

Social Justice in Health System; a Neglected Component of Academic Nursing Education: A Qualitative Study

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Research article

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Abstract

Background : In recent decades, increasing social and health inequalities all over the world has highlighted the importance of social justice as a core nursing value. Therefore, proper education of nursing students is necessary for preparing them to comply with social justice in health systems. This study is aimed to identify the effective factors in teaching the concept of social justice in the nursing curriculum. **Method :** This is a qualitative study, in which the conventional content analysis approach was employed to analyze a sample of 13 participants selected using purposive sampling method. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to collect and analyze the data. **Results :** Analysis of the interviews indicated that insufficient education content, incompetency of educators, and inappropriate education approaches made social justice a neglected component in the academic nursing education. These factors were the main themes of the study and showed the negligence of social justice in academic nursing education. **Conclusion :** Research findings revealed the weaknesses in teaching the concept of social justice in the nursing education. Accordingly, it is necessary to modify the content of nursing curriculum and education approaches in order to convey this core value. Since nursing educators act as role models for students, especially in practical and ethical areas, more attention should be paid to competency of nursing educators.

Introduction

Professional values include “action standards that are accepted by group members and provide a framework for evaluating beliefs and notions affecting behavior” [1]. The acquisition of professional nursing values is a prerequisite to professional development; it leads to service quality improvement and increases satisfaction of patients and nurses [2]. The core values accepted and presented by the American Association of Colleges of Nursing (AACN) (1998) include human dignity, integrity, autonomy, altruism, and social justice[3], out of which social justice has attracted more attention in recent years. Disproportionate burden of diseases and deaths in parts of society associated with environmental and socioeconomic factors has been recognized for decades; however, the number of documents on these issues has increased dramatically over the past 15 years [4]. The WHO Commission on Social Determinants of Health attributes these differences to social inequalities in the distribution of power, income, shelter, education, and healthcare as well as climate change, vulnerability, and other life conditions. It also prioritizes social justice as a mechanism for correcting and eliminating inequalities [5]. Social justice in the health system refers to the provision of equal healthcare for all individuals, regardless of their personal characteristics[6]. The AACN defines social justice as fair treatment, regardless of one’s economic status, race, ethnicity, age, citizenship, disability, or sexual orientation[7].

Although social justice has been identified as a professional value in documents issued by reputable nursing associations such as the International Council of Nurses (ICN), the Canadian Nurses Association (CNA), the American Nurses Association (ANA), and the AACN [8], the discussion of social justice in nursing profession has always been accompanied with serious doubts and concerns [9]. In addition,

nurses' responses to social injustice have not always been admirable, and nursing profession's poor performance originates from various factors such as unawareness[10].

The development of a professional value such as social justice is a continuous and long-term process that begins with professional nursing education and continues throughout years of nursing practice [11]. Studies conducted by Schank *et al.* (1996 and 2001) indicate that education plays a key role in acquiring professional values[11, 12]. Students, educators, faculties, clinical and educational experiences, and individual values are among the most important components of learning and development of professional values [13]. It is very important to train highly skilled and qualified nurses to provide necessary care to heterogeneous populations in today's ever-changing demographic prospect [14]. To institutionalize the concept of social justice in nursing students, especially in developed countries, measures have been taken in the area of education such as modifications made to nursing curriculum and education approaches [15]. For instance, simulation is a one of new methods utilized for teaching this concept[16]. Since the mid-2000s, there has been an increase in tendency towards online learning[17], co-curricular experiences[18], and digital storytelling [19] to promote students' understanding of social justice issues. Nevertheless, some studies have addressed the weaknesses of nursing curriculum in teaching social justice [20, 21] and have attributed nurses' inability to pursue social justice to their poor scientific and practical competencies [22]. Although several quantitative and qualitative studies have been conducted in recent decades to institutionalize the concept of social justice in nursing graduates[23-26], academic nursing education has unfortunately failed to train competent nurses seeking social justice. Given the importance of the subject, a qualitative approach [27] was adopted to provide us with an in-depth understanding of social justice based on the realistic results derived from the participants' real experiences. Therefore, this study analyzed the experiences of nursing educators and students to identify the effective factors of teaching the concept of social justice in nursing education programe.

