



## Review

## Nursing education research in Finland—A review of doctoral dissertations

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## SUMMARY

**Objectives:** The aim of this literature review was to describe the focus of nursing education research in Finnish doctoral dissertations in the field of nursing and caring sciences between the years 1979–2014. In addition, the characteristics (methods, study informants and reporting of validity, reliability, and research ethics) of the dissertations were described.

**Methods and data:** A literature review was carried out. Altogether 51 Finnish doctoral dissertations of nursing and caring sciences focusing on nursing education research were included in the final analysis. The dissertations were published in 1990–2014. The data were analyzed by content analysis both deductively and inductively.

**Results:** Finnish nursing education research was focused on four main areas: structural factors in nursing education, nurse teacherhood, teaching activities, and learning and learning outcomes in nursing education. The most central focus was learning in nursing education whereas nurse teacherhood and structural factors in nursing education were studied the least. Students were the predominant study informant group while nurse staff including nurse mentors were next and nurse educators only the third. Surveys and interviews were the most common data collection methods. In the findings there were a lot of similarities with international nursing education research.

**Conclusions:** Finnish nursing education research has been relatively student-centered yet studies focusing on the education of other nursing-based professions are rare. Future research about nurse teacherhood, curricula and structural factors in nursing education is recommended also. In addition, nursing education research should focus on the central phenomena of nursing education and working life. All in all, more nursing education research is needed. Nursing education dissertations cover only 12.3% of all the dissertations of nursing and caring sciences in Finland.

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## Introduction

Nursing education research has confirmed its place in the discipline of nursing and caring sciences. Since 1979 – the year in which Finnish academic education in nursing and caring sciences began (Academy of Finland, 2003) – the amount of nursing education research has increased, especially in the 1990s (Salminen et al., 2006). Earlier, the focus areas of nursing education research have stayed rather similar as the research has focused on nursing students and their learning, nurse educators and teaching, and the structural factors of nursing education (Salminen et al., 2006). There has been a lack of experimental and intervention studies not only in Finland but also internationally (Johnson,

2004; Hegarty et al., 2008). It seems that today the number of studies in nursing education is constantly increasing internationally.

Furthermore, nursing education itself has been under various reforms during recent decades worldwide, yet educational structures vary considerably (Råholm et al., 2010; Lahtinen et al., 2014). In Finland, universities of applied sciences offer bachelor-level education for nurses (RNs) and other nursing-based professions (public health nurse, midwife and emergency nurse), while vocational schools educate practical nurses (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2006; Finnish National Board of Education, 2010). Universities of applied sciences have been offering a master's degree programs since 2005 and five universities offer bachelor's, master's and doctoral education in nursing and caring sciences.

Extensive and systematic analysis of nursing education research has been lacking both nationally and internationally (Salminen et al., 2006). Some reviews bracketing, for example, methods and contents in the field of nursing research (Suominen and Leino-Kilpi, 1998; Välimäki et al., 2000) and in nursing and midwifery education research have been done (Hentinen, 1989; Salminen et al., 2006; Hegarty et al., 2008). In addition, some studies focusing on doctoral dissertations or other scientific publications produced by doctoral prepared nurses have been

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conducted, for example, in Nordic countries (Björn et al., 2008; Lundgren et al., 2009; Kjellström and Frilaund, 2010) and in Hong Kong (Zeng and Samantha, 2012). It is said that by reviewing nursing doctoral dissertations it could be possible to identify changing trends in the nursing profession as an academic discipline (Zeng and Samantha, 2012).

