

Iranian Nursing Students' Perspectives of Educational Equity

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Abstract- Around the world there is a growing consensus that students' rights must be protected, regardless of race, creed, color, sex, religion, and socioeconomic status. One of these rights is the educational equity. However, little is known about these phenomena in nursing education. The aim of this study was to explore the educational equity from the perspective of nursing students. A qualitative study was conducted. Thus, we purposefully recruited for in-depth interviews 13 nursing students (8 female and 5 male). All interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed by thematic analysis approach to identify categories and themes. Four main themes emerged from the data: Fair Educational Opportunity, fair evaluation, attempts to combat discrimination, and employing qualified teachers. It is argued that educational equity should be developed in higher education. Principles of equity and students' rights may form the most basic rationale for all formal and informal efforts to extend the right of equal access to education.

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Introduction

Concerns with educational equity are not new (1). Issues of educational equity, expressed in terms such as education for all, justice, equal access, equal facilities, have been discussed and debated since the beginning of public education in Iran (2-5).

The dominant paradigm in Western society equates justice with fairness and defines justice as a proportionate (6). Theoretical perspectives of equity in general and educational equity in particular are diverse and often conflicting. Rawls (1971) pose problems of educational equity in terms of distributive justice-who should go to school, to what kind of school (7,8). Young (2013) argues that a distributive approach to justice is not sufficient (9). She looks at justice from the starting point of domination and oppression. Connell *et al.*, looks at educational justice as being not only a matter of distributive justice but also a matter of curricular justice (10). Despite the variety of theoretical approaches offered by philosophers such as these, a review of the

literature shows a significant gap in the various empirical studies of educational equity (8,11,12). Few studies deal with participants' of educational equity. Moreover, the perceptions of educational equity held by students, in particular, are almost completely ignored (13). Therefore, it is logical that students are worried about their rights being violated in educational equity. Memorandum and rules can protect the educational justice in higher education and help to define clearly what administrators, principals, and teachers would and would not do (14,15). The justice in education would be more widely publicized to the student body if it were formalized in a written document, blueprint, and act for students to reference and follow. If administrators and principals were to publicize this formalized policy to students, there would be less of a gray area as to what students expect (16).

Many students enter a nursing program with preconceived ideas about justice and equity. However, little is known about nursing students' perspectives of educational equity. This paper reports findings drawn

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from a large qualitative study conducted in Tehran; Iran sought to explore the students' rights in nursing education. Reviewing the literature showed that the justice and equity have been well documented. However, limited literature exists sharing the nursing students' perspective of educational equity. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore the comprehension and experiences of Iranian nursing students about educational equity.

Background in Iran

Iran is located in Middle East with a population of approximately 75 million. More than 98% of the population is Muslim (17). After the completion of high school, applicants participated in competitive National Higher Education Entrance Examination (NHEEE). Applicants who are achieving highest score generally choose medicine, dentistry or pharmacology. Lower ranking applicants often select courses, including nursing, most often without any particular motivation or interest (18). There are more than 160 nursing schools are established in both sectors of governmental and non-governmental with an annual enrollment approximately about 6000 students. All schools are obliged to follow a basic curriculum established by the Ministry (19). The bachelor degree duration is 4 years including theoretical and clinical courses.

Nursing students are trained in skill lab, hospital, community, and other educational settings. Clinical courses covered across the four years in the five areas of medical–surgical, obstetric, pediatric, psychiatric, and community nursing. The number of students in each clinical group ranges from 6 to 10 people of both male and female. Generally, the students are assigned to care for patients based on the case method in the clinical field. They are under the direct supervision and guidance of the nursing instructors during both the theoretical and clinical instruction for the first 3 years. In the final year, they work under the direct guidance of staff nurses and the collaborative supervision of nurse instructors (17). In the past three years, admission of students has doubled. Due to large student enrollment, staff nurses, and sessional clinical teachers are commonly engaged to instruct and evaluate nursing students. Many of them have never been trained using evaluation methods, nor have qualifications to practice as a teacher.

Analysis of historical data shows that inequities have always existed in the Iranian educational system, and historically, low social classes have been at a disadvantage, with limited access to educational resources and services (20,21). The focus on education

justice for Iranians actually started since a few decades ago (22).

One of the biggest problems is the allocation of education funds that is inappropriate, and most of them are given to developed cities. Another source of educational fairness complaints comes from the difference between Islamic Azad University and national university (23,24).

