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What do high academic achieving school pupils really think about a career in nursing: Analysis of the narrative from paradigmatic case interviews

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Image

Summary As many Departments of Nursing within universities consider raising their academic entry requirements in an attempt to attract a more high academic achieving entrant and also endeavour to attract more school leavers one of the fundamental questions that needs to be answered is – are high academic achieving school pupils really interested in pursuing a career in nursing?

The aim of this paper is to report on the findings from paradigmatic case interviews of high academic achieving school pupils who at one stage in their career choice process had considered nursing as a possible career choice but had ultimately disregarded nursing and had decided to pursue medicine or another health care profession.

The study reports interview data from a sub-sample of ($n = 20$) high academic achieving 5th and 6th year school pupils who participated in a larger survey of 5th and 6th year school pupils ($n = 1062$). These were paradigmatic cases – high academic achieving school pupils who had considered nursing as a possible career choice within their career preference cluster but had ultimately disregarded nursing and decided to pursue medicine or another health care profession as a career choice.

Participants reported that nursing was eventually not viewed as using their examination grades to the maximum benefit. Also the participants reported a belief that the work of the doctor is more important and academic as they cure patients whereas the work of the nurse is practical and routine as they only care for patients. The pupils in addition asserted a negative image of nursing and a low status level of nursing as a career. They also articulated the unremarkable typical school pupils they perceived would pursue nursing as a career choice and the type of school pupil that they had witnessed being encouraged toward nursing within their schools, both of which conflicted with their own typology. Ultimately the high academic achieving

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school pupils were doubtful and suspicious as to the credibility of a degree in nursing and nursing as a university programme.

Nursing is a very contentious career choice consideration for high academic achieving school pupils. There is strong evidence from the interview data to suggest that attracting high academic achieving school pupils into nursing could be hugely problematic.

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Introduction

Over 20 years ago the then UKCC published the report – Project 2000: A New Preparation for Practice (UKCC, 1986). This represented a major and radical change in nurse education in the United Kingdom. The preparation of a new single level practitioner who would be knowledgeable in his/her practice across a wide range of professional activities represented a significant shift in emphasis. The new 'knowledgeable doer' would be capable of competent practice in hospital and community settings. Training was to be dissociated from service delivery. All programmes were to carry an academic award, students were to receive funding through bursaries rather than wages and become independent of employing authorities. Some years after the introduction of Project 2000 throughout the UK, nurse education moved wholesale into Higher Education.

One of the main reasons cited for these radical developments in nurse education was to make nursing more credible as a career choice amongst school leavers, especially high academic achieving school pupils (UKCC, 1986). The move of nurse education into universities was to achieve the aims of a higher, more exclusive entry-gate to the profession, and was thus appealing to the nursing profession. It was also to bring nurse education more into line with the education for comparable non-medical health professions, for example occupational therapy, physiotherapy, speech therapy, dietician, and hence would improve the status of nursing as a career choice for school leavers. Parity with other health care professionals was important within the debate (Barton, 1998). Nurses have lobbied for recognition as partners with other professional colleagues in multi-disciplinary care health care yet in the United Kingdom they remain one of the few health care professions not prepared at first degree level for registration. Graduate status would provide the nursing profession with recognisable and formal equivalence to professional colleagues (Meerabeau, 2001).

There is growing debate about the level of academic award at the end of student nurse education and point of registration. The RCN remains commit-

ted to achieving graduate level entry to the nursing profession at the point of registration (RCN, 2004). The arguments in favour of this view are strong and one further reason for these raft of changes in the education of nurses was that the health service of the future would need nurses with sophisticated skills and increased knowledge which highlighted the need for a well educated nursing workforce. Fundamental to this was the increase in the academic level of nurse education (RCN, 2004). This debate is set against a context of student attrition and paradoxically the success of nursing in widening participation may have contributed to the increase in attrition.

Literature review

An electronic search utilising CINAHL, BNI and MEDLINE revealed no studies which focused specifically on the perceptions of high academic achieving school pupils regarding nursing as a career choice. However there were a number of studies which had examined school pupils' perceptions of nursing as a career choice. These were predominantly US studies and many were over 10 years old.

