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Who Cares?
Accountability for public safety in nurse education.

Gilian Stokes

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Education,
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ABSTRACT

Nursing students assessed as being unsafe by nurse educators present specific challenges in tertiary education organisations. Nurse educators and education administrators are required by law to respect the rights of students to receive education, if it is deemed they will benefit from it. As registered nurses, nurse educators are also required by law to protect the public from unsafe nursing practice. The focus of this study is the management of unsafe nursing students within the tertiary education context. The moral dilemmas experienced by nurse educators, specifically linked to the issue of accountability for public safety, are explored.

The theoretical framework for the thesis is informed by the two moral voices of justice and care identified by Gilligan and further developed using the work of Hekman and Lyotard. Case study methodology was used and data were collected from three schools of nursing and their respective educational organisations. Interviews were conducted with nurse educators and education administrators who had managed unsafe nursing students. Interviews were also conducted with representatives from the Nursing Council of New Zealand and the New Zealand Nurses Organisation to gain professional perspectives regarding public safety, nurse education and unsafe students. Transcripts were analysed using the strategies of categorical aggregation and direct interpretation. Issues identified in each of the three case studies were examined using philosophical and theoretical analyses.

This thesis explores how students come to be identified as unsafe and the challenges this posed within three educational contexts. The justice and care moral voices of nurse educators and administrators and the ways in which these produced different ways of caring are made visible. Different competing and conflicting discourses of nursing and education are revealed, including the discourse of safety - one of the language games of nursing. The way in which participants positioned themselves and positioned others within these discourses are identified.
Overall, education administrators considered accountability for public safety to be a specific professional, nursing responsibility and not a concern of education per se. This thesis provides an account of how nurse educators attempted to make the educational world safe for patients, students, and themselves. Participants experienced different tensions and moral dilemmas in the management of unsafe students, depending upon the moral language games they employed and the dominant discourse of the educational organisation. Nurse educators were expected to use the discourses of education to make their case and manage unsafe students. However, the discourses of nursing and education were found to be incommensurable and so the moral dilemmas experienced by nurse educators were detected as differends. This study bears witness to these differends.
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