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Not choosing nursing: Work experience and career choice of high academic achieving school leavers

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SUMMARY

Work experience has been a feature of the secondary school curriculum in the United Kingdom for a number of years. Usually requested by the pupil, it aims to provide opportunities for school pupils to enhance their knowledge and understanding of an occupation. The main benefits are claimed to be that it can help pupils develop an insight into the skills and attitudes required for an occupation and an awareness of career opportunities. However the quality and choice of placements are considered to be of great importance in this process and in influencing career choice [Department for Education and Skills (DfES), 2002a. *Work Experience: A Guide for Employers*. Department for Education and Skills, London]. As university departments of nursing experience a decline in the number of school pupils entering student nurse education programmes, and with the competition for school leavers becoming even greater, it is important to consider whether school pupils have access to appropriate work placements in nursing and what influence their experience has on pursuing nursing as a career choice.

This paper is based on interview data from 20 high academic achieving fifth and sixth year school pupils in Scotland, paradigmatic cases from a larger survey sample ($n = 1062$), who had considered nursing as a possible career choice within their career preference cluster, but then later disregarded nursing and decided to pursue medicine or another health care profession. This was partly reported by Neilson and Lauder [Neilson, G.R., Lauder, W., 2008. What do high academic achieving school pupils really think about a career in nursing: analysis of the narrative from paradigmatic case interviews. *Nurse Education Today* 28(6), 680–690] which examined what high academic achieving school pupils really thought about a career in nursing. However, the data was particularly striking in revealing the poor quality of nursing work experience for the pupils, and also their proposal that there was a need for work experience which was more representative of the reality of nursing. Participants reported that proper work experience in nursing could make it more attractive as a career choice but that there were difficulties and barriers in obtaining an appropriate work experience in nursing. These included unhelpful attitudes of teachers towards work experience in nursing in general and the placements themselves which were typically in a nursing home or a care home. They felt that departments of nursing within universities should have an input into organising more realistic work placements and that their involvement could foster greater interest amongst pupils in nursing as a career.

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Introduction

Work experience has been a component of the secondary school curriculum for many years in the United Kingdom. Currently, approximately 95% of school pupils in their last two years of compulsory education undertake work placements and about half of senior school pupils have a further period of work experience or work shadowing (DfES, 2002b). From a historical and policy context the marked growth of interest in work experience can be viewed as part of a wider movement to establish a relationship be-

tween education and work (Millar et al., 1991). This stemmed from anxiety about Britain's lack of economic competitiveness in global markets. Schools in particular were criticised for progressive teaching methods which it was argued caused lower standards and negative attitudes towards work. Attention began to focus on the relationship between education and work (Petherbridge, 1997). Watts et al. (1996) proposed that one of the important ways in which professions, occupations and employers can establish links with schools and school pupils is through the provision of work experience placements. Work experience was said to offer many benefits and opportunities such as providing school pupils with enhanced knowledge and understanding of an occupation developing their insights into the skills and attitudes required for specific

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occupations and greater awareness of career opportunities (Flum, 2001). Strikingly there was no evidence of this proposed liaison between the schools (education) and nursing (work) in the interview data from the study.

Choice of career has indeed been identified as a major area of concern for young people nearing the end of their schooling (Alberts et al., 2003). One of the main reasons for the introduction of work experience was to allow the school pupils the opportunity to experience a work placement in an occupation that they were considering as a career choice (Hillage et al., 2001; Semple et al., 2002). Misko (2000) found that the effects of work experience can be of central importance in occupational choice, with Abbott (1993) emphasising the quality of the placement as a critical influence. Although a number of occupations were covered in these studies, there was no mention of liaison between schools and nursing.

Literature review

An electronic search utilising CINAHL, BNI and MEDLINE revealed literature on the career choice process of school pupils which highlighted the importance of work experience in career choice, some studies finding that school pupils and young adults cite work experience as an important influence on their career choice. However this search also found no literature relating specifically to work experience in nursing or the influence on school pupils' choice of nursing as a career.

Sukovieff (1991) investigated the influences on career decisions of High School students. She found that work experience was a significant influence regarding career choice. Osgood et al. (2006) supports this by stating that the role played by work placements in the subsequent career choice of school pupils is important. Further endorsement comes from Pumfrey and Schofield (1982) who also propose that work placements can be a factor which helps pupils resolve their future career direction.

