search strategy inclusion and exclusion criteria.

Search inclusion criteria	Search exclusion criteria
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • United Kingdom literature • English language literature • Relevant review articles, systematic reviews and research studies published from 2000 (inclusive) to 2014 (inclusive) • The keywords 'theory–practice gap', 'newly qualified', 'graduate', 'perception', 'transition' and 'experiences', singularly or in combination • Relevant literature relating to nursing practices • Relevant literature relating to newly qualified nurses 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Non-English language literature • International literature • Relevant review articles, systematic reviews and research studies which published before 2000 • Literature on the selected topic which is not related to nursing practice • Online magazines and newspapers • Articles from non-professional websites and organisations such as social networking sites • Websites other than databases used to source relevant literature

Confidence to Increased Responsibility

Lathlean and Corner (1991, p. 9) define confidence as 'a sense of security which is soundly-based on the nurses' awareness of their own capability'. In order to successfully cope with increased responsibility all NQN's must have confidence in themselves, and their abilities. This increase in responsibility and accountability has been found to be a major cause of stress when first qualified (O'Kane, 2012) and is compounded by findings from Mooney (2007) who argues that nursing managers' expectations of NQN's are unrealistic. Brown and Edelmann (2000) conducted a longitudinal correlation study within a university in the South of England. The study aimed to identify perceived stressors and coping mechanisms of graduating or NQN's of a Project 2000 course, and analyse their experienced stressors and coping mechanisms 6 months later. A convenience sample of NQN's (n = 15) and student nurses (n = 73) (average age 27 years), was drawn from a university in the South of England which the authors had easy access to. The sample consisted largely of females (91%), with no other social data provided. During phase 1, participants responded to a biographical stressor consisting of an open-ended questionnaire which related to potential stressors, resources and support that users expected to experience within their first 6 months of qualification. After this 6 month period participants were given a structured questionnaire containing three groups of stressors derived from phase 1. The results of this study suggested that meeting personal expectations placed upon them was the largest perceived cause of work based stress (42%, n = 40), especially amongst the NQN's (69% n = 11) however after the first 6 months the experienced stress for this cause was much lower (17%, n = 9), although the NQN's showed the smallest signs of reduction (40%, n = 6). The researchers indicate that as NQN's and trainee nurses gain more experience confidence grows, reducing levels of stress to meeting expectations. However it should also be noted that this decrease could be caused by nurses lowering their expectations. The main study strength lies in its prospective longitudinal design, which Grove et al. (2013) argue was appropriate for this study as data was collected at different points in time, enabling the researchers to correctly identify changes in NQN's stress levels and also the evolving causes of this stress. These findings are corroborated by Clark and Holmes (2007) who conducted a cross-sectional qualitative exploratory study within three NHS Trust in the South of England. The researchers aimed to identify themes and views not readily available through means of quantitative data research. A sample of NQN's (n = 34) and experienced nurses (n = 66) was split into 12 homogeneous focus groups. Each focus group was guided by a member of the research team posing open ended questions, allowing for comparable data to be collected while allowing for conversations to be formed. After reviewing the data the researchers identified several themes including 'A Question of Confidence'. From the focus groups it was derived that most nurses felt unready for practice upon qualification, and lacked confidence in

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