A number of studies were located which identified that 'the need to help others', and other humanitarian facets to be important factors in making judgements on nursing as a career choice by high school pupils. A majority of pupils identify nursing as caring (Kersten et al., 1991; Barkley and Kohler, 1992; Grossman and Northop, 1993; Reiskin and Haussler, 1994; Stevens and Walker, 1993; Williams et al., 1991; Boughn and Lentini, 1999; Rogstad, 2002).

Grossman and Northop (1993) in their study of 503 senior high school pupils perceptions of nursing as a career reported that only 7% of pupils listed nursing as their desired career, whilst a majority (74%) perceived nursing as a career that provided opportunities to care for individuals, families and communities in time of need and help them live healthy lives. Grossman and Northop also found high school pupils views were influenced by gender, the students' desired occupation, and opinion of parents, friends, and guidance teachers. Stevens

and Walker, 1993 used a descriptive design with 641 high school students and attempted to determine why nursing was not selected more frequently as a career. The results showed that willingness to work with sick people, desire to help people, to do important work, and to work with a variety of people were the highest ratings for choosing nursing as a career. Dislike of dying people and nurses' salaries were reported as the main reasons for choosing another career.

May et al. (1991) study of 116 mixed age youths perception of an ideal career was one which was more financially rewarding, more respected, and more powerful than nursing. Tomey et al. (1996) in their study of 347 male and female high school pupils perceptions of nursing as a career indicated that they wanted more appreciation, money, safety and power from an ideal career than they perceived to be available in nursing. Kohler and Edwards (1990) investigated 306 high school students' beliefs about nurses and nursing. Using a self questionnaire, subjects responded to statements about educational requirements for registered nurses along with their working conditions, earning power and social status. Results showed that almost 30% of the subjects believed nursing to be a low status occupation.

These studies indicate a strong and consistent perception that caring for sick people was viewed positively by the majority of senior and junior high school students and for a few this attribute was a major reason they chose nursing as a career. However, there were also many negative attitudes held by the students towards the perception of nursing as a career choice which included working in the hospital performing unpleasant tasks, working irregular times including weekends and holidays, low status and lack of respect, powerlessness, being subordinate, and poor salary.

In the United Kingdom young people on the whole tend to be ambitious for themselves and want careers that offer very good opportunities to reach a high status role (Hemsley-Brown and Foskett, 1999). Nursing may be perceived as having limited career opportunities and although the young people in the study expressed their admiration for the work of nurses this was rarely matched by a desire to become a nurse. This ambition for academic success may not be shared by all pupils especially those from socially excluded backgrounds. There is a sense in which this group of students, who in later life wish to re-enter education may find nursing as a highly attractive option.

The need to attract high academic achieving school pupils into nursing is apparent as the health service of the future needs nurses with expert skills

and enhanced knowledge as changes and expansion in the traditional role of nurses has resulted in some nurses assuming roles that were conventionally the domain of the doctor (SEHD, 2001). Also the review of customary nurse roles has led to the introduction of consultant nurses and specialist nurse practitioners (Williams et al., 2001). Nurses are the first point of contact with health care in NHS 24 and walk in centres. Nurses now prescribe medications and order and interpret diagnostic investigations. A fundamental aim of the increase in the level of student nurse education was that nurses should be able to demonstrate that they have the skills of being critical thinkers, analytical, reflective, problem based learners, problem solvers, life long learners, researchers and readers of research (UKCC, 2001). It is not clear if this major change in the complexity and sophistication of nursing roles has had a direct or indirect influence on the way school pupils view nursing as a career option.

Research design and methods

This study employed qualitative methods in which paradigmatic cases of 5th and 6th year school pupils were interviewed to elucidate their perceptions of nursing as a career choice. This study is part of a larger survey of 5th and 6th 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. Access was obtained through the Director of Education and the head teachers of the schools in the educational area. Consent was also obtained from the school pupils for them to be part of the study. As was the policy of the educational area all school pupils taking part in the study signed a participation in research consent form. This followed verbal explanation and written explanation in the form of a letter to each pupil explaining the research. Anonymity and confidentiality was also ensured.

