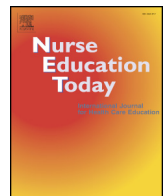




Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Nurse Education Today

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/nedt

Ethical principles in the work of nurse educator—A cross-sectional study☆

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Accepted 1 July 2015
Available online xxxx

Keywords:
Ethics
Nursing education
Nursing student
Nurse education

ABSTRACT

Background: The application of ethical principles within the teaching profession and nursing practice forms the core of the nurse educator's professional ethics. However, research focusing on the professional ethics of nurse educators is scarce.

Objectives: To describe ethical principles and issues relating to the work of nurse educators from the perspectives of both nurse educators themselves and nursing students.

Design: A descriptive study using cross-sectional data and content analysis.

Settings: Nursing education program involving students from nine polytechnics in Finland.

Participants: Nursing students (n = 202) and nurse educators (n = 342).

Methods: Data were derived from an online survey, with two open-ended questions: Nursing students and nurse educators were asked to name the three main ethical principles that guide the work of nurse educators and also to describe ethical issues involved in the work.

Results: Students most often named professionalism, justice, and equality as the main ethical principles for a nurse educator. Nurse educators considered justice, equality, and honesty as the main ethical principles. The content analysis showed that professionalism and the relationship between educator and student were the key categories for ethical issues as perceived by nursing students. Nursing students most often identified inequality between the nurse educator and nursing student as the ethical issue faced by the nurse educator.

Conclusions: Nursing students and nurse educators differed somewhat both in their views of the ethical principles guiding an educator's work and in the ethical issues arising in the work.

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Introduction

Education is a highly contextual, multidimensional, intellectual, moral, artistic, spiritual, and relation-based profession (Ontario College of Teachers, 2012) in which ethics play a central role (Vanlaere and Gastmans, 2007; Kalb and O'Conner-Von, 2007). An ethically competent educator is expected to be responsible, honest, and fair. The educator evaluates his/her own actions and performance regularly and also participates in continuing education to improve his/her own competence. Ethical teaching demands the educator to act according to ethical principles and values. Reflecting on ethical teaching improves a nurse educator's capacity to identify and analyze ethical issues and to analyze the congruence between their ethical beliefs and their lived actions in teaching (Smith and Goldblatt, 2007). An

educator's ability to self-evaluate is also highlighted in the revised Code of Ethics for nurse educators (Rosenkoetter and Milstead, 2010). Ethics are important for nursing students for two reasons: It is a nurse educator's responsibility to teach ethical competence to students, while the nurse educator's own behavior toward students must likewise be ethical (Lewenson et al., 2005). An ethically competent educator respects students' privacy (Janhonen and Sarja, 2005) and has a respectful and trustful relationship with students (Gillespie, 2005; Klunklin et al., 2011).

Background

Learning and applying ethical principles within the teaching profession and nursing practice are at the core of a nurse educator's professional ethics (Davis et al., 2005; Smith and Goldblatt, 2007). The guiding principles that underpin teaching are humanity, parity, sharing, courage, and partnership (Finland's Ministry of Education, 2006). A nurse educator's ethical principles inform how the nurse educator relates to him/herself, to students, to colleagues, to teaching and nursing expertise, and to society. Nurse educators need to

☆ Conflict of interest: None of the authors have personal or financial relationships that influence the study.

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respect a student's rights, deal with the student humanely and fairly, and not accept abuse from other people (Viverais-Dresler and Kutschke, 2001); they need to try to understand the student's principles, thinking, and opinions; they should cooperate with colleagues and accept the principles of individuality and reciprocal support; they need to be committed to work and its norms and professional ethics; they also need to look after him/herself and develop their pedagogical skills (Caldwell et al., 2010; ANA, 2011). Rosenkoetter and Milstead (2010) have described a list of ethical codes for nurse educators. The list emphasizes that nurse educators exercise responsibility, accountability, and advocacy on behalf of the students; when applied, these promote academic and professional values and demonstrate respect for students and colleagues as individual contributors to the profession and greater society.

Distinguishing between professional and ethical issues in a nurse educator's work is often difficult (Lyndaker, 1992). Indeed, high professionalism has itself been described as an important ethical value among nurse educators (Rosenkoetter and Milstead, 2010). Unprofessional behavior, lack of respect, or blaming are among the major ethical issues that a nurse educator will face in their work and can lead to mental stress, lack of collegiality, de-motivation, and diminished educational quality (Yildirim et al., 2007).

