Teaching human rights, equality and equity in a Nursing education: Teachers’ encounters with students’ existential preparedness in relation to access to healthcare for people with precarious migration status

Authors: Okenwa-Emegwa L.1,2*, Eriksson H1

1Department of Health Sciences, The Swedish Red Cross University College, Stockholm, Sweden.
2Department of Public health and Sport Science, University of Gävle, Sweden

Authors contact information
Okenwa-Emegwa L., PhD, Senior Lecturer in Public Health Sciences, leok@rkh.se
Eriksson H., Professor in Nursing, erih@rkh.se

*Presenting author: Okenwa-Emegwa L. leok@rkh.se

Existentialism in nursing is often discussed in terms of diagnoses and end-of-life and rarely from the perspective of inequalities and equitable access to healthcare. The nursing profession is known for advocacy especially for improved patients’ rights and safety. Some core ethical values of the Swedish Society of Nursing include respect for patients’ dignity, integrity, autonomy in decision making and respect for the vulnerable. Furthermore, nurses should help patients experience trust, hope and meaning in encounters with healthcare systems.

At the Swedish Red Cross University, “Health, equality and human rights” is a module in a mandatory second term course. The intended learning outcomes (ILOs) are to explain public health goals, policy documents, fundamental human rights, ethics and their applications in health context. One of the teaching/learning activities is an educational drama (ED) led by the Youth wing of the Swedish Red Cross Society. It’s a two-hour role-play depicting common pre-flight and during-flight experiences of families and individual victims of forced migration (VOFM). Participants make tough decisions like emptying savings, trusting strangers for the difficult journey or which child to send first. At the “migration office” they must prove their identity and story. They may experience families split at borders, being duped of their savings or sent back to country of origin. Using ED promotes teamwork, negotiation, socialization, aids recall of what has been taught and stimulates student’s imagination and empathy for situations that might seem distant.

This scholarly presentation is based on the evaluation of ED as a pedagogical approach. Evaluations consistently show positive outcomes in line with the ILOs, however, teachers also notice how the ED tends to stimulate existential reflections during each session. These are presented here using Sartre’s existential concepts of human freedom/responsibility, choice, anguish, bad faith, and authenticity. Concurrent reflections of the other (i.e. VOFM) and self, first as an individual and secondly as future nurses encountering VOFMs (Sartre’s existence precedes essence), are common. The VOFM’s burden of responsibility, pursuit of freedom and anguish following various choices appear to stimulate existential concerns in relation to privileges taken for granted in Sweden. An example is access to healthcare as an obvious right, in contrast to a continuum of suffering for VOFMs (tough experiences pre/during-flight,
discrimination and limited access to healthcare after arriving in Sweden). The restrictive healthcare policy for people with precarious migration status in Sweden and its challenging implementation are often woven into the discussions. Dimensions of bad faith and authenticity are raised, followed by a shift in perspective accepting healthcare for all. The need for nurses (including themselves as future nurses) to be more knowledgeable about health provisions for VOFMs and for policies enduring equitable access to healthcare for VOFMs are reiterated (Sartre’s “representatives of humanity”).

To conclude, the workshop stimulates existential preparedness in students which aligns with nursing ethical codes e.g. social justice, advocacy, good nursing care to alleviate suffering and constant reflections to challenge own values and beliefs. We argue that this existential preparedness to deal with inequality in health is just as important as the existential thoughts discussed through the lens of diagnoses and end of life care.