Aim

The aim of the study was to gain an understanding of what high academic achieving school pupils thought about nursing as a career choice.

Participants

What emerged from the quantitative questionnaire data were what Heidegger (1962) refers to as cases which shine. Flyvbjerg (2003) refers to these as paradigmatic cases. Cases that highlight more general characteristics of people from groups in question. The paradigmatic case transcends any sort of rule based criteria of determination. No standard exists for the paradigmatic case because it sets its own standard (Christensen, 1987). Data were collected from the 20 paradigmatic cases who were purposively sampled from a larger survey of 1062 school pupils. These pupils were high academic achieving school pupils (pupils who had obtained 3 or more higher grades at level A, B or C and 7 or more standard grades at level 1, 2 or 3). The pupils were from 11 schools in one educational area with different sociodemographic profiles who had considered nursing as a possible career choice within their career preference cluster but had ultimately disregarded nursing and decided to pursue medicine or another health care profession as a career choice. The Scottish education system is distinctly different from other parts of the United Kingdom. In Scotland the Higher is one of the national school-leaving certificate exams and university education entrance qualifications. It is broadly the equivalent of the A-level exam in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. The standard grade in Scotland is an educational qualification for students aged between 14 and 16 years. It is broadly equivalent to the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) examination taken in other parts of the United Kingdom.

Data collection

An interview schedule was formulated for the paradigmatic cases and piloted prior to use. The interview schedule focused on four main areas:

- 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.

All schools provided the use of a room which ensured privacy and no interruptions for the interview which lasted around 60 minutes. The interview interaction with the school pupils was conversational in nature. This allowed the school pupils to

tell their stories in a naturalistic, narrative fashion encouraging them to define the important dimensions of their perceptions of nursing as a career choice and to elaborate on what was relevant to them, rather than being guided by priori notions of what might have been considered to be relevant. The interview as a data collection tool allowed responses to be obtained from the school pupils on a one-to-one, face to face basis. This provided a unique opportunity to interview this group of high academic achieving school pupils which had not happened in previous research and the data gathered could prove vitally important in the recruitment process of high academic achieving school pupils into nursing. The audio tapes which were used to record the 20 paradigmatic case interviews verbatim were transcribed and analysed after the interviews.

Data analysis

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.

All transcripts were read in order to gain an overall view and feeling for them.

The transcripts were read many times in search of meaning and deeper meaning.

Significant statements were extracted from each of the four question areas of the transcripts. Formulated meanings were extracted from each significant statement and clustered into themes. Themes were statements or narrative from the school pupils that referred to an important issue.

The main aim was primarily descriptive to achieve a description of the school pupils reality of their perceptions of nursing as a career choice thus concrete categories were used. Finding commonalities and uniqueness in the individual themes allowed crystallisation of the constituents of the phenomenon of high academic achieving school pupils experience of their perceptions of nursing as a career choice. The result was a description of the general structure of this phenomenon.

Findings

What do we think about nurses?

Media representations

School pupils had very strong and well formed views on nursing, nursing as an academic career

and why they eventually decided against nursing as a career. The high academic achieving school pupils' main source of images regarding nursing appeared to be through television programmes. What seemed important in this respect was that they were greatly reliant on a relatively small number of television programmes for their image formulation of nurses and nursing. These television programmes were powerful opinion formers and in the opinion of the school pupils did not portray nurses in a positive way. The following narrative was typical of the opinion of the school pupils.

"I and I think that most people get our images about nursing and nurses from TV programmes which seem to give a true picture about what nursing is like. Usually sacrificed by doctors in that if doctors make mistakes doctors can usually pass the blame onto nurses – I certainly would not want to be in a job where I was considered to be some unimportant person where when the doctors felt like it could blame me for their mistakes – no way".

"In another episode of Casualty – some nurses are portrayed as brainless, sex mad bimbos out to try to romance doctors and get a doctor for a husband".

This consistent juxtaposition of nurses and doctors was also evident in the next theme which emerged from the data.

