CAREER CHOICES IN RELATION TO NURSING

CROSS-SECTIONAL DESCRIPTIVE STUDY INVESTIGATING THE CAREER CHOICES OF SCHOOL LEAVERS IN RELATION TO NURSING, AND WHAT INFLUENCES THESE CHOICES

Sibongile Mkhize and Siyabonga Nzimande

Report Prepared by Research Programme of Health Systems Trust
Career Choices in Relation to Nursing: A Cross-Sectional Descriptive Study Investigating the Career Choices of School Leavers in Relation to Nursing, and What Influences These Choices

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acronym</th>
<th>Full Form</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AH</td>
<td>Addington Hospital</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BSS</td>
<td>Buhlebemfundo Secondary School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CCNC</td>
<td>Chatsmed Candlelight Nursing College</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DGH</td>
<td>Durban Girls High School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DoE</td>
<td>Department of Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DoH</td>
<td>Department of Health</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HSS</td>
<td>Hillview Secondary School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NDoH</td>
<td>National Department of Health</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NES</td>
<td>Newland East Secondary School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ISS</td>
<td>Indukwentsha Secondary School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NSS</td>
<td>Nkosibomvu Secondary School</td>
</tr>
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<td>OH</td>
<td>Osindisweni Hospital</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>QHS</td>
<td>Qalakahle High School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>QHS</td>
<td>Qinisani High School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RPC</td>
<td>Ridge Park College</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SSS</td>
<td>Sikhulile Secondary School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TSS</td>
<td>Tongaat Secondary School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UKZN</td>
<td>University of KwaZulu-Natal</td>
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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background
The nurse is the single most important frontline health worker (Ntshona, 2000:2). Without nurses the clinics, community health centres and hospitals cannot function. It is therefore critical that nurse education and the supply of nurses form an integral part of transformation of health services in South Africa (Ntshona, 2000:2). According to the Department of Health (2006) there is a need to significantly increase the production of all categories of nurses in order to fulfil the requirements of South Africa. Attracting new recruits to the profession is an integral part of increasing production. It is for this reason that a study was undertaken to assess the attitudes of school leavers towards taking up nursing as a profession, and the reasons for these attitudes.

1.2 Literature Review
Many studies worldwide report that interest in nursing as a career is low. Only 5.2% of a sample of high school respondents in Saudi Arabia intended to pursue nursing after school (Al-Omar, 2004). A study in Tanzania showed that, of all the medically related professions (including veterinary medicine), nursing was the least popular with only 9% of students expressing an interest (Kikwilu et al, 2000), whilst amongst Asian students in Australia less than 10% were interested in nursing as a profession (Rossiter et al, 1998). In Kuwait, however, 19% of female high school students interviewed were considering nursing as a career (Al-Kandari & Lew, 2005) and in Hong Kong, this figure rose to 28% (Law & Arthur 2003). To date no South African studies have investigated the level of interest of school leavers in a nursing career.

The reasons for the perceived lack of interest in nursing as a career are multi-factorial, and may differ from context to context. In South Africa, the low status of the profession, heavy workloads, and poor access to personal development programmes have been proposed as some of the reasons learners are not attracted to nursing as a career (Department of Health, 2006). Other negative perceptions about nursing are that the workload is physically demanding, and that the shortage of nurses increases the stress of the work (Buerhaus et al 2005). Of concern is that some of the perceptions about nursing do not reflect reality (Kohler & Edwards 1990); these need to be corrected in order to attract more high school leavers to the profession. Positive perceptions include that nursing offers good job security, and that the shortage of nurses will lead to pay rises and wider choice of jobs (Buerhaus et al 2005). However, these appear to be overshadowed by negative feelings about the profession.

Nursing is a profession that combines physical science, social science, nursing theory, and technology, in the care of others (www.nursingsociety.org). Many years ago nursing was seen to have numerous career advantages. These included that there is a large demand for nurses nationwide, many job opportunities, various nursing career choices, good benefits, many choices both in terms of specialty areas and opportunities for advancement (www.nursejobs.com).
Nursing is frequently viewed as a vocation, even a “calling” (Prater & McEwen 2006). Self-actualisation is one of the most important reasons given for entering the nursing profession (Zysberg & Berry 2006). Many students who choose nursing are motivated by a desire to help others (Zysberg & Berry, 2006), and have strong perceptions on how they will practice once qualified (Spouse, 2000). These perceptions are an important influence on whether or not nursing students complete their courses. However, not all students who choose nursing express a calling or even a desire to do nursing as their first choice; in a Jordanian study, 69% of nursing students entered the profession because of family or economic pressures (Jrasat et al, 2005). Similarly in Turkey, many nurses entered the profession as a last resort, because they did qualify for other university courses (Baykal et al, 2005).

