




ORIGINAL

## Paths taken by future nurses for supplementary training in mental health

Caminhos percorridos pelos futuros enfermeiros para formação complementar em saúde mental

Caminos recorridos por los futuros enfermeros en la búsqueda de formación complementaria en salud mental


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### ABSTRACT

**Objective:** To describe the paths taken by future nurse in the search for supplementary training in mental health.

**Methods:** A descriptive-exploratory study with a qualitative approach, conducted with 36 students between September 2020 to May 2021 through a semi-structured interview and using WhatsApp® as technological resource. The findings were analyzed in the light of Bardin's Content Analysis technique and discussed against the scientific literature on the theme. **Results:** The need to complement and improve training in mental health is due to the limited hour load of the academic discipline, to superficial contents, and to few practical activities in the mental health services. The search is also the result of affinity with the area and of the wish to undergo the specialization to work in the field of mental health. The most used strategies are academic leagues, extension projects, scientific initiation and participation in study groups. **Final Considerations:** Although they represent spaces of protagonism for the students, the search for supplementary activities reveals the fragility of the training in the academic disciplines and that this strategy is only chosen by the students who have an affinity with the field.

**Descriptors:** Nursing Education. Education, Higher. Teaching. Mental Health. Psychiatric Nursing.

### RESUMO

**Objetivo:** Descrever os caminhos percorridos pelos futuros enfermeiros na busca por complementar a formação em saúde mental. **Métodos:** Estudo descritivo-exploratório, com abordagem qualitativa, realizado de setembro de 2020 a maio de 2021, com 36 estudantes, por meio de entrevista semiestruturada, utilizando como recurso tecnológico o aplicativo WhatsApp®. Os achados foram analisados à luz da técnica de Análise de Conteúdo de Bardin e discutidos com a literatura científica sobre a temática. **Resultados:** A necessidade de complementação e aperfeiçoamento na formação em saúde mental acontece devido a disciplina ter pouca carga horária, conteúdos superficiais e poucas atividades práticas nos serviços de saúde mental. A busca também se dá pela afinidade com a área e o desejo de especializar para trabalhar no campo da saúde mental. As estratégias mais utilizadas são ligas acadêmicas, projetos de extensão, iniciação científica e participação em grupos de estudos. **Considerações Finais:** Embora configurem espaços de protagonismo para os estudantes, a busca por atividades complementares revela a fragilidade da formação nas disciplinas e que essa estratégia é escolhida apenas pelos estudantes que possuem afinidade com o campo de atuação.

**Descritores:** Educação em Enfermagem. Educação Superior. Ensino. Saúde Mental. Enfermagem Psiquiátrica.

### RESUMÉN

**Objetivo:** Describir los caminos recorridos por los futuros enfermeros que pretenden complementar su formación en salud mental. **Métodos:** Estudio descriptivo-exploratorio de enfoque cualitativo, realizado entre septiembre de 2020 y mayo de 2021 con 36 estudiantes por medio de entrevistas semiestructuradas, utilizando como la aplicación WhatsApp® como recurso tecnológico. Los hallazgos se analizaron sobre la base de la técnica de Análisis de Contenido de Bardin y se los analizó en función de la literatura científica sobre la temática. **Resultados:** La necesidad de complementar y perfeccionar la formación en salud mental se debe a que la carga horaria de la disciplina académica es insuficiente, a contenidos superficiales y la escasa cantidad de actividades prácticas en los servicios de salud mental. La búsqueda también responde a la afinidad con el área y al deseo de especializarse para trabajar en el campo de la salud mental. Las estrategias más utilizadas son ligas académicas, proyectos de extensión, iniciación científica y participación en grupos de estudio. **Consideraciones Finales:** Aunque representen espacios de protagonismo para los estudiantes, la búsqueda de actividades complementarias revela la fragilidad de la formación en las disciplinas académicas y solamente los estudiantes que posee cierta afinidad con el campo de desempeño profesional eligen esta estrategia.