Research Method

Research Design and Environment

The conventional content analysis method was in this qualitative study conducted in 2019 at hospitals, faculties located in the cities of Urmia, Tabriz, and Tehran, Iran.

Data Collection

The participants included 6 men and 7 women with a mean age of 39.07 ± 12.92 years old and a mean work experience of 20.00 ± 7.22 years. Out of all participants, 5 individuals had PhDs, whereas 2 individuals had master degrees, and the rest had bachelor degrees in nursing. In total, 7 individuals were faculty members, whereas 2 individuals were clinical nurses, and 4 individuals were nursing students (Table 1). The data were collected using in-depth semi-structured interviews conducted at times and places selected by the participants (mainly at nursing faculties). Each interview lasted 30-90 minutes. The participants were asked questions about their experiences of (learning/teaching) social justice issues. Considering the abstract nature of the research subject, the researchers raised more objective

questions. For instance, the educators were asked to “describe their experiences of modification to the curriculum to cover social justice issues”, whereas the students were asked to “describe their experiences of social justice-based practices during internships”. In addition, to better identify factors affecting social justice education in nursing, the educators and students were asked questions such as “Considering your experiences, what factors affected your engagement in social justice in education?” and “How do you describe education approaches adopted by educators to teach social justice?”, respectively. The researchers continued the interviews until the data were completely saturated when no new idea, concept, or theme was derived from the final interviews.

Data Analysis

After data were collected, they were analyzed through the conventional content analysis approach. For this purpose, Grundheim and Lundman’s (2004) method was adopted [28]. In this method, an entire interview is regarded as an analysis unit involving notes that must be analyzed and coded. The researcher listened to the interviews for several times and transcribed the recorded interviews verbatim. The paragraphs, sentences, and words were considered meaning units. A meaning unit is a set of words and sentences that are related to each other in content and are categorized based on their content and context. The texts were reviewed several times to highlight words containing key concepts or meaning units and extract the initial codes. The codes were then reviewed several times in a continuous process from code extraction to labeling. Similar codes were merged, categorized, and labeled, and subcategories were determined. The extracted subcategories were finally compared and merged (if possible) to form the main categories or themes.

Assessment of data accuracy and stability

Guba and Lincoln’s criteria were used to ensure the accuracy and stability of the research data. The credibility of the data was assessed using member-checking and prolonged engagement techniques. The data were also assessed by an external researcher (external checking process). Triangulation method was used to control dependability. In addition, the audit trail method was used to obtain confirmability. In this respect, all research steps, especially the data analysis steps, were recorded in details to help other researchers pursue this work in future. The transferability of the findings was also established by providing a rich description of the research report [27].

Ethical Considerations

The participants were selected after the approval of the Ethics Committee of Urmia University of Medical Sciences and necessary permissions (Code: IR.UMSU.REC.1397.223) were granted. Prior to the interviews, the participants were informed about their anonymity, confidentiality of their information, the research method and objectives, and their right to leave the study at will. The participants also signed informed consent forms.

Results

The classification of interviews showed that three sub-themes of “insufficient educational content”, “limited competency of nursing educators”, and “inappropriate education approaches” led to the emergence of the main theme called “social justice; a neglected component of academic education” (Table 2).

Social Justice; a Neglected Component of Academic Education

Proper education plays a major role in training justice-seeking nurses. Social justice and its importance in healthcare are constituents of the nursing syllabus. More attention given to this issue in practical and objective areas of education by educators can influence students’ thoughts, attitudes, and behavior to pursue justice in health systems. However, Iran’s education system has unfortunately failed to promote justice because of insufficient educational content, limited competency of nursing educators, and inappropriate education approaches.

1. Insufficient Educational Content

The development of a comprehensive nursing curriculum, especially on ethical issues such as social justice, contributes substantially to the preparation of socially and morally conscious nurses who are able to make significant changes in the public health at local, national, and international levels. In this study, the participants highlighted some weaknesses in the existing nursing curriculum content such as inattention to social justice, discontinuity in presenting courses on ethical values, and allocating most nursing courses to medical issues and clinical care.

