



Aims and theoretical frameworks in nursing students' Bachelor's theses in Sweden: A descriptive study☆☆☆



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Accepted 18 November 2015

Keywords (MeSH®):

Education, Nursing, Baccalaureate
Dissertations, Academic as Topic
Writing
Nursing Research/education

SUMMARY

Background: Nursing students' independent projects in Sweden not only provide an opportunity to receive a professional qualification as a nurse but also gain a Bachelor's degree in nursing. The aim of these projects is to demonstrate knowledge and understanding within the major field of the education.

Objectives: This study aimed to describe and analyze the topics as well as theoretical frameworks and concepts in nursing students' independent projects, which lead to a Bachelor's degree, in a Swedish context.

Design: A total of 491 independent projects, written by nursing students in Sweden, were included in the study. **Methods:** Topics together with theoretical frameworks and concepts in the projects were identified. Similar topics and theoretical frameworks and concepts, respectively, were grouped into subcategories, and similar subcategories were then merged into a main category. The number of entries in each category was counted for descriptive statistics in order to allow for the demonstration of magnitude.

Results: The most common topics concerned experiences and managing when having an illness, experiences of care and of being a caregiver, and healthcare staff's care and knowledge. The nursing theories/models that were most often used were Eriksson's Theory of Caritative Caring, Travelbee's Human-to-Human Relationship Model, and Orem's Self-care Theory. Among the non-nursing theories/models, perspectives and concepts life-world, ethical values and principles, existential concepts and quality of life/health-related quality of life, were most often used by these students.

Conclusion: There may be some difficulty in finding a topic for the project that is relevant for both a professional qualification as a nurse, as well as for achieving the requirements of a Bachelor's degree in nursing. The study indicates that there is a need to widen the student's understanding of different nursing theories/perspectives/models/concepts during nursing education so that students are familiar with a broad range of these when conducting their independent project.

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Introduction

In Sweden, a nursing degree requires three years of full-time study including an independent project accounting for 15 ECTS credits, i.e., a Bachelor's thesis. In Sweden, the universities and university colleges offering nursing programs are relatively free when developing the curricula for the programs. However, a central learning outcome for a

Bachelor's degree in Sweden is that the student must demonstrate knowledge and understanding within the major field of their education, including knowledge of the scientific foundation for the major field and suitable methods as well as having made a specialized study in the main field and being orientated regarding current research topics (Ministry of Education and Research, 1993:100). In regard to professional knowledge and competencies, the core competencies for healthcare professionals, as first outlined by Institute of Medicine (IOM) (2003), has gained increased awareness as a complement to traditional descriptions of nurses' tasks and competencies, both nationally and internationally. These competencies include the provision of patient-centered care, working in interdisciplinary teams, employing evidence-based practice, applying quality improvement, and utilization of informatics (IOM, 2003). In order to be able to practice these competencies, students need to be trained through different educational activities, not at least during their undergraduate studies.

In nursing education in Sweden the students take courses in nursing, medicine, and sometimes also in behavioral sciences. The core subject of

☆ Contribution: study design, MS and LJ; data collection and analysis, MS and LJ; and manuscript preparation, MS and LJ.

☆☆ Funding: This study was funded by grants from the University of Gävle, Sweden, and Jönköping University, School of Health and Welfare, Sweden. These universities had no involvement in the study design, collection, analysis, and interpretation of data, in the writing of the report, or in the decision to submit this article for publication.

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these is nursing. The first theoretical views of nursing were articulated in the 1950s by educators in order to more clearly describe the nature, goal, and mission of nursing and nurses' role. However, at the beginning of the 1990s, middle range and situation-specific theories evolved, these being less abstract than the previous grand theories and regarded as more accessible for both clinicians and researchers (Meleis, 2011). Some of the concepts that nurses and nursing researchers are interested in are not unique to nursing, resulting in models and theories developed within other fields of study being used (Polit and Beck, 2012). Criticism and concerns for the use of borrowed theories in the nursing context have been raised. Borrowed theories can be used to explain nursing phenomenon, but one should be aware of them being developed for other purposes. This means that borrowed theories may contribute to science, but students should be aware that borrowed theories were not created for nursing purposes (Johnson, 1968). Therefore, when borrowed theories are used they need to be adjusted to be meaningful to nursing, otherwise such phenomena will not be addressed (Phillips, 1977). According to Fawcett (1995), nursing theories are significant in that they provide nurses with a distinctive language for nursing practice. Meleis (2011) argues that if theories are borrowed from other disciplines to explicate nursing phenomena, there is a risk that nurses will not put effort in developing their own theories.