Personality traits are considered crucial in the selection of a career in nursing (Zak, 1979), with caring, compassion (Prater & McEwen, 2006) and resilience (McGee, 2006) considered some of the most important traits for nursing. One of the most important influences on students who take up a career in nursing is contact with a practicing nurse (Buerhaus et al, 2005). Other important influences are friends, parents and other family members (Buerhaus et al, 2005), the occupation of the mother, and experience of a hospital environment (Law & Arthur, 2003).

Gender is a very powerful factor in the choice of nursing as a career. Women are more likely to consider nursing than men (Law & Arthur, 2003, Kikwilu et al, 2000), and, for different reasons, women are more likely to cite self-actualisation as their main motivation, whilst men are more likely to cite economic reasons (Zysberg & Berry, 2006). Although numbers are increasing, men still comprise a minority in the nursing profession, and may be deterred from entering it by the perception that nursing is “women’s work” (Romem & Anson, 2005).

The perception that nursing is becoming less popular as a career choice amongst South African school leavers required further investigation. Improving the complement of nurses in the country is crucial to improving quality of care. Only by investigating the multitude of factors that influence school leavers in their career choices can attempts be made to attract more nurses into the profession. Some of these factors may be unique to the South African context, while others may reflect wider international trends. However, once they are identified, targeted efforts can be made to change the attitudes and perceptions and so recruit more school leavers into the nursing profession.

1.3 Contemporary Health Issues

There was a month-long public servants strike from which there were lessons learnt which resulted in a number of steps being taken to prevent a similar situation from taking place again. In the nursing profession, A “groundbreaking move” by South Africa's health department which could see nurses being paid at least 20 percent more, becoming the first beneficiaries of a plan to attract more healthcare students and a plan to keep homegrown skills at home with higher salaries. On the 13th of July 2007 Health Minister Manto Tshabalala-Msimang announced an across-the-board increase of at least 20 percent for public nurses, as well as improved medical coverage and housing subsidies (www.health-e.org.za; Mukomafhedzi and Mbanjwa (2007))”
It is hoped that the substantial pay boost will address the skills crisis that the health sector is experiencing.

The Department of Health and Netcare have confirmed there are at least 28 000 to 30 000 nursing vacancies in the public sector and another 5 000 in the private sector (Cornins, 2007). Netcare nursing director Eileen Brannigan said South Africa ideally needs another 35 000 nurses but is producing only between 2 500 and 3 000 registered nurses a year. This figure excludes the dire shortage of enrolled and assistant nurses (Cornins, 2007).

The DoH is aware of the impact of the ‘brain –drain’ on the nursing shortage and is putting measures in place to address this crisis:

The government was renewing efforts to develop skills by attracting nurses home and training new recruits. Tshabalala-Msimang will visit the UK next month to put her weight behind the Homecoming Revolution campaign and "encourage nurses to return to South Africa" (Cornins, 2007).

This news has created hope that the needs of the nursing profession will be addressed, as well as a number of problems that led to brain-drain and nurses participation in strike action. Since measures are being taken to improve the working conditions of nurses, this may well make nursing more attractive to learners and draw more of them to the profession and assisting in addressing the shortage of nurses in South Africa.

1.4. Study Rationale

One of the initial hypotheses of the study was that there is a decline in interest in nursing amongst school learners. The NDoH realized that there could have been problems which could have led to this perceived decline in the interest of learners in nursing as a career. (Cornins, 2007). Health Systems Trust was commissioned to investigate. It was hoped that the research would produce recommendations to assist the DoH in improving the interest of learners in nursing as a career, and thereby improving the supply of nurses in the country.

The report adopts the following structure: Firstly, it discusses overall factors that influence learners in their career choices; human factors such as parents, teachers and non-human factors like salaries and status, just to list a few. Secondly, it discusses nursing as a career choice where factors both attracting and discouraging learners in either choosing or not choosing a nursing career, are explored. Thirdly, it discusses measures by schools and nursing institutions to make nursing more attractive to learners. Finally, attention is paid to measures that the DoH could put in place to make nursing more attractive to learners.
2. METHODOLOGY

2.1. Research Question and Objectives of the Study

The research question for this study was, “what influences school leavers in choosing or not choosing nursing as a career?” To answer this question, a structured survey questionnaire was used to collect data from learners. The survey data was supplemented by focus group discussions with learners, as well as a number key informant interviews with educators and with lecturers in nursing training institutions.

