Educating for Social Justice

Educaton serves two seemingly contradictory purposes—to sustain the culture and to challenge and change the culture. In nursing, we seem to have accomplished the first very well! Students with whom I have worked over the years, and still to this day, are well-versed in reciting, even regurgitating, what is in the textbook or the printed article, but they rarely question what they find there. The nursing education published literature has many strengths, but content addressing social and structural determinants of health is woefully absent. However, when I challenge students to think about what the printed word might include if social factors were to be addressed, they typically have little trouble recognizing the significance of this missing element. When I challenge students to question the literature and to express their own ideas, they might be able to do this verbally, but putting their ideas in writing is a huge struggle. In addition, this awareness is relatively superficial, and without exposure to the substantial literature that deepens awareness and understanding of these factors, the ability of nurses to adequately address social equity remains out of reach. In my view, the deficits in much of the nursing literature and the inability of students— who are the leaders of the future—to articulate a substantive nursing perspective related to social justice are major problems that also open the door of opportunity.

Signs of steady progress are evident. The journal literature that challenges the status quo of social inequity has increased by leaps and bounds in recent years, and a text containing original writings by nurse scholars whose work has uncovered connections of social injustice and health has been recently published (Kagan, Smith, & Chinn, 2014). That text focuses on emancipatory nursing, which is an approach to nursing that seeks to address social and structural factors that influence health and that seeks social justice for all as a direct path to health and well-being. In the introduction to this new collection, the editors summarized common features that authors of the book chapters identified as characteristics of emancipatory nursing. These features are:

- Facilitating humanization, meaning that nursing’s concern focuses on seeking the freedom of individuals and communities to reach their full human potential.
- Disrupting structural inequities, meaning an approach to nursing that turns attention to changing social structures that prevent full human potential for certain individuals and group.
- Self-reflection, meaning full awareness of one’s own experiences and perspectives that either foster or inhibit one’s engagement in seeking social change.
- Engaging communities, meaning a commitment to build relationships within communities to work together to seek change that the community defines as being in their best interest.

This framework for emancipatory nursing reflects many values that can be recognized in many nursing texts as isolated elements, but bringing them together adds a unique dimension that can nurture our efforts, as educators, to challenge the prevailing culture of nursing and health care. For example, in many statements of philosophy for nursing education programs, the value of full health and human potential for all is typically addressed. However, when this value is placed within the context of the other three characteristics of emancipatory nursing—disrupting social inequities, self-reflection, and engaging communities—a very different approach to nursing, and to nursing education, can emerge.

Our challenge as nurse educators is clear—it is time bring social inequities in health and health care to the center, to incorporate the insights of nurse scholars who have addressed these issues in our teaching, and to ensure that students are skilled in challenging social injustice and seeking social justice. It is not acceptable to devote our educational energies to sustaining a culture of health care that focuses predominantly, sometimes exclusively, on a model of diagnosis and treatment of disease. It is time to devote a significant proportion of our time and attention to challenging this focus and nurturing the capacity of all nurses to change conditions of social injustice.

Reference

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