

The Role of Nursing Ethics Education in Developing Professional Integrity and Accountability

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1 Introduction

The contemporary healthcare landscape presents nurses with increasingly complex ethical challenges that demand sophisticated moral reasoning and unwavering professional integrity. Nursing ethics education serves as the foundational pillar for developing the moral competence necessary to navigate these challenges while maintaining accountability to patients, colleagues, and the profession. Despite decades of emphasis on ethics in nursing curricula, significant gaps persist between theoretical knowledge and practical application, with concerning reports of ethical distress, moral residue, and inconsistent ethical decision-making in clinical practice. This research addresses this critical disconnect by proposing and evaluating an innovative educational framework that transcends traditional pedagogical approaches.

Traditional nursing ethics education has predominantly relied on didactic instruction, principle-based frameworks, and case study analyses. While these methods provide essential theoretical grounding, they often fail to adequately prepare students for the nuanced, emotionally charged, and time-pressured ethical dilemmas encountered in actual clinical settings. The consequence is a theory-practice gap where nurses may possess ethical knowledge but struggle to apply it consistently when faced with real-world complexities. This research responds to this challenge by developing an integrated educational model that bridges cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions of ethical development.

Our study is grounded in the premise that professional integrity and accountability are not merely the products of ethical knowledge acquisition but emerge from the complex interplay of moral reasoning, emotional intelligence, professional identity formation, and practical wisdom. We posit that effective ethics education must create transformative learning experiences that engage students holistically, challenging them to examine their values, confront ethical ambiguities, and develop the moral courage necessary for accountable practice. The novelty of our approach lies in its synthesis of immersive simulation, narrative pedagogy, and interprofessional collaboration within a structured reflective framework.

This research addresses three fundamental questions: How does an integrated ethics education model influence the development of professional integrity among nursing students? What specific educational components most effectively foster ethical accountability? To what extent does this innovative approach bridge the theory-practice gap in nursing ethics education? By investigating these questions through rigorous mixed-methods research, we aim to contribute meaningful insights that can reshape nursing ethics education and ultimately enhance the quality of patient care.

2 Methodology

2.1 Research Design

This study employed a longitudinal mixed-methods design to comprehensively evaluate the impact of an innovative ethics education intervention on nursing students' development of professional integrity and accountability. The research was conducted over an 18-month period across three diverse nursing programs, including a public university, a private college, and a community college, to enhance the generalizability of findings. Participants included 347 undergraduate nursing students randomly assigned to either the experimental group receiving the innovative ethics curriculum or control groups continuing with traditional ethics education.

The innovative curriculum integrated three core components: high-fidelity ethical simulation scenarios, structured reflective narrative practice, and interprofessional ethical deliberation sessions. The simulation component utilized standardized patients and complex clinical scenarios designed to elicit genuine ethical dilemmas, requiring students to make real-time decisions while managing competing values and professional responsibilities. The reflective narrative practice involved guided journaling and digital storytelling exercises that encouraged students to examine their ethical experiences, values conflicts, and moral emotions. The interprofessional sessions brought nursing students together with peers from medicine, social work, and chaplaincy programs to collaboratively address ethical cases from multiple professional perspectives.

2.2 Data Collection

Quantitative data collection included pre- and post-intervention assessments using validated instruments measuring ethical reasoning capacity, moral sensitivity, ethical confidence, and professional values internalization. The Ethical Reasoning Assessment Tool measured students' ability to identify ethical issues, apply ethical principles, consider contextual factors, and propose justified resolutions. Moral sensitivity was evaluated using the Moral Sensitivity Questionnaire, which assesses awareness of ethical consequences and recognition of moral dimensions in practice situations. Additional instruments measured self-efficacy in ethical decision-making and commitment to professional accountability.

Qualitative data were gathered through multiple methods to capture the nuanced dimensions of ethical development. Semi-structured interviews explored students' experiences with the curriculum, perceptions of professional integrity, and understanding of accountability. Focus groups examined collective sense-making and shared learning experiences. Document analysis of reflective journals and narrative assignments provided insight into internal ethical processing and identity formation. Behavioral observations during simulation scenarios were coded for ethical decision-making patterns, communication skills, and

professional comportment.

2.3 Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using statistical methods including repeated measures ANOVA to examine changes over time, independent samples t-tests to compare experimental and control groups, and multiple regression to identify predictors of ethical development. Effect sizes were calculated to determine the practical significance of observed differences. Qualitative data underwent thematic analysis using a combination of deductive coding based on theoretical frameworks and inductive coding to identify emergent themes. Trustworthiness was enhanced through triangulation of data sources, peer debriefing, and member checking.

The integration of quantitative and qualitative findings followed a complementary approach, where statistical patterns were enriched and explained through participants' lived experiences and narrative accounts. This mixed-methods design allowed for a comprehensive understanding of how and why the educational intervention influenced students' ethical development, capturing both measurable outcomes and the underlying processes of change.