Shah (2005) also suggests that work experience is influential in determining future career as the experience leads the school pupil to think more consciously and deeply about their career choice than they otherwise would have done. Park et al. (2005) highlight the value of work experience obtained during the school years, finding that it helped the pupils to make an informed career choice and also suggesting that personal experience can have a highly positive influence regarding career choice. The Scottish Executive (2006) claims that the majority of pupils, teachers, parents and employers value work experience as work placements can give pupils a sense of achievement and increase their motivation towards a career.

Bentley (2000) found that young people in many Western societies are having more trouble than ever before in making the transition from school to adulthood and work. Changes in economy, demographics, technology, culture, values and relationships have thrown doubt upon the institutions created to deliver education. Bentley goes on to argue that schools and education should not be insulated from the reality of work and that this is where work placements have been found to be hugely beneficial in helping school pupils make an informed choice regarding their career.

While and Blackman (1998) explored reasons for choosing nursing as a career, utilising a sample of undergraduate student nurses ($n = 40$). 27.5% of the sample stated that work experience had provided a stimulus to pursue nursing as a career. In the study by Wells et al. (2000), a group ($n = 41$), of nursing students and Leaving Certificate school students, who had expressed an interest in caring type professions, were asked how they would improve the recruitment prospects of nursing. Some nursing students sug-

gested that Health Boards needed to proactively facilitate work experience programmes with local schools as a means of improving recruitment. Students who had had work experience in nursing stated that it helped them to make their mind up as they could see exactly what nursing entailed. This was supported by other students who asserted that work experience in nursing would be useful as it would allow people to see what nursing is like. It was also reported by some students that, during their work experience in hospital, they found that the work of nurses really appealed to them.

Hodkinson and Sparkes (1993) suggest that school pupils make their career choice in two main ways. The first is that they appear to think that they make rational career decisions but these are rational in a restricted pragmatic way. Decisions tend to be based on partial information which is localised and on personal perceptions of what the actual nature of work is in that occupation. The decisions are opportunistic, arising from fortuitous contacts and experiences, and are also ultimately influenced as well by feelings and emotions about the work. This incomplete information can reinforce stereotypes associated with the job. The second way, considered to be more effective, is through a process of technical rationality. This presupposes that school pupils should reach their career decisions in a systematic way. Work experience for school pupils links decisively with this more effective career decision model in that the pupils through work experience can base their decision on a comprehensive information source which is a more accurate reflection of the occupation (Miller and Budd, 1999). This can occur because the work placement is planned and organised to ensure the optimal experience for the pupil. This preparation and coordination involves the pupils achieving the key objectives of providing the pupils with informed guidance on the choices available for work and employment; insight into the skills and attitudes required for particular occupations; awareness of career opportunities; and the pupil can test out their career ideas (OFSTED, 2004). All of this articulates with the second systematic career choice model.

A key message to come from Hamilton's (2003) research is that while work experience is only one part of the way in which young people learn about the world of work it is highly valued regarding decisions made about future careers. A short work placement may not always be an indicator of definite career intentions or post-school destinations but nonetheless can be an important factor which shapes their career choices (Ahier et al., 2000).

Method

The method utilised is as fully described in Neilson and Lauder (2008) so here are presented the salient methodological points for the purpose of this paper. The study employed qualitative methods in which paradigmatic cases of fifth and sixth year school pupils ($n = 20$) were interviewed to elucidate their perceptions of nursing as a career choice. This was part of a larger survey of fifth and sixth year school pupils ($n = 1062$) entitled *The Endangered Species of School Pupils Pursuing Nursing As A Career Choice* which utilised a multi-strategy approach to examine school pupils knowledge and image of nursing; school pupils career perceptions in general; school pupils perceptions of nursing as a career; and who or what has influenced their career choice. In accordance with the policy of the educational authority all school pupils taking part in the study signed a participation in research consent form. This is standard practice in schools as part of their "in loco parentis" role, to act as a reasonable parent would. This followed verbal explanation and written explanation in the form of a letter to each pupil outlining the purpose of the research and their participation. Anonymity and confidentiality was also ensured.

An interview schedule was formulated for the paradigmatic cases and piloted prior to use. The interview schedule focused on four main areas: how and why they arrived at their career choice decision; why they have a particular image of nursing; perceptions of nursing as a university programme; how could nursing be made more attractive as a career choice for high academic achieving school pupils. Analysis of the qualitative paradigmatic case interviews was based on a phenomenological method adapted from Colaizzi (1978) which linked with the research tradition of descriptive phenomenology.

Findings

Work experience in nursing is important

Perhaps the most striking theme to emerge from the data, when the high achieving school pupils were asked to consider how nursing could be made more appealing as a career choice for them, was that of work experience. The high academic achieving pupils thought that work experience in nursing could be influential in making nursing more attractive as a career choice:

"I think that there is nothing like hands on experience of nursing to spark an interest and maybe help the pupils make a definite decision about their career choice".