Doctors cure and nurses care

When talking about aspects of their career choice process the school pupils had compared nursing and medicine as career choices. What became apparent was their polarisation of knowledge and caring. Doctors were seen to cure patients whilst nurses only cared for patients.

"I have chosen medicine because I would like to be involved in patient care and also use sciences to treat patients. Nurses do not use sciences they care for patients whereas a doctor uses the sciences to help cure people. A nurse can only care for the patient".

"I still want to help people but at a much higher level as a doctor being able to cure them".

What was also notable was that the work of the nurse was not seen as academic but as practical and routine.

"Nursing is about social care and caring for the basic needs – comfort and eating. Medicine is much more of an intellectual challenge for me thus having the knowledge and skills to cure people".

The low status level of nursing amongst high academic achieving school pupils was also affected by their erroneous perception of the nature of the job of nursing. The status level of what the school pupils think that nurses do also seemed to be an important factor in deterring them from a career in nursing. Nursing was viewed by these high academic achieving school pupils as not having any high level cognitive aspects related to it but very much practical in nature and therefore undemanding, and not requiring a high degree of intelligence.

"Anytime that there is bad news or the doctors have to give bad news the nurse goes off to make tea – are they (nurses) not clever enough or important enough to give bad news".

"Nurses do the practical stuff – they care for the sick in hospital, serve meals, help self-esteem, encourage, help patients to get dressed or help patients with things that they cannot do for themselves".

Sexual stereotype female and male nurses

The high academic achieving school pupils held very stereotypical images of female and male nurses. Female nurses were viewed as sexual objects and male nurses were viewed as being homosexuals and this became yet another dissuading factor regarding nursing as a career. These stereotypical images appear to have changed very little over many years remaining firmly rooted in the past.

"I would never want to be a nurse – I would be very much concerned about what people would think of me and the popular image that nurses have.

I would not and do not want to be viewed or seen as an easy woman with no sexual morals – nurses are seen as easy for doctors – they will sleep with any doctor".

"The sexual stereotype is always there and seems to be reinforced when you view TV programmes and if you see nurses on adverts or in films they are always female with short skirts and enormous chests – really not what any intellectual female would want to be seen as".

"I know some males who are considering nursing and there seems to be this sexuality issue – why would you want to be a nurse as only gay men are nurses. These males get a hard time at school".

What do we think of nursing as a University course

Nursing should not be a University programme

School pupils did not see the relevance of having nursing education programmes at degree level because of their beliefs regarding what nurse's did not requiring a university education. This became a further compounding factor regarding the school pupils antipathy to nursing as a career choice:

"A university education to me is about higher learning – why would a nurse need higher learning for what they do?"

"I think that nursing should be a college course because most courses at college are practical in their nature like hairdressing, joinery, bricklaying and secretarial work and nursing comes into this category. University courses encourage you to think about things and challenge things and to develop intellectually – nurses do not need to think about things – they do them and move on to the next patient or doctors and other health professionals tell them what to do".

The high academic achieving school pupils were extremely suspicious and doubtful regarding the credibility of nursing as a university programme. This doubt and suspicion was a dominant feature in the data and manifest in a number of areas.

Nursing has much lower entry requirements

The high academic achieving school pupils expressed much distrust regarding the low entry requirements for nursing degree programmes compared to other degree programmes.

"I would be suspicious and doubtful as to the value of a university programme which only asks for standard grades as an entry requirement. I cannot think of any other university programme which only asks for standard grades as an entry requirement".

"I would be unconvinced and uncertain of a university course which only asks for 5 standard grades to get in. 5 standard grades are too easy to obtain to get into university. There are no other university courses that I know of that let you in with only standard grades".

Nursing is an easy way to get into University

Referring back to the subject of the low entry requirements high academic achieving school pupils expressed a belief that school pupils that universities would never have admitted in the past were now entering nursing degree programmes with much less academic qualifications required to enter any other university degree programme. There was also an inference that school pupils who enter student nurse education programmes are inferior to students on other university courses. This was evidenced in the subsequent dialogue:

"Easy to get a degree in nursing – pupils who universities would never touch or look at before with much less grades than they would need to get into any other university course are doing nursing – I needed 'A' grades in my higher to get into medicine".