The principal aim of the research was to investigate the attitudes and perceptions of school leavers around nursing as a career choice, the career choices of school leavers, and what influences these choices. The following objectives guided the study:

1. To identify the nature of career choices available to learners in different schools
2. To analyse the links between the careers chosen and the factors influencing those choices.
3. To identify nursing training institutions available to learners who are interested in nursing as a career.
4. To use these insights to identify the efficacy of potential interventions, such as inter alia encouraging learners to choose nursing as a career and encouraging the DoH to introduce a package which will be attractive to learners interested in nursing as a career.

2.2. Study Sample

The study sample comprised of eleven schools across the range of historically advantaged and disadvantaged. These schools were conveniently sampled from the list of the schools in Ethekwini region. They were all public schools of different racial groupings representing South African population. Six of these schools are African schools, two (2) are historically Indian schools, 2 are historically coloured schools and one is historically a predominantly white school. Schools were selected from urban, peri-urban or townships and rural areas.

Learners were boys and girls from grades 11 and 12 since learners in those grades are nearing completion of secondary schooling and are considering their career choices. The sample of girls exceeds that of boys (58.5% girls and 41.5% boys) because the profession is predominantly female – thus it was felt reasonable to interview more girls than boys.

The sample of educators was made up of eleven (11) educators, one from each school. The Educators were selected by the principal or by the teacher who assisted in the data collection process in each school. The sample of Educators comprised teachers from the School.
Management Team (SMT), principals, Life Orientation educators as well as ordinary educators who interact with learners in an ordinary classroom setting.

Nursing institutions personnel consisted of the Hospital Nursing Managers, Head of Department in a university nursing school, and management of the nursing college. There were four institutions that participated: Two hospitals; a nursing school in the university and a nursing college. The composition is illustrated in Table1 below:

Table 1: Study Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Learners</td>
<td>In-depth Interviews</td>
<td>217</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learners</td>
<td>Focus Group Discussions</td>
<td>30 (6 learners X 5groups)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educators</td>
<td>Key Informant Interviews</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hospital Matron</td>
<td>Key Informant interview</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hospital Nursing Manager</td>
<td>Key Informant Interview</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nursing Institutions Members</td>
<td>Key Informant Interviews</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL PARTICIPANTS</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>265</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2.3. Socio Demographic Determinants of Learners

The sample of learners in the survey comprised 58.5% females and 41.5% males who were aged between 16 to 28 years.

Figure 1: Learners by Gender

They were drawn from grades 11 and 12. It was important to request information about parents. Learners in this age group were assumed to be is the custody of their parents or guardians. The study found that as much as many learners are fortunate enough to still have both parents alive, there were almost a quarter (23%) who reported that their fathers had passed away, as well 9%
who reported that their mothers were deceased. There were 5% of fathers who were reported missing or unknown to their children compared to only one mother who was reported missing. Parents have a large role that they play in the lives of their children; one of these roles is potentially influencing the choices of their children in relation to their future careers. If the parent is missing or deceased, the parental element in the career choices of the child will be compromised.

Figure 2: Socio-Economic Status of Parents of Learners

Since learners largely depend on their parents for funding their education, we then explored the employment status of parents. More mothers are unemployed than fathers.

The high percentage of fathers being deceased or unknown, places more responsibility on mothers to play the role of both parents. This has an impact on household socio-economic status as well as on the career choices and opportunities of learners. Just over 8% (8.3%) of mothers are ‘housewives’, while 6.4% are engaged in paid domestic work. The engagement of mothers in either paid domestic work or as ‘housewives’ raises questions regarding their influence on the career choices of their children. In addition, when assessing that being a housewife is an activity that does not give mothers an income, while on the other hand domestic work is low income work, this could have a negative economic impact in the household, which will make learners have difficulties in choosing their careers as they know that there are costs involved, which their parents possibly cannot afford. It was revealed that many learners wanted to do science related jobs, which implies that when making their career choices, some learners did not take their household economic status into consideration. It can also be argued that they wanted to get into careers which are known to be well-paying so that they can improve their household economic status.
3. KEY FINDINGS

3.1. Career Choices of School Leavers

In order to understand the career choices of learners, it was necessary to assess the academic streams that learners are doing at school. It was found that 31.1% of learners are in Commerce stream, 29.5% are in General or Humanities stream, while 39.2% are in the Science stream. In most cases it is assumed that when learners are in the science stream they are going to pursue science or medically related professions, but that was proven wrong by the careers that learners said they are going to pursue.

