



The juggling act: Do student nurses who care for dependants need an adapted course? An applied policy research study



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SUMMARY

Background: In line with many countries worldwide, the Department of Health mandate to Health Education England seeks to promote the diversity of applicants by widening participation in nurse education. A number of studies have explored the experience of non-traditional students undertaking nursing courses.

Objectives: This study aimed to explore and understand the experiences of student nurses undertaking their nurse education whilst caring for dependant family.

Design: The study used an applied qualitative research approached based on methods developed for applied social policy research.

Settings: The study was undertaken in an institution of higher education in the North East of England.

Participants: The study population consisted of a convenience sample of 14 respondents, 13 female and 1 male. Ten respondents lived with partners and 3 had disabled dependants within the family. The age range of dependent children ranged from 3 months to 19 years.

Methods: Data was collected through focus groups and telephone interviews using a semi-structured interview schedule. Framework analysis was used to analyse the data.

Results: Three superordinate themes were identified, Altruism and Commitment, Maturity and Family and Social Mobility, that best encapsulate the characteristics that enable this group to function well and complete their nurse education. Analysis identified a highly motivated group of students who's individual accounts showed that their lives, whilst in nurse education, were a constant series of compromises and 'juggling' between the demands of the course and the demands of their families.

Conclusions: This group of students do not need an adapted course, but instead wish for a realistic nursing course where expectations are managed in an honest way. Basic common sense and good management of nursing courses will help ensure that this motivated group of people achieve their goals with minimum hardship or difficulties.

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Introduction

Since the end of the 20th century greater numbers of older or non-traditional students have entered higher education worldwide, with notable increases in Australia, and the United States (NCES 2014; Jeffreys, 2012). The requirement for expanded entry pathways into nurse education programmes and the need to attract and maintain high calibre students on health care courses are an international phenomenon that is receiving increased attention (Bednarz et al., 2010; Jacob et al., 2011; Jeffreys, 2012). This requirement is reflected in the current Department of Health (2014) mandate to Health Education

England. The mandate also requires that unnecessary attrition from healthcare courses is reduced by a third over the next three years, but also seeks to promote the diversity of applicants by widening participation in nurse education. From the perspective of one institution of higher education in the North East of England this study aimed to explore and understand the experiences of student nurses undertaking their nurse education whilst caring for dependant family.

Background

A small number of studies have explored the experience of non-traditional students undertaking nursing courses. Early studies evaluated tailor made, part time nursing courses for students with dependants (Bond, 1993; Hooper, 1975). With the introduction of Project 2000 these courses were discontinued and the literature began to examine the problems faced by non-traditional students in nurse education. Glackin and Glackin (1998) argued that the Project 2000 programme

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was not adequately meeting the needs of non-traditional students, and Fleming and McKee (2005) concluded that if non-traditional students are to be recruited to nursing programme, additional support, both before and during the programme, is required. Kevern and Webb (2004) recommended that changes should be made to the philosophy and organisation of future programmes to improve their appropriateness and acceptability to non-traditional women nursing students. Hussain et al (2011) undertook a mixed methods study of radiography and radiotherapy students who were carers and suggested a range of actions to improve the student experience such as flexible arrangements for placements, care-givers leave and targeted advice regarding child care.

Against the call for specific changes to the nursing curriculum for non-traditional students with dependants, is a body of knowledge which suggests that non-traditional students 'stay the course' (Mulholland et al., 2008; Pryjmachuk et al., 2009; Wray et al., 2012) and were more likely to complete the programme than younger students or students with minimal qualifications. Urwin et al (2010: 206) warned caution in considering the differences for leaving and reasons for staying: 'Factors that contribute to retention are not simply the opposite or absence of the factors that are thought to contribute to attrition'.

The debate on the most appropriate educational pathway for this student group is confused, at times unclear, and arguably gender biased. Very little is known or clearly understood about this sub-population of students and the experiences of their studentship. As the faculty considered its curriculum in response to the recommendations of the Francis Commission (Francis, 2013) it was concluded that there was a lack of clarity or understanding about how caring for dependants whilst undertaking nurse education impacted on the experience and engagement of nursing students. Before any changes to the curriculum were considered for this sub-population of students the faculty needed to better understand the experiences of this student group and ensure that change would not be planned or undertaken on flawed arguments.