"I could see nursing being appealing to pupils with lower grades – they could get into do a degree whereas before university would have been closed to them.

It would't appeal to me because I have standards and want to get a good degree not a 'mickey mouse' one but some pupils will jump at the chance to get a degree but might not necessarily want to be nurses. Also some pupils will get into university who should't have and get a degree even though it is a low status degree it is a degree.

Too me this does't seem right I worked hard for my grades to get into university.

Seems like nursing is a back door entry into university. I am a bit worried that this devalues people who have real degrees".

Who becomes a nurse

Nurses are practical, kind but not very intelligent

There was a strong consensus among the high academic achieving school pupils regarding their image of the archetypical school pupil who would select nursing as a career choice. The profile given was of a predominantly unexceptional individual who was more likely to be female, no more than average intelligence, kind, caring, good listener, good practically and could follow task orders. The high academic achieving school pupils were very definite and in agreement regarding the unremarkable, mundane characteristic profile

of the conventional school pupil who would pursue nursing as a career choice in the following descriptions: Fig. 1.

A class dimension was implicit and on occasion explicit in views on the type of person who would wish to become a nurse:

“Come from a working class background because I think for them it is a decent job and they are getting a training that can get them work in a number of places with reasonable money”.

The school pupils went on to talk more specifically about the academic ability of the typical school pupil who would pursue nursing. They described a person with a low academic achievement record. Importantly this conflicted with their own personal typology and thus became a further important dissuading factor regarding nursing as a career choice for them:

“Heh I know some pupils who have been accepted into nursing and they must be some of the thickest people in the year – I wouldn’t let them look after my dog.

It seems to me that if you are vertical and breathing you are in”.

“Nursing is probably a perfectly good career choice for I think girls with poor grades – yes nursing is women’s work plus you hardly get any pay”.

“Nursing is a job for the dim. I know nurses that are not particularly bright.

I would be very surprised if any of the S5 or S6 pupils with good grades would want to be nurses”.

“You don’t require highers to do nursing and a lot of pupils who leave school in fourth year go to college if they can’t be bothered with school and go into nursing.

It’s not mentally taxing”.

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- Female.
 - Outgoing not too loud.
 - Good listening skills.
 - Understanding.
 - Good at following orders and seeing things through.
 - Good practical people.
 - Have a lot of friends because I think they would help people with their problems
 - They would be kind, caring, sensitive
 - Able to follow instructions accurately.
 - Not opinionated
 - Quiet within their peer group.
-

Figure 1 Characteristics of people who become nursing students.

Guidance teachers believe nursing is for the dim

In addition the school pupils proceeded to discuss the characteristic school pupil that they had observed in their schools being encouraged towards a career in nursing. Again this appeared to be significant in their decision not to pursue nursing as a career choice.

“In this school certain school pupils are encouraged towards nursing as a career choice – usually females not the brightest. – they do the standard grade in care which is not really an academic subject and this is well known in the school not to be a subject that the clever school pupils would take.

A lot of females who do this standard grade go on to college to do the access course to nursing – so caring/nursing is not viewed as a good career choice and is reinforced as not being a good career choice for school pupils with good grades. Its kind of degrading for the good grade pupils even asking them to think about nursing as a career.

The school pupils with good grades are steered towards going on to university”.

“I have known some girls in the school – average grades not going to get highers being encouraged by guidance teachers and careers advisor to think about doing nursing or hairdressing – because these are jobs women can do and are not too demanding”.

“I think that I would say that it seems to be low to average grades girls that are encouraged by guidance teachers to do nursing, along with office work and hairdressing because these are seen as jobs that are brain wise not too demanding and they would probably be good at”.

Teachers were thought to share the same views and this would have a direct bearing on their expectations of students:

“I think that in this school girls who are of average intelligence or below average intelligence but are gentle, plain people are encouraged by the teachers to think about nursing as a possible career choice”.