When asked the reasons for their choices, learners said that they had an interest in those careers in line with their academic streams. However, there are some learners who appeared to be confused and whose academic streams were not in line with their career choices. This could be due to the limited availability of certain learning areas due to shortages of educators, and that their learning area of choice is not offered in their school. Learners then find themselves opting for the next available learning area. In some cases teachers chose the streams for learners.

3.2. Factors Influencing Learners on Their Career Choices

There were difficulties in attempting to link the careers of the parents of learners to the careers chosen by learners, to assess whether the careers of parents play a role in their children’s career choices. Not surprisingly there were no fathers in the nursing profession while 6.9% mothers in the sample were reported to be in the nursing profession.

Instances were found where parents actively discouraged their children from following the career they were engaged in.

“My mother is a nurse by profession; however, she does not encourage me to do nursing. I think it is because of the stress she is going through in her profession. She even stated that she is not prepared to fund me if I enrol for nursing when furthering my studies.” (DGH)

In a few instances, there were parents who encouraged their children to choose the careers that they, as parents, were doing.

“I always wanted to be a nurse. I did not want to be a police personnel but my father is a policeman as well as many of my relatives. He is encouraging me to be a policewoman and he does not want to take anything outside that. So, I find myself forced to do it.” (TSS)

Overall, parents, teachers and relatives have been found to be the most influential people to learners, with approximately 35.5% of the learners reporting to being influenced by their parents; followed by teachers, where 17% of the learners are said to be influenced by them; relatives and siblings followed as sources of influence. Surprisingly only 2 learners reported to be influenced by guidance councillors. However, this is not surprising as only two schools reported having
career guidance in their curriculum. This is a weakness that needs to be attended to by the Department of Education as many schools do not have Guidance counsellors and one would expect the guidance counsellors to be influential in the school setting.

4. NURSING AS A CAREER CHOICE FOR SCHOOL LEAVERS

In the sample of learners in the study, there were 12.9% learners who said they are going to pursue nursing as a career. This figure is actually quite high and encouraging, considering that choices are opening up to learners. It can be argued that if nearly 13% of a sample of learners indicates that they wish to pursue nursing, then this is a relatively large pool of potential recruits.

Table 2: Nursing Career by Gender

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>71.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>28.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Out of the learners’ sample that chose nursing, girls made up 71.4% and boys only made up 28.6%. This encourages discussion around nursing being a female profession. On the other hand, since boys made up a percentage which is closer to half that of girls, it shows that the interest in nursing is high and possibly, increasing amongst males. This is an interesting finding – that of those that wanted to go into nursing, over 28% were boys.

It was noted that the age group 17 to 20 had a higher proportion interested in nursing. This is illustrated in Figure 3 below:

Figure 3: Nursing by Age
It can further be argued that learners above 18 years old are over-age for school, so they might be choosing nursing because it is a career that is accessible. The might want a career that will be easy for them to get into and a career that supports them while they study.

Table 3: Nursing as Career by school

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Schools</th>
<th>Nursing-Yes</th>
<th>Nursing-No</th>
<th>TOTAL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>BBS</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DGH</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NES</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HSS</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RPC</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VSS</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NKS</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>QHS</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>QSS</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SSS</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NHS</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td><strong>28</strong></td>
<td><strong>189</strong></td>
<td><strong>217</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is notable that there is more interest in nursing amongst learners in African schools compared to other race groups in the sample. Again this interest is high in schools located in rural areas. It can be argued that schools from other race groups are more exposed to presentations from company representatives, especially in the science and technology fields, which exposes them to a wider pool of career choices to choose from. Such exposure is limited in schools located in rural areas. Also, learners from African and rural schools may be poorer than the others, and be attracted by the fact that they can get paid for nursing whilst studying.

5. FACTORS THAT ATTRACT LEARNERS TO PURSUE NURSING

This section discusses the responses of whole sample of learners. The 12.9% sample that choose nursing as a career, as well as others in the sample who did not choose nursing as a career but regardless expressed positive views about it. Those who didn’t necessarily say that wanted to be a nurse nevertheless expressed their recognition that the career did hold some attractions. It is this pool that could possibly be influenced or encouraged to re-consider nursing as a potential career.

5.1. Positive Aspects of the Nursing – Learners’ Perspective

As much as nursing did not seem to be one of the learners’ favorite career, most of them were able to identify positive aspects of the career. They are arranged in the following section from most attractive aspect to the least.
The aspect labeled ‘Other Aspects’ below, consists of things such as being informed about diseases and having knowledge on the various infections, as well being familiar with health related issues. Some learners even highlighted that the fact that nurses provided an essential service and that this aspect of nursing served as a positive aspect in its own way.

