Olivia Numminen

Nursing Ethics Education in Finland from the Perspective of Codes of Ethics
University of Turku, Faculty of Medicine, Department of Nursing Science.

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to analyze nursing ethics education from the perspective of nurses’ codes of ethics in the basic nursing education programmes in polytechnics in Finland with the following research questions: What is known about nurses’ codes in practice and education, what contents of the codes are taught, what teaching and evaluation methods are used, which demographic variables are associated with the teaching, what is nurse educators’ adequacy of knowledge to teach the codes and nursing students’ knowledge of and ability to apply the codes, and what are participants’ opinions of the need and applicability of the codes, and their importance in nursing ethics education. The aim of the study was to identify strengths and possible problem areas in teaching of the codes and nursing ethics in general. The knowledge gained from this study can be used for developing nursing ethics curricula and teaching of ethics in theory and practice.

The data collection was targeted to all polytechnics in Finland providing basic nursing education (i.e. Bachelor of Health Care). The target groups were all nurse educators teaching ethics and all graduating nursing students in the academic year of 2006. A total of 183 educators and 214 students from 24 polytechnics participated. The data was collected using a structured questionnaire with four open-ended questions, designed for this study.

The data was analysed by SPSS (14.0) and the open-ended questions by inductive content analysis. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize the data. Inferential statistics were used to estimate the differences between the participant groups. The reliability of the questionnaire was estimated with Cronbach’s coefficient α.

The literature review revealed that empirical research on the codes was scarce, and minimal in the area of education. Teaching of nurses’ codes themselves and the embedded ethical concepts was extensive, teaching of the functions of the codes and related laws and agreements was moderate, but teaching of the codes of other health care professions was modest. Issues related to the nurse-patient relationship were emphasised. Wider social dimensions of the codes were less emphasized. Educators’ and students’ descriptions of teaching emphasized mainly the same teaching contents, but there were statistically significant differences between the groups in that educators assessed their teaching to be more extensive than what students had perceived it had been.

The use of teaching and evaluation methods was rather narrow and conventional. However, educators’ and students’ descriptions of the used methods differed statistically significantly. Students’ knowledge of the codes and their ability to apply them in practice was assessed as mediocre by educators and by students themselves. Most educators assessed their own knowledge of the codes as adequate to teach the codes, as did most of the students. Educators who regarded their knowledge as adequate taught the codes more extensively than those who assessed their knowledge as less adequate. Also students who assessed their educators’ knowledge as adequate perceived the teaching of the codes to be more extensive. Otherwise educators’ and students’ demographic variables had little association with their descriptions of the teaching. According to the participants, nurses need their own codes, and they are also regarded as applicable in practice. The codes are an important element in nursing ethics education, but their teaching needs development.

Further research should focus on the organization of ethics teaching in the curricula, the teaching process, and on the evaluation of the effectiveness of ethics education and on educators’ competence. Also the meaning and functions of the codes at all levels of nursing deserve attention. More versatile use of research methods would be beneficial in gaining new knowledge.

KEYWORDS: nursing ethics, codes of ethics, nurse education, teaching, nurse educator, nursing student