Why did we choose not to take a nursing programme at university

Not using my ‘grades’ to the maximum benefit

In the interviews the school pupils referred to their level of achievement in their standard grade and

higher grade examinations as their 'grades'. What was also apparent was that the high academic achieving school pupils' career choice process had a strong tactical dimension in the emphasis they placed on using their examination grades to the maximum benefit but nursing was very clearly not viewed as utilising their examination grades efficiently. This is evident in the following narrative.

"I have good grades I want to do something important, make a difference, be respected – making life and death decisions. Being a nurse would be a waste of what I am, what I have become and what I can become. Nursing is not for intelligent pupils, I am better than this and I think most clever pupils are".

"I did think about nursing but I have pushed it further and further away as a career choice as I see what I can really do with my grades and do something important".

"When I got my grades which were better than I expected it was easy to get rid of nursing".

Nursing viewed as a last resort

The school pupils talked further about their disregard of nursing within their career choice process as in their final school years nursing had become very much a last resort. This is substantiated in the following assertions.

"I would only consider doing nursing if I really screwed up my grades".

"I would only do nursing if I could not do something better in the medical field".

Difference that they can make in their career

In light of the manifest low status of nursing as a career choice, the high academic achieving school pupils felt that they would not make a difference in their career if they pursued nursing and that they would be wasting their qualifications if they chose nursing – this is witnessed in the following.

"I wanted to get a good qualification and medicine is an extremely valuable qualification which only a select few can achieve.

A nursing qualification does not have the same value – I feel that I would be wasting my qualifications, I have very good grades and that I am a bit too clever to be a nurse.

I want a job where I can make a difference, doctors clearly make a difference to people's lives,

and I am able too and have scope to use my brain".

"Doctors make a real difference to patient's lives – curing cancer, developing new technology, new operations, transplants to save lives, doing work in other countries.

Nurses are never ever seen as making vital differences to people's lives like curing them or saving their lives. Doctors make a difference".

Discussion

This study explored the factors that a group of high achieving school pupils took into account when forming their views on nursing as a career choice. Despite initially considering nursing none of these 20 high achievers went on to pursue nursing as a career choice.

The key themes to emerge from the interviews were what the pupils thought about nurses, this being influenced by media representations and the perception that doctors cure patients whilst nurses only care for patients. There was also evidence of outdated, stereotypical images of female and male nurses. Pupils believed that nursing should not be a university programme because they did not believe that to be a nurse required a university education. There was distrust regarding the low entry requirements for nursing degree programmes compared to other degree programmes and a consideration that nursing was an easy way to get into university. It was thought that pupils who would become nurses were generally unexceptional individuals. The belief of who would become a nurse was also influenced by the characteristic school pupil that they observed being encouraged towards a career in nursing and the influence of guidance teachers who expressed a view that nursing was for the dim. The final theme related to why pupils did not pursue nursing. The pupils stated that they wanted to make a difference in their career but that if they pursued nursing they would not make a difference and that they would be wasting their examination grades. As their career choice process evolved nursing became viewed as a last resort.

Nursing and medicine have a complex relationship and one which has downsides certainly in terms of the ways in which this relationship is understood by pupils and the wider public. This relationship is mediated through a relatively small number of TV programmes and seems to have changed little in the last 40 years. According to Bacon et al. (2000), Kiger (1993) and Rossiter and Yam

(1998) the stereotypical images of nurses and nursing persists. The nurse is depicted as a sex symbol or in a subordinate role and we can see parallels with the 1960s Carry on Doctor film and recent episodes of Casualty.

The strong images and opinions pupils expressed about nursing, people who become nurses and nursing as a university subject may impact on their career choice decision through both direct and indirect effects. Value systems exert a direct impact on the short-term attitudes and decisions on nursing and an indirect impact by influencing pupils' selection of news and TV programmes and thus the type and content of information and images they are exposed to about nursing (Kepplinger et al., 1991).

Negative images which were apparent in the narrative do not serve to encourage school leavers into nursing as a career choice. These images were reinforced for the school pupils by the negative depiction of nursing in television programmes, the negative image portrayed by people who are nurses and the sexual stereotype of female and male nurses.