1.1 Inattention to Social Justice in Nursing Curriculum

Social justice is a core nursing value which plays a significant role in promoting justice by nursing students and nurses; however, according to the participants, it has unfortunately been neglected in existing nursing curriculum. In this regard, one participant stated,

“In the fourth semester, we studied a course on nursing ethics. I think there was no discussion on social justice because I don’t remember anything about this topic” (Participant No. 7).

Regarding the importance of teaching social determinants of health, another participant stated,

“I was not aware of the importance of social issues in health until I participated in a workshop called ‘social justice in health’. It really changed my beliefs and broadened my perspective” (Participant No. 10).

1.2 Discontinuity in Presenting Courses on Ethical Values

Values are major components of the nursing profession. The institutionalization and development of professional values such as social justice contribute significantly to the future of this profession. The few number of courses presented on ethical values and discontinuity in presented courses (for instance, no course on ethical values is provided for postgraduate students) were major items mentioned by the participants. In this regard, one of the participants stated,

“When students are repeatedly reminded about the importance of a value, they will realize its importance, and the value will be institutionalized among them. We partially studied professional values and social justice issues in the fourth semester of our undergraduate courses; however, no similar course was provided for us afterwards during master programs” (Participant No. 5).

1.3 Allocating Most Nursing Courses to Medical Issues and Clinical Care

Diseases and clinical care are among the most fundamental parts of theoretical and practical training provided for nursing students; however, due to the multidimensional nature of the nursing profession, special attention should be given to other dimensions as well. According to the research results, the existing nursing curriculum focuses mainly on transferring knowledge and skills associated with physical and routine care. One participant stated,

“Most of our courses were related to various diseases and nursing care, and educators rarely talked about ethical and legal issues during their lectures” (Participant No.6).

2. **Limited Competency of Nursing Educators**

Educators play an undeniable role in training competent nurses through institutionalizing beliefs and behaviors. Using proper teaching and behavioral approaches, educators can improve students’ critical thinking skills and prepare them to promote justice in health systems. According to the participants, insufficient capacities of nursing educators in teaching social justice issues and inappropriate value perspectives of educators in developing social justice were the main properties of this category.

2.1 Insufficient Capabilities of Educators in Teaching Social Justice issues

Educators must be equipped with sufficient scientific, practical, and ethical capacities in order to effectively institutionalize the concept of social justice in students. According to the participants, nursing educators’ insufficient knowledge and experience of social justice issues make it difficult for them to transfer such knowledge to their students. One participant said,

“When I was a student, I once informed my educator about unjust patient admission procedure in the surgical department, yet my educator recommended me to do what the head nurses would say. I did not see the necessary authority in my educator to establish justice” (Participant No. 11).

2.2 Inappropriate Value Perspectives of Educators in Developing Social Justice

The participants highlighted the important role of nursing educators ethical perspectives in promoting the quality of education and training qualified nurses who would provide services tailored to the needs of society. They also argued that ethical values could help educators establish and expand social justice in health systems. According to the results, most of the educators had undesirable value perspectives on establishing social justice in the area of health. In this respect, participant number 5 stated,

“When a nurse has no right to make any decisions in a healthcare system, what can I say to the student about social justice?” (Participant No. 5).

3. Inappropriate Education Approaches

Education approaches are considered an essential part of the educational structure playing a key role in transferring ethical values such as social justice to students. Given the abstract nature of social justice, choosing the best education approach helps educators resolve complicated problems during teaching in order to institutionalize professional values and beliefs. According to the findings, educators adopt poor education approaches to transfer ethical values such as social justice and self-awareness to students. In this regard, focusing on traditional education approaches and using insufficient affective learning approaches were cited by the participants.

