



Original research

The extent, variability, and attitudes towards volunteering among undergraduate nursing students: Implications for pedagogy in nurse education

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ABSTRACT

In the aftermath of the Francis Report nurses are being called to account for an apparent lack of care and compassion, leading to debate around pedagogy in nurse education. Absent from this debate is a consideration of student volunteering within undergraduate nursing programmes and its potential to promote student nurses self-esteem and to enhance the development of critical thinking skills. The aim of this study was therefore to understand the extent of and attitudes towards volunteering among nursing students. A mixed methods approach using a specifically developed questionnaire, followed by in-depth interviews to ascertain extent, variability, and attitudes towards volunteering revealed low levels of volunteering among nursing students. Limited time, limited access, and lack of academic support were cited as reasons. Nevertheless, students displayed positive attitudes towards volunteering. While volunteering has been shown to impact upon students abilities to think critically, to develop personal values and respond to the needs of others, volunteering within the UK undergraduate nursing programme considered here is neither structured nor formalized. Nurse educators should pay attention to the positive benefits of volunteering for nursing students and consider ways in which volunteering might be incorporated into the curriculum.

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1. Introduction

Nurses working within the National Health Service (NHS) require critical thinking skills in order to cope with severely ill patients with complex care needs, to deal with rapidly changing situations, and to do so with care with compassion. The Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC) expect undergraduate nursing programmes to prepare nurses to think critically, while at the same time offering limited strategies for the educational development of such skills (Banning, 2006). A lack of consensus around a definition of, and ways of teaching critical thinking has resulted in a proliferation of strategies for the development of critical thinking skills in nursing programmes, for example case studies (Popil, 2011), reflective practice (Caldwell and Grobbel, 2013), and critical reading and writing (Heaslip, 2008). A less well understood

strategy for the development of critical thinking in nursing is student volunteering, despite the view that volunteering is thought to promote students' self-esteem and to enhance the development of critical thinking (Moore and Parker, 2008). While self-esteem and critical thinking skills are synonymous with nursing and with volunteering, literature concerned with volunteering in nursing programmes appears limited. The paucity of literature may be due in part to programme requirements determined by the standards for pre-registration nursing education (NMC, 2010), which leave limited time for the inclusion of extracurricular activities. In light of this, our study aimed to understand the extent, variability and attitudes towards volunteering among nursing students at our University. Our primary research question was to establish the extent of volunteering in a subsection of the student nurse population. Our secondary research question was to understand the attitudes of our nursing students towards volunteering, in order that we might make recommendations for the nursing curriculum.

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2. Background and literature

2.1. Student volunteering

Volunteering, in and of itself is considered a mutually beneficial relationship or exchange rather than a gift, with considerable evidence of health and wellbeing benefits to those who volunteer (Mundle et al., 2012). However, in spite of considerable evidence of benefit to volunteers, measuring these benefits is a complex matter. Mundle et al. (2012) argue that generalisations made from the research around volunteering must be very cautious as most of the studies have limitations, which would make establishing causal relationships or even strong associations between good health and wellbeing outcomes and volunteering difficult. There is also considerable evidence of benefits to those who 'receive' help from volunteers and to the organisations that use volunteers. However, such benefits are hard to evaluate and are highly dependent on context, such as the nature of the volunteering, the match between the volunteer and the person receiving help or the training received by the volunteer.

The particular benefits of volunteering to nursing students centre on increasing the variety of social groups or situations to which students are exposed, increasing self-confidence; breaking down hierarchies, greater reflection on their own practice through doing (praxis), the development of more critical perspectives and improvements in terms of meeting particular competencies (Bell et al., 2014). The development of praxis and critical perspectives as part of nurse education may be one way in which progress towards greater compassion in nursing practice may be achieved, although research is needed to fully appreciate the process by which this is achieved. Nevertheless, the absence of volunteering in nursing pedagogy is a missed opportunity to harness the students' knowledge and skills; both pre-existing and underpinned by the nursing programme, for the benefit of recipients of health and social care services. While student volunteering may not automatically result in learning, nor directly link to the development of caring and compassionate practice, nonetheless volunteering does provide a way for students to make sense of their experiences through opportunities intentionally designed to foster compassion for others and critical thinking skills.