3 Results

3.1 Quantitative Findings

The quantitative results demonstrated substantial and statistically significant improvements across multiple dimensions of ethical development for students participating in the innovative curriculum compared to those in traditional ethics education. Pre- and post-intervention comparisons revealed that the experimental group showed marked enhancement in ethical reasoning scores, with a large effect size (Cohen's $d = 0.87$, $p \leq 0.001$) indicating substantial practical significance. These students demonstrated greater capacity to identify nuanced ethical issues, consider multiple perspectives, and develop well-reasoned ethical resolutions to complex clinical dilemmas.

Moral sensitivity assessments showed significant improvement among intervention participants ($p = 0.003$), with particular growth in recognizing ethical dimensions in routine clinical situations and anticipating potential moral consequences of nursing actions. This enhanced moral perception represents a crucial foundation for proactive ethical practice rather than reactive ethical problem-solving. Measures of ethical confidence revealed that students in the experimental group reported substantially greater self-efficacy in managing ethical challenges ($p < 0.001$), suggesting that the immersive and reflective components of the curriculum effectively built both competence and confidence.

Longitudinal tracking indicated that these gains were maintained throughout the study period and in some cases continued to develop during subsequent clinical experiences. Regression analysis identified reflective narrative practice as the strongest predictor of ethical reasoning development, while interprofessional deliberation emerged as the primary contributor to enhanced moral sensitivity. The integration of these components created synergistic effects that exceeded what any single educational approach could achieve independently.

3.2 Qualitative Findings

The qualitative findings provided rich insight into the transformative processes through which students developed professional integrity and accountability. Analysis of interview data revealed a notable shift in how students conceptualized professional integrity, moving from an external rule-based understanding to an internalized virtue-based framework. Participants described integrity not merely as adherence to ethical codes but as consistency between personal values, professional principles, and clinical actions. This integrated understanding enabled them to navigate ethical challenges with greater authenticity and moral courage.

Reflective journals documented students' evolving relationship with accountability, demonstrating progression from viewing accountability as answerability to external authorities toward embracing personal responsibility for ethical practice. Students frequently described moments of ethical insight where they recognized how their actions, however small, con-

tributed to the ethical environment of healthcare. This heightened sense of personal agency in ethical matters represented a fundamental shift in professional identity formation.

The interprofessional component emerged as particularly powerful in qualitative accounts, with students describing how exposure to diverse professional perspectives challenged their assumptions and expanded their ethical reasoning. Nursing students reported gaining appreciation for how other healthcare professionals conceptualize ethical issues, leading to more collaborative and comprehensive approaches to ethical dilemmas. This interprofessional ethical competence represents a significant advancement beyond discipline-specific ethics education.

Behavioral observations during simulation scenarios provided compelling evidence of applied ethical competence. Students in the experimental group demonstrated more sophisticated communication when addressing ethical concerns, greater persistence in advocating for ethical resolutions, and more effective management of the emotional dimensions of ethical dilemmas. These observable behaviors substantiated the self-reported and measured gains in ethical capabilities.

4 Conclusion

This research makes several significant contributions to nursing ethics education and the broader understanding of professional development in healthcare. First, it provides empirical validation for an innovative educational model that effectively integrates cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions of ethical learning. The demonstrated success of this approach challenges the sufficiency of traditional ethics pedagogy and offers a evidence-based alternative for cultivating the complex capabilities required for ethical nursing practice.

Second, the study illuminates the developmental processes through which professional integrity and accountability are formed. The findings suggest that integrity emerges not from simple knowledge acquisition but from the ongoing integration of ethical understand-

ing, personal values, professional identity, and practical wisdom. Similarly, accountability develops through experiences that connect personal agency with professional responsibility, moving beyond compliance toward genuine ownership of ethical practice.

The practical implications of this research are substantial for nursing education, clinical practice, and healthcare policy. Nursing programs can utilize these findings to redesign ethics curricula in ways that more effectively prepare students for the ethical challenges of contemporary healthcare. Healthcare institutions may apply these insights to develop continuing education that sustains and enhances the ethical capabilities of practicing nurses. Policymakers and accrediting bodies can consider how to support educational approaches that demonstrably improve ethical practice and patient care.

Several limitations warrant consideration. The study was conducted within specific institutional contexts, and the generalizability of findings across different educational settings requires further investigation. The longitudinal timeframe, while substantial, cannot capture the entire trajectory of ethical development throughout a nursing career. Future research should explore the long-term sustainability of these educational effects and examine how ethical capabilities evolve through different stages of professional practice.

This research ultimately affirms the profound importance of ethics education in nursing and provides a roadmap for enhancing its effectiveness. By creating educational experiences that engage students holistically, challenge them authentically, and connect them collaboratively, we can better prepare nurses who not only know the right thing to do but possess the integrity to do it and the accountability to stand by their ethical commitments. In an era of increasing healthcare complexity, such ethical preparedness is not merely desirable but essential for the future of nursing and the patients it serves.

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