3.1 Focusing on Traditional Education Approaches

Undoubtedly, lecturing is one of the most widely used education approaches; however, this traditional method is very ineffective in teaching abstract concepts such as social justice. According to the participants, educators mostly use lecturing approach to teach social justice issues, and students are rarely involved in the teaching process. One participant argued that educators mainly used teacher-centered approaches in ethical discussions, stating,

“We (the students) had no active role in the professional ethics class. The educator spoke on relevant topics based on availed syllabus and gave some examples of clinical ethical issues. However, I think that educators must discuss social justice issues with students to help them visualize and understand cases of injustice and discuss appropriate reactions in such situations” (Participant No. 13).

3.2 Using Insufficient Affective Learning Approaches

The use of affective learning strategies such as reflective activities and simulations leading to emotional responses play an important role in creating self-reflection and transferring professional knowledge and skills to nursing students. However, based on the participants’ experiences, affective learning approaches are not used effectively and systematically in teaching ethical issues such as social justice. In this regard, one participants stated,

“Since there are too many topics on professional ethics, we (educators) can only convey basic issues to students, and it is difficult for us to adopt other learning strategies such as affective approach” (Participant No. 4).

Discussion

According to the research findings, social justice in a health system is a neglected component of academic nursing education due to factors including insufficient educational content, limited competency

of nursing educators, and inappropriate education approaches. These factors were introduced as the main research themes in this study.

Some weaknesses were observed in the content of nursing curriculum, which is an effective factor in promoting professional nursing values such as social justice, in nursing students. Inattention to the issue of social justice in nursing curriculum has also been mentioned in other studies[14, 21]. Based on the participants' experiences, most nursing courses are allocated to medical issues and clinical care. According to Thurman, clinical specialties received the main focus of nursing curriculum, whereas little attention has been paid to social justice issues[22]. This problem can be attributed to the poor performance of nurses in clinical care. The participants also believed that there were discontinuity in presenting courses on ethical values because the professional ethics course was presented only to undergraduate students. This issue disrupts the proper institutionalization of ethical values such as social justice in nursing students. Frenk *et al.* believe that the preparation of healthcare professionals to address current healthcare inequalities and challenges have been slowed down by obsolete, fragmented, and static curriculum [29]. In addition, Rozendo *et al.* highlighted inconsistencies in presenting social justice-related issues in nursing curricula and argued that there was little material on social justice in postgraduate nursing programs[15].

Nursing educators' competencies also affect social justice issues teaching. In today's rapidly-changing world facing numerous crises, experienced educators play a significant role in training qualified nurses equipped with various skills enabling them to create social developments. Accordingly, Read *et al.* highlighted the critical role of nursing educators in institutionalizing fundamental principles of social justice and health equity in students [30]. According to Ellis, educators should shift nursing students' learning and thinking attitudes from individualism to community-centered frameworks and from tertiary (reactionary) care approaches to primary (preventive) care approaches [31]. However, unfortunately, the research findings indicate that nursing educators are not sufficiently qualified to teach and institutionalize social justice in students. In this regard, educators' insufficient knowledge and experience in teaching social justice issues were highlighted by the participants. Borhani *et al.* found that ethical knowledge of nursing educators determined their students' professional ethics competencies [32]. Gorgulu and Dinc also argued that nursing educators' knowledge and skills were the first and most important factors affecting their success in teaching professional ethics issues[33]. As mentioned by the participants, inappropriate value perspectives of educators in developing social justice was another weakness of nursing educators. The significant impact of educators' perspectives on teaching ethical values such as social justice has also been emphasized by Parandeh *et al.*[34].

Education approaches adopted to present and convey ethical values to students are very important. In this regard, Einhellig discussed the ineffectiveness of traditional approaches such as lecturing in institutionalizing social justice in nursing graduates and outlined the benefits of affective learning approaches [20]. According to the findings, lecturing is the dominant approach used to teach social justice in Iran's nursing faculties, which is an inefficient teaching approach as the research literature suggests. This is probably due to the large number of students and limited time allocated to each

academic course. While cognitive learning approaches rely on principles and concepts, affective learning approaches supports the integration of knowledge with emotions, ethics, attitudes, and personal beliefs [35]. Neumann found that affective education approaches could enhance students' understanding and use of ethical values [36]. Einhellig highlighted to the need for nursing faculties to use various strategies focus on behavior and behavior changes to successfully institutionalize the concept of social justice in nursing graduates[25].