"Thorough work experience which involves discovering about the role of the nurse and what they actually do is important in helping make a career choice".

However the pupils raised three main problem areas in relation to work experience. Firstly, there was the difficulty in obtaining appropriate work experience in nursing due to the attitude of teachers towards nursing as a career. Secondly, pupils felt very strongly that they were not being given proper nursing work experience exposure often being placed in a nursing home or a care home. Thirdly, they felt that university departments of nursing should have input into organising work placements that would more accurately represent the work of nurses.

Difficulties of obtaining a nursing work experience

The pupils felt that school teaching staff who organised the work placements placed barriers in their way and were generally unhelpful regarding work experience in nursing. One high achieving female school pupil gave an articulate, enlightening and graphic account of her high achieving friends struggle to get actual work experience in nursing:

"My friend who has really excellent grades was undecided about what she wanted to do when she left school and was interested in getting a work placement in nursing but the teachers seemed to come up with all sorts of barriers when pupils want a nursing work experience. My friend had to organise things for herself – she was persistent but how many school pupils give up because they are given no help and are lost to nursing"

Others amongst the high academic achieving school pupils also experienced barriers in trying to secure a nursing work experience a number of pupils with similar experiences eventually gave up:

"I was interested in getting a work placement in nursing to see what it was like because I wanted to be a nurse. But none of the teachers seemed that keen to help me – it was not on their list of available placements. I got the feeling that the teachers thought that it was a worthless, insignificant job. I gave up because no one seemed interested".

"Work experience we do that in third year but if you put down for nursing you do not get it because the school cannot organise it".

The high achieving pupils did seem convinced of the importance of a work placement and highlighted the fact that many good candidates could be lost because of this ineffectiveness in organisation of placements:

"A lot of pupils are undecided about a career choice and might make good nurses but it is not actively promoted in the school and if they had a proper work placement and shadow a nurse they would get a true picture about what nursing involves – they would be able to come across all aspects of caring for patients. But once again it comes back to how difficult it is to organise a nursing work placement – it is easy to get an office work placement and a placement with a business".

"Thorough work experience which involves discovering about the role of the nurse and what they actually do not ignoring those who want this type of experience, or teachers saying it is too difficult to organise".

"Nursing was not an option on offer at our school for work experience – if it is not available how can we try it".

These emphatic statements by pupils about barriers and unhelpful teacher attitudes do underline the question of how we can expect pupils to make an informed choice about nursing as a possible career if they cannot access a realistic experience. The pupils themselves confirm the impression that many good and prospective candidates are probably lost to nursing because of work experience that is unrepresentative or unavailable, discouragement by teachers and an apparent failure to recognise the importance of good placements in career choice.

Better work experience in nursing

In addition to identifying barriers to gaining work experience in nursing the near unanimous feeling across pupils interviewed was that placements offered should reflect a more typical experience of the nurse's work. The pupils were in no doubt that this was not happening and their concerns revolved around three areas. Firstly, the nursing placements given were almost always in care homes or nursing homes for elderly people. Secondly, their view was that that this was not typical of nursing work, for example as in hospitals, and that it gave them very little and possibly false insight into nursing. Thirdly, they also appeared to know that the persons in charge of the patients in these placements were mostly carers with no nursing qualifications or experience:

"There has to be proper work experience to learn the truth about nursing".

"Proper work experience finding out exactly what nurses do. Did work experience in fourth year but there was only very limited nursing work placements and these were mostly in old people homes".

"Proper work placement and experience in nursing"

Not only was there a lack of 'proper work experience' and therefore the opportunity of 'finding out exactly what nurses do', such arrangements and experiences – looking after 'crinklies' under a 'teenager with an SVQ' – would probably discourage these high achieving school pupils from pursuing or even considering a career in nursing:

"I think that a proper nursing work placement in a hospital would be really valuable but when I tried for a nursing work placement I

was sent to a nursing home. Also other pupils who got a nursing work experience got an old peoples home or a nursing home. I think that this gives the wrong impression about what nursing is really like and going to be like and must put a lot of school pupils off. It most certainly put me off”.

“They send you to a nursing home – that is not real nursing and its carers who work in them and who are in charge who have Level 2 SVQs. Makes me wonder do you really need to study for nursing qualifications if these people can look after patients with an SVQ”.

Not sending pupils to urine smelling care homes where the person in charge is a teenager with an SVQ.

