In January 2015, Canadian registered nurse regulators adopted a new licensing examination, the NCLEX-RN. The resulting change in pass rates for new graduates was both applauded and criticized publicly by a number of stakeholders. This commentary examines the challenges presented in the McGillis Hall et al.’s (2017) article, which identified and addressed, in the author’s opinion, only a single viewpoint about the change in the examination and corresponding candidates’ experiences. This oversimplification represents a biased approach to considering the outcomes of the implementation of the new examination in Canada, has led to further misunderstandings by the public and has fuelled unnecessary fear amongst already anxious examination candidates.

Methodology review

In reviewing the article by McGillis Hall et al. (2017), it appeared to the authors that the researchers may have been explicitly looking for criticisms rather than identifying and presenting a multitude of viewpoints about the impact of a new licensing examination in Canada. This opinion comes from the authors’ own experience in which both negative and positive feedbacks from educators, candidates, regulators and others have been expressed in a number of public forums.

‘Qualitative content analysis involves a process designed to condense raw data (i.e.: words, phrases, text) into categories or frameworks based on valid inference and interpretation (Zhand & Wildemuth 2009)’. This process uses inductive reasoning as a foundation for making inferences and interpretation. The difficulties with this methodological choice are that an investigator’s bias may restrict the sampling to only texts that support the theories under investigation. As such, it is the authors’ opinion that the researchers were biased in undertaking their investigation because they used qualitative content analysis.

For instance, the researchers appear to have completely missed key indicators, such as comments from nursing leadership (A. Coghlan, Letter to CASN, December 18, 2015), which offer alternate hypotheses about the resulting change in pass rates and examination candidates’ experiences, such as the variability in educational programme performance, dissemination of misinformation, flaws of the previous examination and the role of the regulator in public protection.

What appears to be incomplete work by the investigators related to developing grounded analytical frameworks is evident in the manner in which the investigators present the contextual comments retrieved from media articles when educators and regulators held contrasting positions about the examination. This flaw in the researcher’s findings is, in fact, reinforcing the belief that there is incongruence between the Canadian nursing curriculum and the new licensing examination.

In an attempt to confirm the findings of McGillis Hall et al. (2017), the authors reviewed all the media articles, including reader comments, cited by the investigators in their reference section, thus ensuring identical text for comparison. This comparison resulted in the identification of many public comments not mentioned by McGillis Hall et al. (2017). It is the authors’ opinion that these public comments represented a contrary viewpoint to the criticisms reported by McGillis Hall et al. (2017).

As such, we have concluded that either the research is inadequate or the investigators rejected the contrary views because they did not conform to their pre-determined outcome. This should cause the reader to question the thoroughness of the grounded research that informed the development of researchers’ analysis and to question the credibility and reliability of the researchers’ conclusions as the full discourse related to the aim of this study was inappropriately restricted.

The result of the researchers’ inappropriate analysis methodology, as described throughout this commentary, has ensured that misinformation continues to, and as one reader of Canadian media stated, ‘demonstrates how misinformed stakeholders are regarding the NCLEX which dangerously propagates to nursing students to create nothing but confusion’ (Medves 2015). By being unaware of, or ignoring, their own personal biases, the researchers base their discussion and the policy
implications on data gathered to reach a pre-determined conclusion (proof texting) rather than letting the data lead them to a valid, reliable evidenced-based conclusion (science).

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