Table 4: Positive Aspects of the Nursing Careers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ASPECT</th>
<th>FREQUENCY.OF LEARNERS</th>
<th>PERCENTAGE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Opportunity to care for others</td>
<td>190</td>
<td>87.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other aspects</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>43.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stable Career</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>15.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Possibility of getting paid while studying</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>14.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Different avenues to follow within nursing</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>8.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good career progression</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>7.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good prospects for travel</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>6.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Many job opportunities</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>6.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interesting</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t know</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

87.6% of responses (in Table 4 above) highlighted that being engaged in nursing as a profession is fulfilling because it provides them with an opportunity to care for others.

5.2. Positive Aspects of the Nursing – Educators and Nursing Institutions’ Perspectives.

Responses from educators and nursing institutions are somewhat similar to the responses of learners. However, nursing was viewed as a respectable and stable career with much job security and which is rewarding, as it provides job satisfaction. As was stated by a participant below:

“It is self-fulfilling and money has got nothing to do with it (AH).”

“Whatsoever you do, you are not just doing it for a patient, but you are doing for God, who is represented by the patient (OH).”

Additionally, the aspect of nursing that supports student nurses financially while they are training was extensively commented upon.
It was also mentioned that nursing gives one a sense of the value of life through comforting, others, caring for people and saving lives. Furthermore, nursing was seen as unique in that one is not stuck in one particular job or speciality as the focus within the work can change. It is also a profession that is internationally recognized, and a profession with ample employment opportunities, provided that one is registered with the South African Nursing Council:

6. FACTORS THAT DISCOURAGE LEARNERS TO PURSUE NURSING

As much as there were positive aspects of nursing identified above, there were also negative aspects that were put forward. In Table 5 below, responses are ranked from the most selected to the least selected.

6.1. Negative Aspects of Nursing – Learners’ Perspectives

Table 5: Negative Aspects of the Nursing Career

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ASPECT</th>
<th>FREQUENCY.OF LEARNERS</th>
<th>PERCENTAGE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Other aspects</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>45.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor salary</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Long hours</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low status</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>15.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difficult work</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>13.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physically demanding</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>12.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t know</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>9.2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is important to highlight what ‘Other aspects’ consist of, as it was the most selected aspect amongst those surveyed. The aspects that dominated the ‘Other aspects’ section were; fear of getting infected with an infectious disease, such as HIV/AIDS. 18% felt that this was a negative aspect of a nursing career. This was followed by a 7% of those who felt that nursing offered bad working conditions and 5% stated that it is emotionally challenging. The remaining few distributed amongst the issues such as; a long study period, high tuition fees, poor service delivery and nursing being psychologically disturbing.

6.2. Negative Aspects of Nursing - Educators’ Perspectives

When educators were asked what they thought were negative aspects of a nursing career, as with the nursing institutions, they stressed the discrepancy between the hard work of nursing and the low remuneration levels. They echoed a view that salaries are disappointingly low while employees have to work long hours caring for patients in overcrowded health facilities. The working conditions are perceived as poor as well as the physical conditions, especially with
health facilities in the public sector. Given all these problems, they stated that nursing has become one of the ‘undignified’ professions.

Despite the fact that educators do not keep records of the future endeavors of their learners, they stated that the number of learners who later pursue nursing as a career has been decreasing. Educators stated that in previous years they had many learners pursuing nursing as career, but recently, they have seen a major decline in these numbers.

6.3. Negative aspects of nursing - Nursing institutions’ Perspectives

When personnel representing nursing training institutions were asked their views of the negative aspects of a nursing career, they stressed that the salaries paid to nurses were ‘pathetically’ low, while working hours were very long. They also stated that government hardly assisted in terms of contributing to the financial support of learners interested in nursing. The limited places for placement, perceived as a refusal of hospitals to accept learners, is also seen as another negative aspect. This means that institutions can only accept the small number of students that they will be able to provide placement for at hospitals and exclude others. Institutions also felt that there was a rising concern for the health among staff in relation to general infections in the work place. Many especially feared dealing with the HIV/AIDS patients, while making sure that they did not get infected in the process.

Nursing institution personnel also stated that their inability to cope with the huge number of applicants is a negative aspect of nurse training. They argued this, because they find themselves compelled by circumstances to turn away applicants due to a shortage of places for them.

It was stated that:

“The number of people that apply yearly is more that 700 and we can only take 120, the number stipulated by the nursing council, we can’t take more (CNC).”