“Not sending pupils who genuinely want a nursing work placement to care homes full of ‘coffin dodgers’ and ‘crinklies’ pretending this is a nursing work experience – pupils then believe that this is what nursing is like and this puts them off doing nursing”.

It is evident that these high achieving pupils were being deterred from a career in nursing. The fact that care homes tend to be managed not by nurses but by carers who have a college caring qualification and not a nursing qualification is seen by pupils to seriously question the value of a nursing qualification.

A Scottish Vocational Qualification (SVQ) is a certificate of vocational education in Scotland. SVQ’s are developed by Sector Skills Councils in partnership with industry and awarding bodies and are based on standards of competence that describe a person’s ability to work in real conditions (Scottish Qualifications Authority, 2008).

University departments of nursing input to placements

Many of the high achieving school pupils expressed the opinion that departments of nursing within universities should provide input into organising nursing work placements for the school pupils. The departments of nursing were seen by the pupils as having influence and connections in relation to arranging placements, and that would be more likely to ensure that pupils experience what nursing is ‘really like’ as opposed to a restricted view portrayed in nursing homes or care homes:

“There should be strong connections between schools and universities. If they want us the school of nursing should help us to, or arrange work experience for us. Work experience should be included in fourth, fifth and sixth year not just third year”.

“The school needs to organise it thoroughly, maybe it would even help if schools of nursing and hospitals were involved in organising work placements for pupils who wanted to do nursing”.

“The university nursing department should be able to get us into hospitals to get a real work placement. They must have the power and the influence to do this. We need some help we cannot get it through our teachers”.

As well as feeling that departments of nursing should be actively involved in the process of arranging work experience, the pupils also felt that they could help to foster interest in nursing amongst pupils. It was prominent in the dialogue that strong and formal links between schools and departments of nursing could influence the appeal of nursing as a career choice. A number gave extremely favourable mention of how successful the link between their schools and the Science department at a university in that part of the country. They give examples of visits to the science department as well as how links with the department generated interest in careers in science and even influenced some of the

school pupils to such an extent to change their career options. They were clear that a similar venture with schools of nursing could have the same impact:

“If our school had links with the university school of nursing and we got to visit hospitals and the school of nursing that might make a difference and stimulate an interest in nursing as a career”.

“XXX University has a connection with our science department and the 5th and sixth years get to visit the science labs at XXX and do experiments also to find out about interesting careers that you can do with science. It is a really interesting and enjoyable time and this gets the pupils thinking that this might be a great area to have a career in”.

“They made you feel that they were interested in you and they were really enthusiastic about science and that science was the most important subject and greatly mattered. Maybe if the nursing department in the university did this as well it might inspire pupils to be nurses”.

Some pupils thought that a greater impact would be made if this link were to be made in the first year of secondary school, or even earlier in primary schools:

“Connection between nursing school and local secondary schools I think that this right from first year would foster an awareness and an interest in nursing or certainly make it more acceptable to both males and females as a career”.

“Linking university schools of nursing with primary schools and secondary schools – getting involved even with youngsters could foster an interest in pursuing nursing as a career choice”.

The school pupils picked up on how enthusiastic the scientists were regarding their subject area and how they stressed the importance of careers in science. They also got a prevailing impression that they, as school pupils were valued and important; they were made to feel welcome. The high achieving school pupils appear to question why departments of nursing within universities have not made the effort to link with schools as other university departments have. The clear message from the pupils is that nursing cannot afford to ignore the opportunity to engage much more actively with school pupils regarding nursing as a career choice, to do this in a meaningful and productive way, in early secondary school and possibly even in primary schools.

Concluding discussion

The clear and significant finding that emerges from the data is the need expressed by the pupil voice for more authentic work experience in nursing. Support for work experience for school pupils is typical of most European countries, but it seems to be better developed in other countries than it is in the United Kingdom (Bierhoff and Prais 1997). In Sweden, for example, pupils give three choices of work that would interest them. The first choice is known colloquially as the ‘dream job’ and every effort is made to place the pupil in this. If the job cannot be found locally, arrangements are made for the pupil to have this work experience in another area. Ryan (2001) also found that work experience placements appear to be better organised in other European countries compared to the United Kingdom, with a concerted undertaking to ensure that the school pupils get their choice.

The view that the nursing work placements provided were not representative of nursing and were of questionable quality was apparent in the interview data in that the pupils reported that the only nursing placements offered were in care homes or nursing homes for the elderly. The pupils felt that this did not give an accu-

rate insight into nursing or the diversity of nursing roles. Also the pupils stated that the people in charge were not always nurses and therefore did not have nursing experience. In addition the pupils described the difficulties and barriers that they had experienced in trying to obtain an appropriate nursing work placement this being in relation to the unhelpful attitude of teachers. What was also evident in the data was that the pupils believed that departments or schools of nursing should be actively involved in the process of organising work experience placements.