Principles of the constitution in the 20-year outlook express that the Iranian society will have the following characteristics under the horizon of this outlook: Having advanced science, capable in producing knowledge and technology, relied on higher share of human resources and social asset in the national production; and having the health, welfare, judicial security, social security, equal opportunities. Although the constitutional law protecting people rights in Iran, up to present, there is no memorandum or rules that protect the educational justice in higher education. Besides a review of the literature revealed an abundance of discussion papers relate to justice in education, we have not found any study in relation to the nursing students' comprehension about educational equity and this is probably the first study in this field using a qualitative approach.

Materials and Methods

A qualitative research design based on thematic analysis approach was employed to explore the comprehension and experiences of Iranian nursing students about educational equity.

Qualitative research seeks to describe and interpret the subjective meanings of an individual's experiences, in order to achieve a deep understanding of those experiences (25-27). Thematic analysis is one of the most commonly used methods of qualitative analysis that typically involves a progressive process of classifying, comparing, grouping, and refining groupings of text segments to create and then clarify the definition of categories, or themes, within the data (26,28,29).

Data collection and analysis

This study involved semi-structured, in-depth interviews designed to elicit information with 13 nursing students.

This was held in a place that assured the participant's privacy and confidentiality. At the beginning of the interview, the participants were invited to ask any they might have about the consent form or the procedure. The interview questions were open-ended, beginning with

general inquiries. The focuses of the interview questions were the following: What is your comprehension regarding educational equity? Would you please share with us your experiences regarding respecting educational equity? In addition, probing questions were asked to conduct the interview. Each interview lasted on average between 30 and 60 minutes. The interviews were digitally recorded, and verbatim transcriptions were made. Following steps were implemented to analyze the data:

- Familiarizing with the gathered data: Transcribing data (if necessary), reading and re-reading the data, noting down initial ideas.
- Generating initial codes: Coding interesting features of the data in a systematic fashion across the entire data set, collating data relevant to each code;
- Searching for themes: Collating codes into potential themes, gathering all data relevant to each potential theme;
- Reviewing themes: Checking if the themes work in relation to the code extracts (Level 1) and the entire data set (Level 2), generating a thematic 'map' of the analysis;
- Defining and naming themes: Ongoing analysis to refine the specifics of each theme, and the overall story the analysis tells, generating clear definitions and names for each theme;
- Producing the report: The final opportunity for analysis. Selection of vivid, compelling extract examples, the final analysis of selected extracts, relating back of the analysis to the research question and literature, producing a scholarly report of the analysis (30).

The researchers independently analyzed the data by identifying and categorizing codes. Then, the three authors' codes and their latest analysis development as themes were compared. In areas where did not agree, definitions were clarified, and discussions continued until consensus was reached. Regarding trustworthiness, credibility was established through peer check and prolonged engagement. The expert supervisor and two other doctoral students of nursing conducted the peer checking.

Participants

Purposive sampling was used to recruit students from the Bachelor of Nursing program. All participants were informed about the objectives of the study, and written informed consent was obtained in accordance with guidelines of the Tehran medical University. Participants comprised eight females and five males.

Maximum variant purposive sampling will be conducted to capture a wide range of perspectives and experiences relating to the phenomenon. Maximum variation of sampling also enhanced the confirmability and credibility of data.

Ethical considerations

The study was approved by the university's research ethics committee before beginning of data collection. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw participation or data at any time. Prior to the recording interviews, the purpose of the study was verbally clarified with each participant. Last, those who agreed to participate in the study signed written consent.

Results

Thematic analysis of the transcripts identified three themes emerged: Fair Educational Opportunity, attempts to combat discrimination and employing qualified teachers. The following is a description of these themes, as well as verbatim examples of participant's responses that illustrate them.

Fair educational opportunity

Students considered it very unjust that more resources were available to schools of medicine, dentistry and pharmacy and those students received a better education at predominately schools. They complained that the treatment of students was unjust. They believed mistreatment of students violated the ideas of equal treatment and equal opportunity.

'Discrimination exists in all aspects of education, not just relationship, services, and educational environment.'
(Male junior)

'High-quality opportunities to learn for all students are not equitably distributed throughout the faculties.'
(Female junior)

Participants complained it very unfair that nursing students were not allowed to use facilities in hospitals while medical students could use:

'I think that I have been discriminated against by my university. Medical students benefit from best facilities in the university, but nursing students are second rate student.'
(Male junior)

A male student stated that the educational equity means global development in all aspect of educational and para-educational status of students:

'The guidance and counseling services are totally inadequate for students. The sport and social activity services are forgotten in university, but they are equally

important to other educational activities.' (Male junior)

Participants believed that the justice consisted of rules and equal punishment. Participants concentrated on the elimination of double standards for special students. This situation assumes that those students are of unequal value to other students:

'We should have clear-cut rules for all students. If students violate, they should get an effective punishment. Everyone should be treated the same, regardless of his/her field of Study.' (Female junior)