Similarly, the University of KwaZulu-Natal’s School of Nursing stated that they only take 45 or 50 applicants while they receive 1 500 applications per year. This further reinforces the fact that institutions have to turn away applicants because of limited places for training.

The above statistics have highlighted a very crucial point, where one can argue that there is considerable interest in nursing as a career, but it is the nursing institutions that cannot provide enough space for the interested applicants.

This suggests that instead of advocating the need to promote an interest in nursing as a career, one should rather focus on building the capacity of nursing schools to take in larger numbers of students, thus trying to match the demand faced by nursing institutions.
7. MEASURES TAKEN BY PARTICIPATING INSTITUTIONS TO MAKE NURSING ATTRACTIVE

With the awareness that there is a critical shortage of nurses, given the vacant posts and shortage of staff mentioned above, it is clear that this is not an issue that can only be addressed by one sector or department, but needs contributions from different angles to deal with this matter. Institutions were asked what they thought their role could be in assisting in making nursing more attractive to learners.

7.1. Measures on the Part of Schools to make Nursing Attractive

The view of schools was that they should work closely with health facilities and invite health personnel to come and present to learners about nursing. This would help to clear confusion and misperception, and impart knowledge. Schools should have “Careers Day”, so that learners could be given an opportunity to listen and interact with personnel from different professions (including health), enabling them to make informed career choices.

As was stated by one of the schools:

“We have a lot of people coming into the school to market their institutions and market their careers; we actually have someone right now who is marketing their institution. The nursing profession does not do this, they do not have a marketing campaign, and they do not go to schools, marketing their careers, offering bursaries or any incentives to actually attract learners to come to their schools. They do not partner with schools, they are just sitting back and crossing their fingers and hoping that people are going to come knocking on their door and it does not work like that. Maybe if the children are exposed to it, but there is no marketing at all (RPC).”

Schools believe that the health sector is not doing anything to market nursing as a career to learners. That is one of the reasons why they feel that the number of learners attracted and wanting to pursue nursing is so minimal. However this view is debatable, as it has been noticed that there is an over subscription of applications for nursing at nursing colleges.

It was also argued that schools sometimes put more emphasis into certain subjects, as compared to others, which learners tend not to do well in. Subjects such as Science and Mathematics fall into this category and they feel that it is not a good move and creates imbalances. Schools were also of the view that they can include information about nursing as part of their subjects, especially in the learning area known as Life Orientation (LO). This learning area has recently been added to the curriculum and focuses mostly on the stages of growth of learners, as well as on HIV/AIDS. It was pointed out that this learning area is one of the potential tools to facilitate career guidance, and some schools are already making maximum use of it.

A supporting argument provided that:

“LO could contribute substantially into producing or encouraging nursing (BSS).”
The shortage of resources in schools emerged from the research as one of the main issues that needs to be addressed. Availability of resources is seen as way of encouraging learners to focus on their studies, and the relevant resources could make learning in relation to nursing an easier path to take. There was only one school which stated that they do not have adequate human resources. Others stated that they do not have enough facilities such as laboratories and libraries which they see as essential in contributing and assisting learners to pursue nursing career.

Overall, schools acknowledge that they have a role to play in perhaps clarifying misperceptions or correcting misinformation regarding nursing as a career, and assuring learners that nursing is one of the better career paths to pursue.

7.2. Measures on the part of Nursing Institutions to make Nursing Attractive

Nursing institutions were very willing to work together with the schools and the DoH in addressing this matter. It was learned that from their perspective they are already doing a lot in attracting learners to do nursing. Institutions have reported that the old system of going to schools and promoting nursing studies, which they feel was ‘effective’ has fallen away because it is believed that career guidance or life orientation should cover it and now they basically depend on “open days” to market nursing, with the aim of attracting learners. An open day system could, however, be challenged by the fact that people who come to “open days” are people who are already interested, and the rest do not then receive the benefit of exposure, and continue with what may seem like a lack interest and negative ideas about nursing.

It is additionally unfortunate that the dissemination of information about the “open days” of nursing institutions does not reach most schools in rural areas. This then deprives learners in rural schools the exposure from which they could have benefited.

Institutions indicated that they would wish to work closely with schools where they could go and present on nursing, and address any questions and concerns that might come from learners. They felt they could also advertise in schools through brochures and other kinds of media that would be comprehensible to learners. They could extend their invitations for an “open day” activity to all schools and finally, the hospital stressed that if it had a nursing college it could provide training to the learners after completing their schooling. This could reduce the problem where learners are being misled into enrolling into unregistered nursing schools. The institutions were prepared to do anything to assist in this situation.

