



A Case Study on Nursing Student Involvement in Social Justice Week: Reported Findings on this Innovative Method

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Professional nurses as well as nursing students are advocates for diversity, human rights and issues pertaining to social justice. This includes advocating for access to healthcare as well as the dignified and equitable treatment of all individuals, especially as clients/patients within the healthcare system. During the fall semester of 2015, the author's undergraduate students pursuing the Bachelors of Science in Nursing (BSN) degree and enrolled in a nursing course on health, theory and the family collaborated to present key ideas from each student's research paper as part of the Social Justice Week (SJW) events at Southern Connecticut State University (SCSU). Speaking in front of an audience from across the diverse campus, the author and her BSN students discussed a wide array of topics pertaining to health and human rights. These presentations were well-received and provided the BSN students with the opportunity to advocate for vulnerable populations of individuals.

Keywords: BSN students, advocacy, diversity, healthcare, human rights, nursing theory, professional nursing, social justice, transitions theory.

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Introduction

The inclusion of research by nursing students at the Baccalaureate (BSN) level as part of the events of Social Justice Week (SJW) at Southern Connecticut State University (SCSU) is an innovative method that combines nursing education with patient advocacy and was developed by the author to facilitate BSN students' learning and understanding of nursing concepts presented in the undergraduate nursing course entitled, *Theoretical Foundations of Nursing Practice with Families across the Lifespan*. This course combines theory with various writing assignments (e.g., essays, journaling, research papers) in order to focus on the responses of patients and their families to health and illness. While preparing to teach this course for the first time, the author discovered that the course content lends itself to real-world application, particularly when BSN students learn to view nursing theory as a basis for advocacy for patients, their families and the basic human rights to which all people are entitled (United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948).

The method and its connection to nursing theory and patient advocacy.

By means of this innovative method, the author encouraged her BSN students to recognize that advocacy, human rights and professional nursing are commensurate with one another. After all, nursing education adheres to the principle that patients and their families are not to be judged or neglected; rather, nurses are to accept people as they are while wanting to contribute to an improved health status and well-being for all patients. Nurses are highly knowledgeable and trusted healthcare professionals to whom patients and their families look for guidance and safe care, especially during times of illness, pain and suffering. Likewise, when appropriate, nurses initiate referrals to fellow members of the healthcare team (e.g., chaplains, social workers, therapists from across disciplines), and this action demonstrates respect for human rights via patient advocacy.

Goals and objectives of the method.

Each of the 23 students in the class was asked to provide a brief presentation of 5 – 10 minutes during the SCSU Social Justice Week (SJW). The content of the presentations was based on the research topic selected by each student earlier in the semester and based on her/his interests and in thinking ahead to a possible specialty in nursing. Transitions theory was utilized as the theoretical foundation for each of the research papers and topics, given the appropriateness of situation-specific transitions to professional nursing practice (Meleis, 2010). Students were encouraged to use creativity in their presentations while adhering to the goal and objective of demonstrating the ways in which her/his topic of choice pertained to advocacy and respect for our fellow human



beings (e.g., patients and their families) as well as their rights as people. Examples of students' research topics included: bereavement for families with children who have debilitating health conditions; diabetes in the Hispanic community; effects of dementia on caregivers; long-term effects of childhood cancer on children and their families; postpartum depression and its effects on all members of the family; post-traumatic stress disorder in children who were abused; teen pregnancy and teens who choose adoption for their babies; transgender transitioning; understanding the effects of sexual assault and violence; and understanding pregnancy in the homeless population.

Description and explanation of the method.

Key to the implementation of this innovative method is the SCSU SJW, held across the university campus in November of each year. SJW seeks to increase knowledge and to raise awareness about inequalities and injustices experienced by different groups of people at local, national and worldwide levels while also inspiring action to find solutions to these disparities. During the call for submissions for events to be advertised and included as part of the SCSU SJW, the author proposed inclusion of her BSN students' research paper topics for consideration as a group presentation to take the place of regularly scheduled class and to which members of the SCSU campus community were invited. In this way, the campus had the opportunity to join our class for a day, to listen to students' brief presentations that provided a synopsis of each student's topic and to interact with the students about how the topics pertain to advocacy, awareness and human rights.

Conclusions and Important Unresolved Questions

The results of the BSN students' presentations for the SCSU SJW were overwhelmingly positive. Students from disciplines other than nursing attended the event, as did potential nursing students who interacted with the BSN students after the event. Several nursing professors attended as well, and one nursing professor even brought her entire class to the event. By presenting their topics, the BSN students were able to share from their growing expertise as future Registered Nurses (RNs) and in areas about which each student is knowledgeable and passionate. BSN students were able to express their advocacy for the rights of patient populations in a manner that connects the theoretical with the pragmatic and 'real-world' while simultaneously building confidence in preparation for becoming certified RNs in the not-too-distant future.



Given this information, educators from across all disciplines – including the arts and sciences, the humanities and various healthcare fields in addition to nursing – may begin to ask themselves and their students a few important questions about the place of social justice within a specific discipline. Perhaps the first question to ask involves agreeing on the definitions of terms; that said, how does a specific discipline define the terms “diversity,” “human rights” and “social justice”? Likewise, what are ways in which undergraduate students within a specific discipline may demonstrate knowledge about individuals from diverse populations? What are some of the types of courses within a specific discipline that may lend themselves to inclusion within off- and on-campus events pertaining to human rights and social justice? Finally, at a more organizational level, how might universities and other institutions of higher learning set an example in support of diversity and social justice for all individuals and the basic human rights to which everyone is entitled?



References

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