As a basic practice, a nurse educator facilitates and guides the learning of students in order to ensure the quality of teaching nursing education and to encourage professional nursing practice. In addition to these, he/she needs to have skills to identify ethical issues and the courage and will to discuss these issues with students (Friman, 2004). However, research focused on the professional ethics of nurse educators has been scarce (Haigh and Johnson, 2007; Numminen et al., 2009a, 2009b; Salminen et al., 2013), while the need for more research on ethical issues in nursing education has also been recognized (Fowler and Davis, 2013).

The work environment of educators is multidimensional. Educators cooperate with their colleagues and mentors as well as with nursing leaders working in health care organizations. That collegiality is not always fulfilling. Educators may sometimes envy each other for different reasons, and this can lead to inappropriate behavior (Holopainen et al., 2007). Moreover, mentors working as supervisors for nursing students can feel that they are not valued by educators and may not even get to meet educators for discussions (Salminen et al., 2013). The educator is seen as an ethical pioneer and role-model for all students (Lumpkin, 2008; Kim, 2013).

In Finland, the qualifications required to be a nurse educator (defined in this study as an educator teaching in nursing education) are a master's degree, pedagogical competence, and a minimum of 3 years' work experience in the health or nursing care field. Finnish nurse educators are responsible for teaching theoretical and clinical nursing care and have close contact with nursing students. While some countries have separate ethical guidelines for nurse educators (Rosenkoetter and Milstead, 2010), Finland has no specific ethical guidelines. Rather, Finnish nurse educators follow the general ethical principles for all teachers.

The purpose of this study is to describe nurse educators' ethical principles and the ethical issues they face in their work and to consider these from both the perspective of nursing students and the nurse educators themselves. The research questions are: 1) What ethical principles guide the work of nurse educators? and 2) What ethical issues do nurse educators face in their work?

This research opens a new aspect in the exploration of nurse educators' ethics. Namely, nursing students are in a key position to describe the ethical actions and performance of nurse educators. This research fills the gap in knowledge regarding nurse educator's ethics and their ethical behavior. An underlying goal of this research is to stimulate ethical discussion in nursing education and to develop interventions to support nurse educators' ethical competence and to develop nurse educator training.

Methods

A descriptive design using cross-sectional data was implemented. The total sample of nurse educators (N = 765) was drawn from all polytechnics (n = 25) in Finland. A pilot survey was conducted with educators (n = 25) and nursing students (n = 20) from one of these polytechnics, though data from the pilot are excluded from the analyses. Altogether, 740 nurse educators were asked to participate in the study. The nursing student sample was formulated with cluster sampling by selecting nine polytechnics of differing size from different geographical areas of Finland. All nursing students studying in their final semester (N = 1241) in these polytechnics were asked to participate in the study.

Data Collection

The data were collected through online surveys. Two open-ended questions asked the nursing students and nurse educators to name the three main ethical principles that guide the nurse educators' work and to describe the ethical issues involved in that work. In the instructions that accompanied the survey, an ethical principle was defined as a "fundamental truth or doctrine that is the source of inspiration or direction for moral action, or used as the starting point for moral reasoning" (Thompson et al., 2000, p. 13), while an ethical issue was defined as a value conflict between two or more values (Thompson et al., 2000, p. 7).

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed (RM, JR) using inductive content analysis to identify and classify categories based on the manifest content (Graneheim and Lundman, 2004). Individual words and phrases formed the units of analysis. The purpose of the study was used to identify relevant content, and so the text was separated into content units (Graneheim and Lundman, 2004). Frequently occurring content units were condensed into content areas and given a coded name. Codes were then combined into subcategories, and the subcategories combined into main categories. During the analysis, continuous comparisons between the original text and the identified categories were made in order to ensure semantic similarity between the categories and the original text (Polit and Beck, 2009). Following this, the ethical principles mentioned in the text were categorized according to their content and the instances in the text were quantified. The data analysis was carried out by two researchers and analysis process and the resulting categories were discussed in the research group and a consensus was achieved.

Ethical Considerations

Good scientific practice was followed in this study (TENK, 2012; Pauwels, 2007), and the research was carried out in accordance with the instructions of Finland's National Advisory Board on Social Welfare and Health Care Ethics (TENK, 2012). Permission to conduct the study was obtained from the polytechnics in line with their ethical protocols. Each potential study participant received written information about the purpose of the study and about the commitment to confidentiality and anonymity. Based on the information provided, each participant made a voluntary decision to participate in the research. Responding to the survey was understood as informed consent.

Results

Participants

The mean age of nurse educators (n = 342, response rate 46%) was 50 years (range 27–64, SD 7.7). The vast majority (97%, n = 331) were female. Professional education included education as a registered nurse (84%, n = 282), public health nurse (25%, n = 82), or midwife (10%,

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