**Descritores:** Educación en Enfermería. Educación Superior. Docencia. Salud Mental. Enfermería Psiquiátrica.

## INTRODUCTION

The National Curriculum Guidelines for the Nursing Course (*Diretrizes Curriculares Nacionais para o Curso de Enfermagem*, DCN/ENF) foresee the training of generalist, humanistic, critical and reflective nurses who are qualified to practice their profession and can respond to health problems, considering the bio-psycho-sociocultural dimensions.<sup>(1)</sup> In these guidelines, competencies and skills are presented, which should be developed throughout the training and direct the structure of the courses, through corresponding content, internship offers and supplementary activities that should be contemplated and stimulated with the students' participation.<sup>(1-2)</sup>

The guidelines indicate that Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) should devise mechanisms to take advantage of the knowledge developed by the students through independent practices, encouraging them to seek to improve their knowledge and skills through these supplementary activities, important for the professional development of future nurses.<sup>(1,3)</sup>

Several supplementary activities can be offered. Usually organized by knowledge areas, they can be of the "teaching" type (tutoring, internships, courses), of the "research" type (Scientific Initiation, research groups, academic and scientific events), or of the "extension" (community extension projects and academic leagues) or "assistance" (extracurricular internships in health services) types.<sup>(4)</sup>

The students' search for these supplementary activities is voluntary and independent, and is related to different personal and academic aspects. In the health area, the most searched are extension projects in different services; scientific initiation and participation in research groups; participation in scientific events, such as congresses, seminars, symposiums and meetings; and tutoring in academic disciplines.<sup>(5)</sup>

There is no fixed rule for this choice, although it is believed that the students are intrinsically motivated to participate in a given activity. However, most of the students seek these activities as a way to supplement their training in a specific area that needs more knowledge, to the detriment of the limited space for learning and discussion within the undergraduate course itself.<sup>(2,5)</sup>

Knowing that, in recent years, training in mental health in undergraduate Nursing courses has been facing changes and also presents limitations due to the curricular structure and faced obstacles that, from the pedagogical point of view, are weakening teaching in mental health, it becomes important to know which strategies are used by the students to supplement their training and maintain quality in the professional development of future nurses.<sup>(6)</sup>

Thus, this study sought to answer the following questions: What leads Nursing students to seek supplementary training in mental health? Which paths do they take to achieve this supplementary training? Consequently, the objective of this paper is to describe the paths taken by future nurses to seek supplementary training in mental health.

## METHODS

A descriptive-exploratory study, with a qualitative approach<sup>(7)</sup> and anchored in the theoretical and methodological grounds of Content Analysis.<sup>(8)</sup> To confer greater methodological rigor in developing and writing this study, the guidelines described in the *Consolidated Criteria For Reporting Qualitative Research* (COREQ) were followed.<sup>(9)</sup>

The study locus was capital city Maceió, located in northeastern Brazil, with six different Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) that offer undergraduate Nursing degrees and which authorized their teaching through a form signed by the course coordinator or the person immediately responsible.

The population of this study comprised students attending the higher-level Nursing course. The students included were those attending the last undergraduate year, excluding those who had not finished the Mental Health academic discipline. By means of the snowball technique, the students were invited through contact with the class representative, who received the research information and indicated students that could contribute. Sampling was determined by the saturation technique,<sup>(10)</sup> in which inclusion of other participants ends when the findings become repetitive, with a total of 36 students comprising the final sample of the study.

Data production was from September 2020 to May 2021, using the semi-structured interview technique, with a semi-structured script containing 12 questions referring to the training process in mental health. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the interviews took place at a distance through *WhatsApp*®, at previously scheduled dates and times. The interviews were audio-recorded and lasted a mean of 43 minutes.

The data produced were transcribed to Microsoft Word® by three authors, submitted to the Content Analysis technique proposed by Bardin<sup>(8)</sup>, in three stages, and then reviewed by the other three authors of the study. In the first stage (pre-analysis), the first three authors skimmed the interviews to get familiar with the perceptions and to create the first categories. In the second stage (exploration of the material), the speeches were broken down, organized and systematized into subcategories. In the third stage (data treatment and interpretation), the main categories were defined and the data were interpreted. Two categories emerged in this process, which were presented in the results and discussed against the national and international literature on the theme.

The participants were presented the research objectives and asked to participate by signing the Free and Informed Consent Form (FICF), which was sent via email. The codes "Student 1" to "Student 36" were assigned to preserve anonymity.

The study was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the Ribeirão Preto Nursing School at the University of São Paulo (EERP/USP) under CAAE No. 30463520.1.0000.5393 and approval opinion numbers 4,075,817, 4,162,591 and 4,290,870 in 2020, according to the ethical principles set forth in Resolution No. 510/2016/CNS, and was carried out with the support of the Coordination for the

## RESULTS

### Need to supplement knowledge and skills

Different paths lead Nursing students to decide supplementing their training in mental health during their undergraduate studies. The first refers to the eminent need to supplement knowledge and skills for the area in question, as they were worked on in general terms during the classes.

