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The research-teaching nexus and academic identities in Portuguese nurse education (0072)

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The purpose of this paper is to highlight the way the academic identities of Portuguese nursing lecturers are engaged in research, by presenting and discussing a research study carried out in a Polytechnic Institute.

To discuss and analyse RT nexus in occupations like nursing, implies incorporation of history and local and cultural features framing professional purposes and debates. Accordingly, the paper addresses an ecological approach to academic identity (Lopes, 2009). Ecological academic identities come from the interaction between the biographical background of the individuals and their contexts. The context is conceived as systemic – it is organised in different subsystems from micro to macro system, each one interacting with all the others – and socio-historical – in discussion, nursing lecturers express their perspectives on their work, which rely on social representations they share about nursing and nurses, and other social groups and objects, such as “being a lecturer in higher education”. As recognition is at the centre of professional identity construction, lecturers’ professional recognition comes mainly from their social representations of professional knowledge.

Because of this conceptual framework and the objectives of this symposium - to develop a shared research-based understanding of the RT nexus across institutional and cultural boundaries – information must be given on the ecological context of Portuguese nursing lecturers. Throughout recent decades, Portuguese nursing has undergone a strong process of professionalization (Pereira, 2006; Lopes, 2006). Since 1965, it has been controlled by nurses, with nurse education and training institutions extensively conducted by (former) nurses. After the democratic revolution in 1974, applications to nurse education programmes increased due to the improvement in nurse education and the work conditions for nurses. During the 1990s, nurse education improved with the identification of specific nursing concepts and interventions. In 1996, the Law on Professional Nurse Work allowed for nursing autonomy, giving place to the creation of the Portuguese Nursing Board. According to Pereira (2006) nurse education has had an important role in this professional movement, notably offering specific frameworks of intelligibility (Abreu, 2001), which are based on caring, framed by a ‘biopsychosocial’ paradigm, as opposed to a ‘biomedical’ one (N. Lopes, 2001).

Nurse education was included in higher education system in 1988. As the Portuguese higher education system is binary, nurse education takes place either in universities or in polytechnic institutes, but it can also take place independent of polytechnic institutes and universities. Polytechnic institutes and universities have a different history related to research and courses for graduation. In 1991, the first nursing master’s courses were launched, and in 2003 the first PhDs in Nursing were completed, but they were developed in universities. Since 2007, Polytechnics offer master’s courses but not doctoral programmes. The master’s degree has traditionally been the higher degree obtained by lecturers in polytechnic institutes. However, after higher education rearrangements in 2006, lecturers at polytechnic institutes have been pushed to have doctoral degrees, developed research projects, and published research.

In this empirical study, a semi structured interview was conducted with fourteen nursing lecturers in a Polytechnic institute: 8 female and 6 male, with between 3 and 37 years of experience within higher education posts, all of them with professional experience as nurses. Keeping in mind the main objectives of the research, some aspects were intentionally solicited: lecturers were prompted to discuss their pathway and induction into their higher education role, and their experience of the nurse educator role, including the place of research within it. A qualitative data analysis was carried out, leading to three core sources of meaning: educating nursing students, nurse education and nursing, and nurse educators' roles.

Educating nursing students

Lecturers mainly define themselves as educators. They feel like they are a special kind of lecturer in higher education due to the professional nature of initial education.

Nurse education and nursing

They give major importance to practice in professional education. They feel they need to be updated about current challenges in the workplace, and also to maintain their own credibility as nurses. As nurse educators and nurses, they are committed to the empowerment of nursing as a professional body through nurse education.

Nurse educators' roles

Research justifies their role as nurse educators in higher education, but the major purpose of the research they develop is to give up-to-date classes and to progress in their academic careers. They wish to improve their ability to publish, but they feel difficulties in dealing with demands for published research and workload intensification.

They consider professional knowledge to include caring, specific instrumental procedures, content knowledge, and reflection. From this standpoint, they also share a specific, even if underdeveloped, type of professional research that leads to knowledge construction, which is roughly defined as reflection, and connects with the education of students.

Some main questions must be highlighted from these findings. The professional nature of nurse higher education appears to be unavoidable. Nurse education and lecturers' academic identities positively rely on practice and practical knowledge, which meanwhile is critical and not instrumental. Beyond the research that they are compelled to do, they share an original meaning of research, which relates with teaching and nursing. If the way they currently relate research and teaching matches the RT nexus 'research led' model (Healy and Jenkins, 2006) that is teacher and content focused, they have embryonic conditions to develop a professional kind of RT nexus, which may articulate student learning and lecturers' academic development through shared research.

A last word on the ecological aspects of these findings, which can be related not only with the professionalization of nursing in Portugal and the place nurse education has within it, but also with the specific course and institution under study.

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