A female participant believed that equity not mean equal opportunity for all students:

'I think Tehran medical university had more resources than most university in the country. I think it is fair that Tehran medical university have more resources than other universities. We achieved a high score in national higher education entrance examination (NHEEE), and it is fair to have better facilities than other universities.' (Female junior)

In contrast, another participant alleged

'Nobody is better than anyone else. Everybody should have an equal chance to learn. Everybody should have the opportunity to advance no matter what where he or she educate.' (Male student)

Fair evaluation

Many participants complained about fairness in clinical evaluation. This displeasure confirms that they faced many problems in clinical evaluation. One of the more striking features of finding is the extremely large number of participant expected to report their experiences in this regard. For example, a student mentioned:

'It has repeatedly occurred that I have done my work properly, but my instructor gave me an unfair grade that I did not deserve. That is really unfair' (male junior).

'...You never get what you deserve. Instructors know that they give unfair grade...' (Female junior).

'I do not think the clinical evaluation forms reflect what is to be evaluated. It is not based on practical work. Even if they (instructors) evaluate me based on this form, this evaluation is unfair. An evaluation is fair if it design based on accurate criteria'(male junior).

'...I think that it would be good if the instructors were informed how to do fair evaluation'(male junior).

Participants complained that the assessment for the team project had limited the scope to evaluate individual effort:

'...there are no differences among strong and weak students. Do you think instructors give same

grades for equal work? ...when students enter in teamwork, it is not wise to give same grades for all members in the group because their respective abilities and level of involvement to the group project varies greatly' (Male junior).

In sum, this theme focuses on nursing students experiences about troublesome process of clinical evaluation. It is the responsibility of the University to promote the fair evaluation of student learning in all clinical setting. Nevertheless, most of the students were complained that they should face with innumerable challenges in this era.

Attempts to combat discrimination

Many participants complained about discrimination and breaches of justice. This displeasure confirms that they faced many problems in the process of education. In general, their experience can be broadly categorized as differential treatment of individual students. Some students expressed that they received positive or negative status relative to others:

Teachers do not have appropriate relationships with all students. They distinguish between students of different achievement levels. You can see these in communication with students, in their talking, in their seeing....

Students in this study pointed out about the exclusive focus on the bright students in faculty. Students complained that instructors displayed lack of attention to other students. A student reported the bulk of attention to be allocated on bright students:

'Our instructors keep in mind certain students rather than other students. Instructors concentrate on bright students and encourage them (female junior).

One student believed that the instructors not always observant or aware of what the students are doing in the clinical setting:

'...Our educator was absent for a couple of days. To prevent our objection, he gave us much better marks in comparison with other groups of the students' (male junior).

Preconceptions about the abilities of male and female students may influence scoring decisions. A female student echoed this as in:

'teachers show personal bias in classrooms and other educational situations....in the ward, female students often perform better than their male counterparts, but the male students give a better score...' (Female junior).

'We had a teacher really hated male students. I do not know why. She really likes the girls. The male students

would always get the blame for their behaviors or works' (Female junior).

Students thought the nursing school treated students unfairly. A male student expressed:

The school decided to experiment with special hospital uniforms. No other schools were asked to try uniforms. I believed that students at nursing school were forced to wear uniform because the nursing students had been portrayed to be degraded students.

Employing qualified teachers

Most examples of injustice cited by the participants in this study represent concerns about qualified teachers. One of the more striking features of findings is the extremely large number of participant expected to report their experiences in this regard. For example, a student mentioned:

'I do not like my instructors. They were not highly qualified in teaching clinical courses. I mean a few of them had taught in a professional level' (Male junior).

'The student to instructor ratio is high in nursing; the instructor may not be able effectively to provide the individual attention necessary to educate and evaluate students. (Female junior)

'A few of our instructors are expert. A large number of sessional instructors hired in nursing education, especially in clinical courses. However, all of the medicine and dentistry Instructors are expert practitioners in the subjects that they teach.' (Male junior)

In contrast, another participant expressed

Some our teachers have always been real encouraging. I presume my teachers always supportive of what was going in my education. (Female junior)

In sum, this theme focuses on nursing students experiences about troublesome discrimination. It is the responsibility of the faculty to promote combat discrimination. Nevertheless, most of the students were complained that they should face with innumerable challenges in this era.

Discussion

Educational equity issues have become more and more important in higher education. There is a great deal of information found in the literature that emphasizes the need to justice, equity and fairness in education (31-33). This is an attempt to study the nursing students' perspectives of educational equity in Iran. The finding shows there are many important issues relevant to

educational equity. Students are basic elements in the educational system, and their views and opinions should be investigated to make sure that students are involved on their educational system.