*To tell you the truth, I took part in some conferences on mental health held in other schools, to know a little more, because I thought that what we learn in the classroom with the teacher is quite superficial. It's not that the teacher didn't teach the class right, but I felt the need to seek more, you know? (Student 2)*

It was evident in the students' speech that most of the contents dealt with psychopathologies, and they consider that others should have had more emphasis, such as the Psychosocial Rehabilitation process itself or the actions and tools developed to promote Nursing care for people with mental disorders or in mental distress.

*I think that the discipline was too centered on the disease. It dealt a lot with the disorders. The whole discipline devoted to that, right? At the beginning, it dealt with the reform, the CAPS [Centro de Atenção Psicossocial], but not well-explored. Then I saw that there was going to be a mental health congress here and I signed up [...] there I had the opportunity to know more, because many professionals from the CAPS spoke, talked about work, and that helped me understand more (Student 20)*

Thus, the students chose to participate in scientific events such as lectures, seminars, symposiums, meetings, conferences and congresses, with the intention of getting to know a little more about the work developed in the services.

*It was in the Nursing conference [...] there was a nurse from the CAPS who explained how reinsertion work is, mental rehabilitation [...] and I could understand better, because it was not so clear to me during the discipline (Student 27)*

The second path that leads future nurses to seek to complement their training is related to the development of the necessary professional skills to work in mental health services. The students report that the academic disciplines provided little or no practice in mental health services, such as a Psychosocial Care Center (*Centro de Atenção Psicossocial*, CAPS).

*I joined the mental health league so I could go to the field, right? Even so, I didn't have a single practice in the CAPS during the discipline. Not one! [...] The whole discipline was theoretical. Then in the league, I went to the CAPS a few times and could do some activities there with the users. I also participated in the therapeutic groups there with*

Even with all the activities in classrooms and contact with some services, the students considered it insufficient to be confident in the care actions and practices. Thus, they look for programs, extension projects or academic leagues to insert themselves in the service scenarios, in order to practice skills such as welcoming, qualified listening and therapeutic groups, among others.

*I took part in an extension project there from the [name of the University] and we went to the CAPS and were able to talk with the users. I was able to do welcoming with them, with the family members. The active listening issue, right? It was very useful indeed. A whole lot more than the discipline's practices. Because in the discipline we go two or three times and the teacher is their evaluating and organizing everything, and we don't feel so much at ease like that, I think (Student 29)*

### Affinity with the performance area and professional perspective

In this second category, another two paths that lead Nursing students to decide supplementing training in mental health are presented. The first is related to the students' own affinity with the performance field.

*I'm in a research group there at [name of the University], related to mental health. We discuss the [psychiatric] reform a lot there, about Nursing care, the professionals. There are students, the teacher and professionals from the services in the group. I chose it because I like the mental health area, right? [...] (Student 33)*

The students report that they were delighted with the professional area, the work process and everything that was studied, practiced and developed, awakening their interest in continuing to improve their knowledge and to go deeper, specializing in some of the area's more specific topics, which led them to participate in research groups, perform scientific initiation, produce papers and speak at scientific events.

*My [scientific] initiation project is on suicide, right? It's a mental health area that I really liked when I saw the discipline. It's only that the discipline was really superficial [...] now with my supervisor I'm getting to know more, study more, you know?, in research. My CCP [Course Conclusion Paper] is also going to be on suicide (Student 17)*

The second aspect presented in this category and which leads students to seek improving their knowledge and skills is related to the possibility of working in the field of mental health. The students express their wish to work in services such as the CAPS or other from the health network, in the care and assistance provided to people with mental disorders.

*I see mental health as a work opportunity. I want to work in mental health care. Then the more I specialize, the more prepared I will be, isn't it so?*



*I'm thinking of doing a specialization in mental health when I finish college, to qualify myself even more and this will be good when I go looking for jobs in the services (Student 8)*

The students see this performance field as an opportunity to enter the labor market as qualified professionals for mental health care.

*I think that there's room to work in the CAPS [...] so I do want to work in CAPS. First because I like the area and also because I see that there are vacancies. Mainly if you're well-prepared, right? Because when I was studying I saw that most of the professionals are not so well prepared. Then, if I prepare as I should I get a job there [...] (Student 9)*

## DISCUSSION

For the DCN/ENF, performing supplementary activities should be a natural and expected movement on the part of the students, as it is foreseen in the pedagogical projects that a minimum of 10% of the course hour load is devoted to this purpose.<sup>(1)</sup> Although there are different strategies and mechanisms recognized as supplementary activities, some structural points related to the offer by the institutions must be considered, such as the following: availability of teaching staff or professionals to conduct them; physical structure; partnership with public and private agencies to offer them in the different scenarios; and strategic planning.<sup>(2,3)</sup>

