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CONCEPTIONS OF CRITICAL THINKING FOR NURSING
JUDGEMENT HELD BY NURSE EDUCATORS

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Abstract

Over the last decade there has been a major shift in nursing education with an emphasis on facilitating students to think critically. Nurses engaged in professional practice encounter, in their every day work, situations requiring multidimensional decision-making. In order to be safe in their practice nurses need to be critical thinkers. The Nursing Council of New Zealand (1999) requires nurses to make sound professional judgement based on research, and reflection, in decision-making and problem solving.

In the literature there is no clear definition of critical thinking as it relates to nursing judgement. In recent years there has been a move to broaden the conception of critical thinking from a linear problem solving process to include aspects of the affective domain. If nurse educators are to facilitate the development of critical thinking in students it seems essential that they have a clear understanding of the concept.

The purpose of this study was to explore the conceptions of critical thinking for nursing judgement held by a group of nurse educators working in the Health Studies Department of a large city Institute of technology. Methods they used to facilitate the development of critical thinking and measure its achievement in students was also investigate

A semi-structured interview was used to explore the nurse educator's conceptions. In addition the nurse educators where asked to discuss students work and critical incidents in clinical performance, which, in their opinion, demonstrated critical thinking.

The study revealed that the nurse educators considered that critical thinking included both a rational/analytical component and an intuitive/reflective aspect. They considered critical thinking to be essential for caring nursing practice. The most common means of facilitating critical thinking was dialogue and encouraging reflection on practice through journal writing

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DECLARATION

I declare that the work presented in this thesis is entirely my own independent study, and has not previously been submitted for a degree or diploma in any institution of higher education; and that to the best of my knowledge it does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

Signature of Candidate

Patricia Julia Walthew

15, November 1999

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INTRODUCTION

In 1991 vision '2000', a national workshop involving nurse leaders meet to define the future of nursing needs in New Zealand. It was decided to establish nursing education at a degree level. This change in nursing in nursing education in New Zealand has altered the expectations of learning for nursing students. It is recognised that nurse engaged in professional practice encounter, in their everyday working life, complex, multivariable problems. They must be able to make independent, nursing decisions based on sound judgement. Nursing educational institutes are being asked to guarantee that nurse will emerge from their programmes with the knowledge and skill necessary to perform at this level.

Critical thinking is one of the key concepts in the health studies department in which this study took place. The department guarantees that nurses who emerge from the programme have the ability to think in a critical manner. As the department was about to undertake a curriculum review it was appropriate that a study related to the concept of critical thinking be undertaken. Informal discussion with the nurse educators in the department indicated that there was a lack of consensus as to a clear conceptualisation of the concept. As a concept critical thinking was in danger of being uncritically accepted

In recent years extensive debate in relation to the concept of critical thinking has appeared in nursing literature. Many of these studies have had their origins in North America. They have centred round the ability to define of critical thinking as it relates to nursing judgement, the importance of critical thinking to

nursing practice, methods nurse educators use to facilitate its development and measure its achievement

There is a clear indication in literature that the understanding of the concept of critical thinking as it relates to nursing judgement and decision making is moving away from a rational, linear, problem solving approach to include intuition and areas of the affective domain (Miller & Rew, 1989; Pless & Clayton, 1993; Tanner, 1993, 1997). The purpose of this study was to explore the conceptualisations of critical thinking held by nurse educators in the Department of Health Studies in which the study took place. It is thought a clear understanding of the concept is needed in order to facilitate its development. Congruence between the departments definition of critical thinking and methods the nurse educators used to facilitate, measure and evaluate its development were explored.

The following questions arose out of the literature:

Do the nurse educators perceive critical thinking to be an important concept in?

Do the nurse educators perceive critical thinking as being a generic set of skills or as being dependent on a specific body of knowledge?

Do the nurse educators consider that critical thinking has an affective component?

What factors do the nurse educators think affect the nurse's ability to think critically?

Are the nurse educators' conceptions of critical thinking congruent with the programmes goals?

Are the nurse educators' conceptions of critical thinking congruent with their methods of evaluating the construct?

What methods do the nurse educators use to facilitate the development of critical thinking in the students?

These questions were to assist in the construction of an interview sheet that was used to guide both the researcher and the participant. It was thought to be a useful technique to ensure that all information need was obtained while at the same time giving the participants freedom to explore and enlarge upon the concept. It must be emphasised that the purpose of this study was to gain an in-depth understanding of the nurse educators' own conceptions of critical thinking rather than restricting the information obtained to responses from a set body of questions