Three themes including the fair educational opportunity, attempts to combat discrimination, and employing qualified teachers, were the obtained results of this study. These findings contain important ideas, which refer to students' attention to the educational equity.

In the present study, participants claimed that the mistreatment of students violated the ideas of equal opportunity. They believed that all students must have bracketed access to educational facilities, regardless of field of Study. They complained that facilities are not prorated among schools. For example, students considered that more resources were allocated to predominately schools.

Fair educational opportunity and just distribution of facilities have been the object of large literatures (34,35). Different educational settings constitute various grounds of the justice distribution. They provide different learning opportunities that affect students' academic achievements, self-esteem, and motivation (36-38).

What constitutes an educational equity has been subject to much debate and argument among students and principals over the years. Interpretations of equity have evolved in response to the multiplicity of social and cultural beliefs as well as larger political and cultural philosophies regarding the views and responsibilities of policy makers (39,40).

The dominant paradigm in Western society associates equity with fairness and justice. Fair educational opportunity was based upon liberal and egalitarian principles (41,42). These principles held that the right to education ought to be granted to all students, regardless of their religion, gender, nationality, ethnicity, degree or field of Study (43,44). Kohlberg proposes that schools should be organized as just communities. On the other hand, the egalitarian and meritocratic principles of education were differently interpreted across universities (45).

In the present study, some participants claimed that equal access to services should be granted to all students. On the other hand, other participants believed that equity not means guaranteeing 'equal treatment' or 'equal access' to facilities and believe that students in Tehran medical university should have further and better educational facilities and services than other students.

The second theme is about the experiences of

students about fairness in clinical evaluation. It is indispensable to mention that fairness is fundamentally a sociocultural, rather than a technical, issue (46-48). Fair evaluation includes a broad range of intertwined issues, including absence of bias in the assignments (48,49), equitable treatment of all students in the evaluation process (50), and using methods and procedures appropriate to students (48). The participants complained that the instructors were not informed how to do a fair evaluation.

Another factor for creating dissatisfaction among participant referred to gender bias. Many researchers found that gender does play a great role in student evaluation regardless of their knowledge or abilities (50-53).

The third theme encompasses the participants' perspective regarding Attempts to combat discrimination. Students must be aware of procedures for reporting experiences of discrimination (54). Torney-Purta (2005) commented that most students were suffering from lack knowledge about educational regulations (55). So research and education are required in order to increase awareness of students (56). It is important to highlight that education for students does not necessarily mean the problem is solved. In order to combat discrimination, we must be aware to ensure that educational rules are being implemented throughout every school in the university.

Research has showed that students strive to get what they consider they deserve (57,58). When there is a gap between actual and deserved situation, students will sense injustice, which may lead to feelings of unfair, frustration, social behavior, and isolation (58).

The last theme was related to employing qualified teachers. The participants specified their apprehension from the impact of the absence of qualified instructors in clinical education. McCutchan (2010) were concerned the manner in which instructors are not always aware of what's happening in the clinical setting, what the students are doing, and what they need to learn (50).

Despite the well-documented issues associated with the use of inexperienced sectional clinical instructors (17,59), they are commonly engaged to evaluate nursing students. Sessional clinical instructors are often unfamiliar with the clinical evaluation. The other problem is Sessional clinical instructors utilized for a short period. They are often unfamiliar with the nursing curriculum and the clinical objectives (59,60).

The high student to instructor ratio and low contact hours can interfere with the ability of the instructor as he/she simultaneously teach and evaluate student in

clinical setting. It is almost impossible to directly observe how students meet the educational objectives (59,61).

Participants stated that instructor subjectivity is another problem associated with the clinical evaluation. It is acknowledged that subjectivity is an integral part in performance appraisal (46,59). One of the principles of evaluation is to avoid bias. However, many aspects of nursing practice are difficult to objectively define, therefore, it is logical that the interpretation of instructors can include bias and thus become subjective (46,53).

Limitation of the study and suggestion for future study.

It is important to highlight the limitations of this study in order for the findings to be interpreted in the context. It is implausible to suppose that this geographically localized and relatively small-scale study will reflect entirely the experiences of all nursing students in Iran. Therefore, conducting further studies among nursing students and pursuing nursing instructors' perspective regarding educational equity are recommended.

The educational equity is an intricate concept in nursing education in Iran. It seems that increasing awareness about justice and fairness causing students to be more serious about educational equity. This study has provided some insights and information about educational equity. One of the components for maintaining educational equity is to comprehend public attitudes about justice, fairness, equity, and equality. Understanding students' values and the ways they comprehend educational equity would inspire principals and policy makers designed better strategies to develop the educational equity.

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