2.2. The extent of student volunteering

The National Union of Students (NUS) report almost a third of students in higher education (HE) devote a significant proportion of their spare time to volunteering activities, with an average of 44 h per year spent on volunteering (Mattey, 2014). While these figures suggest students value the role of volunteering the evidence of any general benefit to health for the volunteer and the recipient is largely anecdotal (Casiday et al., 2008), and for the most part unproven (Holdsworth and Quinn, 2010). The assumption that students benefit from volunteering, specifically in relation to skills development and employability supports positive action by Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to embed volunteering into programmes. Embedding volunteering within academic programmes, for example through provision of a volunteering module whereby students may develop skills and achieve credits (Bell et al., 2014) may lead students to feel they have little choice but to take up a volunteering activity in order not to be disadvantaged in a limited job market.

The core values of nursing; to make the care of people the first concern (GMC, 2012), while not exclusive to nursing suggests student nurses are likely to exhibit values based motivators for volunteering, for example supporting good causes, and helping others (Handy et al., 2010). Utilitarian motivators, such as career

enhancement and developing new skills are less likely to be important for student nurses whose career choice has been made, and for whom specific skills are embedded within approved undergraduate nursing programmes. Given the current job market in healthcare where demand outstrips supply the usefulness of volunteering as a means to build career contacts while training is questionable. Rather the benefits of volunteering to nursing students are derived from the very nature of nursing itself, as a socially engaged activity, whereby a concern for the 'other' is central to all its endeavours (Cipriano, 2007).

2.3. Care, compassion and volunteering in the nursing curriculum

Since the publication of the Francis Report into failings at Mid Staffordshire Foundation Hospital Trust in March 2013, it is unusual to hear health commentators talk about the NHS without referring to "care and compassion". Care and compassion has become a figure of speech, a sustained metaphor for discourse around health care, nursing and nurse education. In the 'post Francis' era "care and compassion" is a dominant discourse. Organisations with a vested interest in health; NHS England, Health Education England (HEE) the Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC), and the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC) take a view on how "care and compassion" is taught in theory and how it is enacted in reality (NHS England, 2012, DH, 2015; NMC, 2015; HEE, 2015; HCPC, 2016). However, teaching "care and compassion" to student nurses is not straightforward in spite of the edict in the Francis Report for an increased focus on a culture of compassion at all levels in nurse education, training and recruitment (Francis, 2013).

One approach for teaching care and compassion to nursing students is through provision of opportunities for students to engage in a structured volunteering activity, which then becomes the focus of a structured learning event where student and teacher reflect on the experience in a safe environment (Buchen and Fertman, 1994). While generally under-researched as a teaching strategy the available research suggests that volunteering is perceived as allowing students to have more control over their learning, to gain experience in diverse environments, break down stereotypes and develop critical perspectives. Bell et al. (2014) describe a partnership between De Montfort University and Macmillan Cancer Support whereby a volunteering module (hosted within the Department of Nursing and Midwifery) was offered to students in all faculties. It required 100 h of volunteering over three years and the completion of an academic assignment. The module included workshops and training sessions which were jointly delivered by Macmillan and academic staff. Bell et al. (2014) report that the module was extremely popular and successful. Their analysis of nine interviews with members of the module steering group highlight a wide range of benefits for all stakeholders including meeting the aim of the university to contribute to the local community and helping Macmillan to meet its aims of supporting people with cancer and their families. The benefits to the students which were identified by the module steering group included giving students the opportunity to take control of their learning and to experience situations that would not be possible within a traditional lecture based environment.

The benefits of volunteering for student nurses are seen partly in educational or pedagogical terms (being in charge of their own learning and developing a critical perspective) but also in terms of enhancing the potential for students to more fully understand compassionate nursing practice and all that this entails in contemporary healthcare contexts.

In light of a clear body of evidence around volunteering in the nursing curriculum we sought to understand first, the extent and variability of volunteering among nursing students on our

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