“We want it to be fair, that whoever wants to come to nursing has got a fair chance like everybody else who has applied to get in (UKZN).”
8. MEASURES BY DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH TO MAKE NURSING ATTRACTIVE

When asked the question; *what in your opinion can be done by the Department of Health so that nursing will be attractive to other learners who are still going to make career choices?*, there were different responses from participants. This following section covers responses from learners, educators and nursing institutions respectively.

8.1. Measures According to Learners

The overriding concerns of the learners with regard to being attracted to a nursing career or aspects that could make nursing more attractive to learners who are still to make their career choices are based on the following;

First and foremost, salaries should be increased to represent the major contribution and dedication nurses make to the society. Learners also feel that there is a need for more bursaries to be made available. It requires incentives to retain or motivate their commitment to do such a career. Learners made it clear that there was a need for more advertisement and promotion of nursing as a career, as careers given most consideration that are those frequently advertised and supported by the media. It was felt that the advertising of nursing should take the form of promotions in which the positive aspects, benefits and good side of nursing were highlighted. Most of the learners stressed that presentations, guest and promotional speakers are also highly effective in promoting careers and they should therefore be considered for nursing. There were also recommendations that nursing personnel conduct promotional talks and presentations of their work, as they are experienced and know the ins and outs of nursing as a career.

Furthermore, the working conditions of nurses as well as the physical conditions of their workplaces need to be revisited and improved, as this was said to influence the perception of learners towards nursing as a career.

8.2. Measures According to Educators

It transpired from the responses of educators that there was a feeling that the DoH is not doing enough to make nursing attractive. The DoH was blamed for the deterioration in the profession. The views of educators were that nursing has to be compensated fairly so that nursing staff can also make a living out of their much loved profession. To elucidate this discussion it has been divided according to issues outside and inside nursing.

8.2.1. Inside Nursing

The participants stated that the DoH needs to work on the way it operates, especially in relation to nurses as staff. The main issue which emerged from all respondents was that of remuneration. Respondents suggested that the salaries must be increased and the whole package for nursing staff, such as scarce skills and rural allowances, need to be improved. They stated that working conditions also need to be enhanced. Workplaces, such as clinics and hospitals have to be
improved so that nurses can be comfortable in identifying themselves with those facilities. A very concerned matron argued the following:

“Why should a government hospital look so dirty? Why should private hospitals look so comfortable. Private care is outstanding … Why is it that the conditions must be different? Between private and public … they have to upgrade our conditions (AH).”

Finally, for learners to be attracted to nursing, the employment strategy has to be reviewed so as to accommodate those who really deserve to be employed. It was felt that most learners who are coming into nursing do so because it is a means of earning a living and not because they are passionate about it. Furthermore, some go into nursing because they earn while they study, unlike other careers which require one to study at universities or other institutions which is generally not affordable to most of the people.

8.2.2. Outside Nursing

Educators argued that nursing has not been marketed to the public, especially learners at school. The DoH should try to do what the science and technology institutions are doing in supporting science learners. Those institutions supply schools with essential equipment and follow-up on the utilization of that equipment with presentations and practical work conducted by experienced personnel. The DoH could do likewise by sending experienced nursing officials to address learners in schools and to make presentations to market the nursing profession. These personnel could inform learners about opportunities in this field, such as the possibility that learners will be earning while studying.

The DoH should work hand in hand with the Department of Education to do practical work in the school environment, demonstrating to students what nurses do and what is expected from them. They could work hand in hand with the educators of Life Orientation as well as with those of the science institutions to market nursing as a profession. Learners might also be taken on short trips to the health facilities such as clinics and hospitals so that they can be exposed to the daily activities of the nursing staff. This would give them an understanding of what the job entails. This could motivate and attract them to the profession. One other approach that was suggested was linking nursing to school subjects, not only biology, but something more practical, which is relevant to the field. It was suggested that it must be an enjoyable and engaging subject which could motivate learners.

Educators argued that the DoH needs to make sure that it addresses issues that make nursing less attractive to potential recruits. Educators argued that nursing has not been well marketed, and, as a result, learners tend to view that being a doctor or other professions are far more valued by society than being a nurse.
8.3. Measures According to Nursing Institutions

The nursing institutions feel that there needs to be strong collaboration between them and DoH. Their view is that DoH is not assisting them as they would have expected. The support they need, for instance, is the intervention of DoH in the issue of placements. They also experience problems where institutions do not allow them to place their students for facility practicals. They also mentioned that the lack of bursaries is a huge stumbling block in influencing learners to choose nursing. The fees charged for nursing studies are now very high and unaffordable for most of their learners. This disturbs learners during their studies, so that they end up stressing about the debts accumulating because of their studies, rather than learning. One institution stated that DoH does have bursaries available for students studying towards nursing; however, in their experience it has been very difficult for students to access these bursaries.