The National Education and Business Partnership Network (NEBPN) (2003) states that for the majority of school pupils work experience placement is the most significant contact with the world of work that they have before making their career choice. If this experience is largely restricted or limited then the pupils do not receive a reasonably representative experience of the career that they may be interested in pursuing. Rolfe (1999) also states that poorly organised or a narrow range of work placements for school pupils represents a lost opportunity to interest young people in careers that they have shown interest in and might have followed. This is supported by Schilling (1989) who found that the experiences of some pupils alienated them from an area of work that they had previously been interested in. This was due largely to the poor quality of the work experience offered to the pupils which was felt to be due to ineffectual organisation between the school and the placement.

If the choice and quality of the nursing work experience is not improved it is difficult to envisage an increase in nursing's status and appeal, especially to high academic pupils, regardless of the Government's view of the desirability of work experience.

With 95% of school pupils currently undertaking work experience, nursing could be missing out on a huge opportunity to influence and engender an interest in nursing as a career choice because of a lack of a co-ordinated and structured programme of work experience for school pupils. The present system, certainly in the eyes of high achieving pupils, needs to be radically reviewed and improved if it is to have any significant influence on school pupils' choice of nursing as a career.

Nursing departments in universities in partnership with schools could look at the development of a structured and co-ordinated work experience in nursing for school pupils. This is happening in the USA, where there is also a problem in recruiting school leavers. Redding et al. (2004) describe a unique approach in the USA of linking high schools with departments of nursing within universities in an attempt to recruit pupils into nursing. This innovative approach was the development of the "Teens Experiencing Nursing" programme, affectionately known as the 'TEN Camp', which was a series of experiential summer camps for high school pupils. The programme was developed to benefit the university by acquiring prospective students and future nurses. The programme provided opportunities for 20 school pupils to explore careers in professional nursing through active involvement in an academic environment and a hospital practice setting. In the evaluation, all pupils arrived at the camp saying that it was something interesting to do for the summer and all left saying that they wanted to be a nurse.

In response to the significant and concerning reduction in high school leavers entering nurse education programmes in the USA, Buss et al. (2003) also created a programme for high school students to learn more about nursing, again on the lines of a nurse camp. The aim of the camp was for high school students to learn more about nursing and to make nursing more attractive as a career option to male and female students. In the feedback for this initiative, all the participants stated enthusiastically that they would think about nursing as a career more seriously than they did before. These nursing camps appear to have been successful in the USA and such innovative interventions could well prove suc-

cessful in the United Kingdom. Given the marked decline in the number of school pupils interested in pursuing nursing as a career and the serious social and health consequences, it is arguably a matter of some urgency.

Further evidence of the establishment of innovative and productive links between Schools of Nursing within universities and schools comes from the USA. Fundamentally these connections were initiated because it was found that school pupils are considering their careers at earlier ages and it was felt that children at primary school levels needed to gain awareness of the advantages and opportunities of selecting a career in nursing. The University of Maryland School of Nursing has developed a 'career academy', which helps prepare high school pupils for college and university by integrating career themes into their academic courses (Thompson et al. 2001). Learning opportunities include discussions of nursing in contemporary society, investigating community problems, the science of nursing, and hands on experience such as experience in simulation laboratories and in the wards under supervision. It is hoped that early exposure to the challenges and realities of nursing will recruit more school leavers into the nursing profession.

The concomitant link between the departments of nursing and the schools is an additional feature of these initiatives that could prove beneficial. This link becomes even more important as the recent refocusing of the work of school Careers Agencies is likely to result in their withdrawal from supporting work experience data bases (Howieson et al. 2007). The most common system for organising work experience for school pupils has been for schools to access local authority or schools Careers Agency data bases of employers willing to provide work experience. Without this connection, there is a considerable challenge for schools, but one that opens up an opportunity to establish links between departments of nursing and schools, which have been overlooked or neglected for too long.

Limitations of the study

The study was carried out in Scotland and therefore the findings may be influenced by social and cultural issues. However the results appear to be applicable to not only Scotland but England and Wales where recruitment of school leavers into nursing appears to be problematic. The study also draws important parallels with the situation of a consistent decline in the numbers of high school pupils pursuing nursing as a career in the USA. The findings may not transfer to other countries where nursing still remains a popular career choice, for example Northern Ireland and Eire where culturally nurses have high public approval (Fealy 2004).

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