To summarize, the undergraduate nursing programs in Sweden should prepare the students both to be skilled nurses and to have knowledge and understanding in the subject of nursing, as is demonstrated in the undertaking of an independent project. To the best of the authors' knowledge, there are no studies specifically related to the content of nursing students' independent projects, in particular regarding topics and theoretical frameworks. This knowledge is valuable for teachers and academics within nursing, in order to critically reflect on what is desirable when it comes to the content of the students' independent projects, both in relation to their future profession and in relation to the field of nursing. Therefore, the aim of this study was to describe and analyze the topics as well as theoretical frameworks and concepts in nursing students' independent projects, leading to a Bachelor's degree, in a Swedish context.

Methods

Design

This study employed a descriptive design with both a qualitative and quantitative approach.

Sample and procedure

The sample was a stratified random sample consisting of independent projects written by nursing students in Sweden. It was the same sample as the one used when the nursing programs in Sweden were evaluated by the Swedish Higher Education Authority between February 2013 and February 2014. That evaluation was partly based on the students' independent projects submitted to the Swedish Higher Education Authority by the 24 higher education institutions being evaluated. A random selection of between five and 24 independent projects from each higher education institution providing the nursing program was made for the evaluation process, giving a total of 492 projects. The number of projects was based on the total number of independent projects each higher education institution had submitted. The students' independent projects selected for the evaluation had been examined during the period January 2012 until March 2013. When submitted, the projects were anonymized by the removal of information both about the authors, the supervisor and examiner, and the higher education institution submitting the project.

An introductory letter was sent to the program directors for the nursing program at the 24 universities and university colleges in January 2014. The letter provided information about the study and a request

that by an e-mail send the independent projects that had been part of the evaluation process to the authors. Few program directors either sent the independent projects or declined to participate in the study. Therefore, contact was established with the Swedish Higher Education Authority. Subsequently, a request was made to have access to all students' independent projects that had been assessed during the evaluation period of the nursing program. This was possible since these projects are considered to be public documents in Sweden. The sample consisted of 492 independent projects, but in one of them, pages were missing in the introduction and the aim (topic) of the project was not provided. This independent project was omitted from the analysis. The sample for this study therefore consisted of 491 independent projects.

Data analysis

Topics together with theoretical frameworks and concepts used in the respective projects were identified and entered into a spreadsheet by the authors. Regarding theoretical frameworks and concepts, the introduction of each project was examined regarding if it contained a heading with the title 'theoretical framework', 'nursing theory', or similar. The names of the theories/models, perspectives, and concepts described under these subheadings, were entered into the spreadsheet. Apart from this, the introduction was examined to see if there were theories/models, perspectives, or concepts described without using headings titled 'theoretical framework', 'nursing theory', or similar. These were entered into the spreadsheet if the project described the content of a theory/model or the theoretical base of a perspective or concept.

Together the authors identified the topic (aim) together with theoretical frameworks and concepts in 50 of the projects; the rest of the projects were divided between the authors for analysis. In 35 of the independent projects, there was more than one aim, that is, the aims were two-, three-, or fourfold. In these cases, the aim was divided in different parts, resulting in a total of 530 topics identified in the 491 independent projects. Hesitations regarding if theories/models, perspectives, or concepts being described without the use of a heading (for example, 'theoretical framework') were to be included in the analysis were discussed by both authors until consensus was reached.

When all topics, together with theoretical frameworks and concepts, had been identified, they were subjected to content analysis focusing on the manifest content with an approach inspired by Berg and Lune (2014), see Fig. 1. This analysis was performed by both authors.

Ethical considerations

In Sweden, students' independent projects are publicly accessible. When they were received from the Swedish Higher Education Authority, the names of the students, supervisors, examiners, and universities/university colleges had been removed with some exceptions. In these latter cases, it was possible to identify the universities/university colleges, but in the present study, no such information is presented. This resulted in the data being treated confidentially. Since the study did not include any intervention or sensitive personal information, no permission from the Regional Ethics Committee was required (Ministry of Education and Research, 2003:460).

Results

In total, 13 categories were identified as a result of the data analysis regarding the topics, and they are described together with the different nursing, as well as non-nursing, theories/models, perspectives, and concepts that formed the theoretical frameworks in the projects.

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