In summary, the nursing institutions stated that to make nursing attractive to learners, it is important for the DoH to make bursaries available and easily accessible to students who are studying towards nursing. They also suggested that DoH should support the institutions and intervene in issues such as the placements of students in health facilities for their practicals. The view was that if the issues they had outlined could be addressed, it could enhance the motivation of learners to choose nursing as a career.
9. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The study investigated the career choices of learners in order to assess what motivated them in their choice of careers.

Firstly, sometimes the interest of learners in other careers outside of nursing is mainly because they do not get exposed to accurate information on nursing and they end up depending on unreliable sources of information, such as rumors. This portrays a career which definitely does not attract them. However, when looking at the number of learners from schools that are interested in nursing, one would nevertheless conclude that 28 learners out of 217 in a school is a large number. This highlights that if the study had to include more participants and schools, a very large number of learners would be interested in nursing as a career, despite the lack of information.

Secondly, the study also found that there is a shortage of the supply of nurses to hospitals from the nursing institutions. This is in contrast with the finding that there are many applicants who are interested in enrolling in nursing institutions, but who are turned away due to the shortage of places. This implies that there is an interest in nursing but that there are probably limited institutions to enroll these interested learners. In this case, the demand for nurses far exceeds the supply. While many may argue that though there are problems in schools and health facilities, the major problem seems to be in relation to the nursing institutions. There are either not enough places or there is a shortage of nursing institutions. In any event, they cannot manage the huge demand that they are expected to supply.

Thirdly, working conditions are important. Those learners who were interested in nursing and were potentially serious recruits to the profession, stated that they were discouraged by poor working conditions, low salaries and the lack of information about nursing as a career.

In essence, the nursing institutions have indicated that there is a very high interest in nursing since they receive many more applications than the number of places they can provide and they end-up turning large numbers of applicants away. They indicated that if efforts to get greater DoH and DoE support was successful and they were able to recruit more learners into nursing, there would not only be the need to increase the places or number of nursing institutions, but there would also remain the need to facilitate improved access to health facilities for the practical placement of student nurses.

The hypothesis that ‘there is a decreased interest in nursing’ is not in line with the findings given that nursing institutions receive many applications, far more than they that for which they can cater. Furthermore, it has been shown in this study, that despite numerous negative perceptions, there remains quite a substantial interest in nursing, as 13% of learners in the sample were interested in pursuing nursing as a career.
10. RECOMMENDATIONS

The study has produced a number of recommendations to facilitate improving nursing as a career, and making nursing more attractive to learners. It is hoped that these recommendations will benefit DoH as well as institutions which provide training to learners who will pursue nursing.

The first and most important point is that nursing institutions state that there are high volumes of applicants which they are forced to turn away due to the shortage of space. It is therefore recommended that more places in existing institutions or creation of new nursing institutions are necessary. If there are more decentralized nursing institutions, the problem of supply more adequately meeting demand could be addressed. It would not help after all, if measures were taken to stimulate interest in nursing, only to find that those interested in the career were turned away because of shortage of places or institutions. This then leads to the conclusion that the overriding recommendation is to create more places for nursing students or more nursing institutions.

Having said that, there is still, nevertheless, the need to improve the quality of information and to encourage learners to take up nursing for the correct reasons. There should be a standing mechanism in place to encourage learners who would like to choose nursing as a career. This mechanism should include marketing the profession to all schools with significant outreach to rural schools. This could be achieved through collaboration between DoH, DoE, schools and nursing institutions.

Moreover, the DoH could easily attract additional learners through awarding them with bursaries. Their awarding strategy should, however, be easily accessible, thus making sure that every eligible person could benefit from them. In addition, the DoH could offer learners part-time work as well opportunities in health facilities during school vacations which would give them experience as well as practice.

There needs to be better collaboration between nursing institutions and health facilities to ensure that placements of student nurses take place with no difficulty. The department should help facilitate this process in health facilities. In the end it is the facilities that are starved of good personnel if they do not avail their facilities to nursing students.

The Department could also continue to improve the infrastructure and conditions of public health facilities so that they are more conducive as working environments. Similarly attention would have to be given to increasing the relative salaries and packages for nurses, as this surfaced as one of the most serious concerns of those considering a nursing career.
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