The individuals interviewed in this study reported that the search for the extracurricular activities took place independently. However, it should be considered that this search is influenced by aspects such as the following: viability in their academic, personal and work routines; availability to participate in the actions and practices (when they are offered) in the scenarios proposed; financial resources spent for participation or scholarships for assistance to pay the costs; periodicity of the activity and time for its conclusion; in addition to other issues that are personal determinants for each student to perform and remain in the activities.<sup>(3,4)</sup>

Regarding the extracurricular activities in mental health, it is noticed that the students' search is primarily focused on the fragility of teaching.<sup>(13)</sup> An integrative review of different qualitative studies conducted with Nursing students points out limitations and challenges to offer good quality training for the area in question.<sup>(5)</sup> Academic disciplines with insufficient hour loads, superficial content, little or no practice in the services and professors with limited training or experience in the area are some of the reasons that lead students to seek supplementary training.<sup>(11)</sup>

The first paths taken by the students refer to academic-scientific events. The number of events targeted at the academic population increases as an alternative to disseminate new knowledge and share practices in the mental health area. The students have accepted this alternative because it is easy to put into practice. The students consider it a positive alternative because they are brief, in addition to

Paths taken by future nurses for supplementary.. enabling experiencing other cultures and realities, when they take place in other cities or states.<sup>(12)</sup>

In addition, other paths pointed out in the study were the extension projects and the academic leagues. A number of Brazilian studies<sup>(3,14-15)</sup> point out extension projects and academic leagues as favorable spaces for the development not only of health practices but of a more human professional profile, in the perspective of integrality, in responding to individual, family and collective needs that are found in society, considering the bio-psycho-sociocultural aspects, especially when actions are carried out together with professionals and users of mental health services.

Therefore, through Resolution No. 7 of 2018, the National Education Council (*Conselho Nacional de Educação*, CNE) indicates that the courses' Pedagogical Projects (PPs) should allocate 10% of their hour load to extension activities and that they should be provided for in the curricular matrix. This measure is for the experience and contact with the different scenarios transform the students, so that they become professionals with critical-reflective training.<sup>(16)</sup>

A number of international studies<sup>(17-19)</sup> highlight the importance of encouraging students to search other spaces for training in mental health and to build a professional profile in line with the social reality. These studies also acknowledge the limitations that training presents, impacting on the Nursing assistance provided to people with mental disorders, mainly in the specialized services, which hinders the individuals' recovery process itself.

Other paths pointed out in this study refer to participation in research groups and scientific initiation projects. Students who participate in the process of building science through research become more critical, reflective and resolute professionals.<sup>(18)</sup> This more active development of the students is close to the DCN/ENF, which guides the development of future professionals from the perspective of Permanent Education in Health, being autonomous in their improvement as nurses, and making their practices consistent with the demands of the profession and society.<sup>(1)</sup>

Moreover, it becomes relevant to point out that some students search to supplement their training by awakening the desire to work as nurses in mental health services. Although it is considered a neglected area among the students<sup>(20)</sup>, the future nurses interviewed state that they see an opportunity for professional experience and development in the area, expressing their interest in continuing to specialize academically for the job.

All these issues contribute a double meaning to understand the phenomenon. In the first place, the students are increasingly more active in their training process and always seek improvements for their professional performance. Secondly, even with all the advances in the policy and education sector, the still present weakness of mental health teaching in undergraduate Nursing courses is revealed.

The limitation of this study lies in the fact that it is local research and that it fails to portray a broader reality, representative of other regions. In addition, this study contributes to reflecting on the

elaboration of the mental health curriculum structure, which has led students to choose to supplement their training due to the fragility presented in the teaching of Nursing courses, allowing institutions, managers and professors to transform this reality so that it is one of the strong areas in the training of future nurses.

## CONCLUSION

This study presents the paths taken by future nurses to complement their mental health training during their undergraduate studies, revealing that the most commonly used supplementary activities are community extension projects, academic leagues, scientific initiation, research groups and scientific events.

It was verified that the search for improvement also suggests weaknesses in the training process of these future nurses. The search for supplementation is also due to the students' curiosity to learn more about the field, reflecting their personal desire for professional qualification after graduation and to work in the mental health field.

The students are perceived as active subjects in the search to complement their training, but it is important to highlight that the institutions need to devise mechanisms so that these activities are offered continuously and with good quality.

Furthermore, it is suggested that new studies be carried out with the purpose of favoring a mapping of the supplementary activities related to teaching, research, extension and assistance in the mental health area that are being developed by the institutions, as well as the main extracurricular practices carried out in Brazilian territory.

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