Nursing was perceived as being a low status occupation which is inferior to medicine in which doctors cure and save lives and nurses only carry out personal care for patients. This low standing was also linked to the perceived inferior work that nurses do in addition to the very few positive and contemporary images that the pupils had of nursing.

Furthermore nursing as a career choice was not viewed by the school pupils as using their standard grades and higher grades to the maximum benefit. This was also reinforced by the low academic level of the typical school pupil that they witnessed being encouraged towards a career in nursing. Compounding this were the school pupils' doubts and suspicions regarding the credibility of nursing as a university programme and the value of a degree in nursing. This can be seen in the belief that nursing had much lower entry requirements than other university programmes and that it was an easy degree to obtain. Consequently nursing was not seen as having the same value as other degrees.

Unfortunately negative perceptions of nursing as a career choice were widespread amongst the high academic achieving school pupils in this study and it would seem that unless these negative images are transformed nursing will struggle to recruit the high academic achieving school pupils. This is also supported by the literature which suggests that the public's attitudes towards nursing appear to be negative (Bampton et al., 1986; Grossman and Northop, 1993; Kalisch and Kalisch, 1986; May

et al., 1991). Although the public are aware of the caring aspects of nursing, it is generally perceived as being feminine, associated with weakness, powerlessness, dependence and lacking in knowledge. Several studies reveal that the image of nursing influences recruitment to nursing. Beck (2000), Stevens and Walker (1993), and Wilson and Mitchell (1999) suggest that a positive image of nursing attracts applicants.

Social impact theory (Latané, 1981) proposes that the likelihood that one will respond to social influence is dependent on how important the influencing group is to you (strength), how close the group is to you (whether in space or time) during the attempt to influence you (immediacy) and how many people are in the group (number). In this study we found that important individuals such as career teachers and groups such as peer groups had a strong influence on these pupils. These individuals and groups were close in both space and time and their views had a strong immediacy effect. This combined with relatively large numbers of similar students and teachers who expressed the same views on nursing as a career was a potent combination.

Conclusion

We are constantly reminded that the current shortages in young people who are pursuing nursing as a career and those who are leaving the profession has major implications for the health of the nation (Couch, 2003). Mitchell (2003) supports this view when stating that the threat and harm to patients due to the nursing shortage is of grave concern. While increases in numbers of nurses has been the focus of policy attention, there is little dispute that the fundamental objective in increasing the number of NHS nurses, and thus reducing the shortages, is to improve the provision of care.

The sustainability of the development of the profession is linked to school pupils not pursuing nursing as a career choice. Based on projected nursing shortage statistics, there is an immediate need for a call to action to protect and support the nursing profession. An adequate supply of skilled professional nurses, including nurses who have the potential to practice at advanced levels, must be assured to maintain a high quality health care system. If trends continue the pipeline of new students will not be adequate to fill this void. Although retaining registered nurses is of paramount importance, it must be complimented by successful recruitment of the next generation of nurses. Many strategies are currently needed to ad-

dress a shortage of high quality entrants that may impact on health care quality. Many believe that recruitment initiatives need to focus predominantly on attracting more young people particularly school leavers into the nursing profession (Jackson and Daly, 2004). One strategy is to increase the interest of school leavers in the profession of nursing. The 5th and 6th year school pupils' perceptions of nursing as a career choice, revealed within the narrative of the paradigmatic cases, have offered important clues toward trying to recruit the next generation of nurses. Engaging with the school pupils to ensure that they have an up to date view of the many facets of modern day nursing and consequently changing the enduring stereotypical images of nursing. Also ensuring that careers advisors' as well as guidance teachers' information and knowledge is current regarding the education level, role and career opportunities of the modern day nurse. Contemporary nursing also needs to promote the academic and cognitive component of patient care delivery. In addition qualified nurses have much to contribute and must take responsibility for improving the image of nursing through talking with people and acting as a positive role model.

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 Scotland, England and Wales where recruitment of school leavers into nursing appears to be problematic. The findings may not transfer to other countries where nursing still remains a popular career choice, for example Northern Ireland and Eire.

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