Aim

The aim of this study was to explore and understand the experiences of student nurses who have dependants and ascertain the impact that caring for dependants has on their study, clinical practice and education outcome.

Methods

The exploration of the students' experiences required a qualitative method able to elicit specific information requirements. It was important that the impact that being a care-giver had on clinical practice and educational outcome was truly understood. Applied research concentrates on finding solutions to an immediate practical problem (Ritchie and Spencer, 2002), and has a key role to play in providing insight, explanations and theories of social behaviour (Ritchie and Spencer, 2002). The study used an applied qualitative research approached based on Ritchie and Spencer's (2002) methods for applied social policy research. Ritchie et al. (2013) argues that applied qualitative research has a crucial role in providing the knowledge that is required for understanding complex concerns around social policy. Applied social policy research was selected for this study as it is underpinned by the requirement to understand the complex experiences, behaviours and needs of this group of students. Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the University Ethics Committee.

Sample and Data Collection

Data was collected through focus groups and telephone interviews with students. To be included in the study, nursing students had to be responsible, or have a shared responsibility for a dependant, either a child or relative.

A semi-structured interview schedule based on Flanagan's (1954) Critical Incident Technique (CIT) was used to guide the interview process. This is a valuable tool for studying events that are important to people and those that would be difficult to observe. Respondents were asked two questions:

1. Think of a situation where caring for your dependant and working on clinical placement or in University was difficult for you?
2. Think of a situation where caring for your dependant whilst working and studying turned out well?

Analysis

At the heart of this project was the need to understand the students' stories and interpret them in such a way that policy guidance could be drawn from the conclusions. Framework analysis was chosen for this project as it was developed to help researchers achieve specified aims and outputs as well as to facilitate systematic analysis of data (Ritchie and Spencer, 2002). The framework approach was developed in the UK specifically for applied or policy relevant qualitative research (Pope et al., 2000) and consists of five phases: familiarisation, constructing an initial thematic framework, indexing and sorting, reviewing data extracts and data summary and display. As described by Kiernan et al (2013) a systematic approach was taken to organise the qualitative data for analysis using the NVivo software package. The familiarisation stage involved immersion in a selection of the data to identify topics, themes and subjects of interest to produce an initial thematic framework and index. This step ensures that whatever labels or themes that are developed are grounded in and supported by the data (Ritchie et al., 2013). The framework was then applied to each transcript dynamically to allow the thematic framework to evolve as new phenomena were identified in the text. This allowed text to be added and new themes to emerge. Once all the text had been indexed the thematic framework was finalised and the data extracts reviewed. The reviewing of the data extracts allowed further data reduction and the formation of more coherent data groups (Ritchie et al., 2013). By this stage of the process the data had been sifted and sorted into core themes and guided by the original research aims the reviewed data extracts were used to map and interpret the findings. The systematic process of theory construction in framework analysis clearly builds on evidence (within the data), and shows the development of links and relationships (within the data) that build up to theories.

Results

The study population consisted of 14 respondents, 13 female and 1 male. Ten respondents lived with partners and 3 had disabled dependants within the family. The age range of dependent children ranged from 3 months to 19 years. Nine respondents took part in a focus group, whilst 5 agreed to a telephone interview for convenience.

The individual accounts of each participant and the stories that they shared showed that their lives, whilst in nurse education, was a constant series of compromises and 'juggling' between the demands of the course and the demands of their families. Within these stories the thematic analysis identified multiple personal characteristics that enable the study participants to manage this demanding and hectic period of their lives. Analysis identified three superordinate themes, Altruism and Commitment, Maturity and Family and Social Mobility. The superordinate themes best encapsulate the characteristics that enable this group to function well, and complete their nurse education, despite the demands placed on their time by the dependants that they cared for. Fig. 1 shows the reduction of the data into the three themes and demonstrates the characteristics which enable the students to manage the conflict of priorities between their nurse education and their caring responsibilities.

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