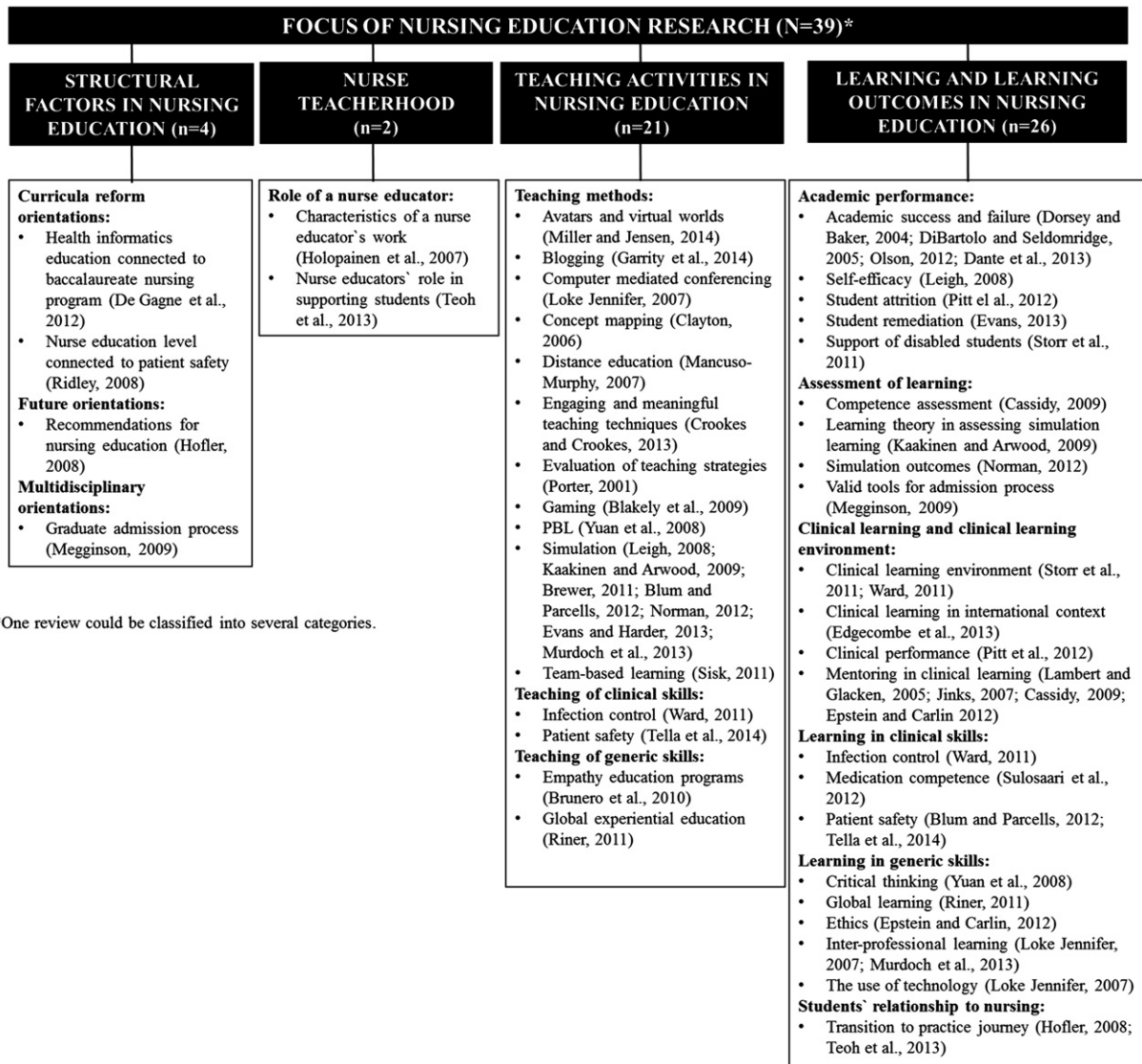
As the educational reforms and existent variations of nursing education structures create challenges for nursing education research, the studies should focus on research topics that are central to nursing education and its development (Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, 2003). Due to all this, we now aim to analyze what is the focus of nursing education research in Finnish dissertations in the field of nursing and caring sciences.

To identify the focus of nursing education research on an international level, a computerized systematic search (starting 19th November 2014) of the Medline database was conducted using the search terms: “nursing education research” [MeSH] AND teacher OR student OR patient OR environment. Previously published reviews were chosen as information sources as they bracket a wide area of research fields. Altogether 216 reviews were identified, of which 39 articles were included in the final analysis as they focused on nursing education and were scientific literature reviews (i.e. method and N were reported). Altogether, the reviews ( $n = 39$ ) included 1129 studies, scientific papers or other documents (e.g. policy papers) and they were published from

2001 to 2014 in nine different countries. The focus of the reviews was analyzed by categorizing them and using inductive content analysis according to their reported purpose and subject matter (Grove et al., 2013).

The focus of the international reviews in the field of nursing education research could be classified in four different main categories that were: *Structural factors in nursing education*; *Nurse teacherhood*; *Teaching activities in nursing education*; and *Learning and learning outcomes in nursing education* (Fig. 1). *Learning and learning outcomes in nursing education* was the most central focus in nursing education research and *Teaching activities in nursing education* was the next, whereas *Nurse teacherhood* and *Structural factors in nursing education* were least focused on.

The reporting of the research methods and study informants varied from being scarce to being detailed and sample sizes varied greatly. The reported methods were: experimental methods (e.g. experimental design with pretest and/or post-test, quasi-experimental and RCTs) ( $n = 9$ ), a case study ( $n = 5$ ), grounded theory ( $n = 5$ ) and phenomenology ( $n = 3$ ). The data collection methods were: a survey ( $n = 16$ ), an interview ( $n = 10$ ), focus group interviews ( $n = 10$ ), observation ( $n = 6$ ) and a Delphi panel ( $n = 1$ ). Otherwise the applied methods were not applicable. The study informants were nursing students ( $n = 30$ ), other students (i.e. not nursing students) ( $n = 11$ ), educators, lecturers or



\*One review could be classified into several categories.

Fig. 1. Focus of the reviews\* in nursing education research (N = 39).

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