The findings of present study are limited to factors affecting education of social justice in the nursing curriculum in the health system in the culture of Iran. Further studies are required in different cultures.

Conclusion

The research findings provide researchers with an insight into the weaknesses of nursing curricula, educators, and education approaches in social justice development. It seems that more attention must be paid to professional values and social determinants of health in nursing curricula in order to train justice-seeking nurses with a sense of responsibility. Educators play a prominent role in training competent individuals who are aware of and sensitive to social issues and inequalities. It is necessary to change the education approaches adopted by nursing educators to institutionalize the concept of social justice in students. After changing the content of nursing curriculum and applying different education approaches, future studies can focus on the impact of such changes on social developments and social justice promotion.

Abbreviations

WHO: World Health Organization, **AACN:** American Association of Colleges of Nursing , **ICN:** International Council of Nurses , **ANA:** American Nurses Association, **CNA:** Canadian Nurses Association

Declarations

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Authors' contributions

Design: Fariba Hosseinzadegan ,Madineh Jasemi, Hosein Habibzadeh

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Availability of data and materials

The raw data supporting the findings presented in this study will be available from the corresponding author upon request.

Consent for publication

Not applicable.

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

Ethics approval and consent to participate

The participants were selected after the approval of the Ethics Committee of Urmia University of Medical Sciences and necessary permissions (Code: IR.UMSU.REC.1397.223) were granted. Prior to the interviews, the participants were informed about their anonymity, confidentiality of their information, the research method and objectives, and their right to leave the study at will. The participants also signed informed consent forms.

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Tables

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of the Participants

No.	Gender	Age	Education	Work experience	Position	City
1	Male	56	PhD	28	Faculty member	Urmia
2	Male	51	PhD	25	Faculty member	Urmia
3	Male	54	Master degree	28	Faculty member	Urmia
4	Male	47	PhD	24	Faculty member	Tabriz
5	Female	45	PhD	22	Faculty member	Tabriz
6	Male	22	Bachelor degree	N/A	Student	Urmia
7	Female	23	Bachelor degree	N/A	Student	Urmia
8	Female	36	Master degree	10	Faculty member	Urmia
9	Female	47	PhD	11	Faculty member/ Policymaker	Tehran
10	Female	47	Bachelor degree	20	Clinical nurse	Urmia
11	Female	35	Bachelor degree	12	Clinical nurse	Tehran
12	Male	24	Bachelor degree	N/A	Student	Urmia
13	Female	21	Bachelor degree	0	Student	Urmia

Table 2: Categories, Subcategories, and Codes Extracted from the Interview analysis

Core Category	Subcategories (1)	Subcategories (2)	Open Codes
Social justice; a neglected component of academic nursing education	Insufficient educational content	Inattention to the issue of social justice in nursing curriculum	Deficiencies in academic courses provided on nursing ethics Deficiencies in academic courses provided on professional rights Insufficient attention to social determinants of health in education Lack of educational courses on culture-oriented care Insufficient attention to the topic of community-based care
		Discontinuity in presenting courses on ethical values	Presenting ethics course only for bachelor students Failing to present ethics course for nursing students at all levels Failing to adequately repeat the discussed ethical topics presented to nursing students
		Allocating most nursing courses to medical issues and clinical care	Putting unnecessary emphasis on biological health factors Allocating a large number of courses to medical issues Focusing educations on clinical care
	Limited competency of educators	Insufficient capabilities of educators in teaching social justice issues	Insufficient knowledge of educators about ethical values Insufficient experience in teaching social justice issues Insufficient experience in social justice due to poor presence in clinical and social settings
		Inappropriate value perspectives of educators in developing social justice	Discussing social justice issues based on personal beliefs Placing little importance on professional ethics Believing that nurses cannot play an effective role in justice promotion
	Inappropriate education approaches	Focusing on traditional education approaches	The use of teacher-based approaches in teaching ethical issues Concentration on lecturing approach Seldom use of group discussions in teaching ethical issues
			Weakness in using affective learning approaches

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