

Addressing ethnicity in nursing education in Denmark

Background

Ethnic inequality in health is a societal problem requiring attention in health education. Future professionals need knowledge about and competencies to handle health inequality related to ethnic minority status. However, ethnicity is an overlooked and difficult issue to address in Danish nursing education both in the clinical and school context, despite increasing ethnic diversity in health care and among nursing students.

Method

Possibilities and barriers for enhancing cultural competencies in nursing education were explored in focus group discussions with students with ethnic minority backgrounds.

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School context

A teacher talked about health inequality in this rough neighborhood and then looked straight at me. And I thought: "why are you looking at me, I don't live there?" But then everyone looked at me.

I think it's OK to ask students with ethnic minority backgrounds to share their experiences, I wouldn't mind or feel exposed. But if I was the teacher, I think it would be difficult.

This is not part of the education. You should learn how you as a nurse should meet people who do not speak Danish. Now me – I'm lucky, I am a foreigner myself, but if I'd been Danish and totally new to this field, it would have been difficult. How should I communicate with these people and how can I understand their culture?

But I think – in a country like Denmark with so many Muslims, you could at least have a power point slide...

Clinical context

I'd rather not care for patients from my own home country – to avoid that they expect special treatment from me, like "can we do it the way we do it at home?"
No, I don't want to end in that situation

Its a huge asset that an ethnic minority patient can meet a nurse with an ethnic minority background too. They don't have to have the same ethnic background, but I have certain knowledge because I have grown up in several cultures – I just have an understanding that things can be different and that it is OK that others have another understanding than I do.

If my colleagues experience that a patient doesn't understand what they are saying, then they think "Oh there's that girl with the head scarf" and then I am asked to translate and give them a complete understanding of the patients' situation.

Findings

All students felt that their background provided them with a **sensitivity towards cultural differences** and competence to handle situations where ethnicity matter. In clinical practice, their **language skills and cultural insights** were perceived as beneficial by colleagues and they were often assigned to care for ethnic minority patients. However, they experienced that their professional role was challenged due to **certain expectations from both patients** and colleagues bound to their ethnic background. In an educational context, **students did not experience that their cultural competencies (dilemmas, experiences) were recognized or employed nor that intercultural competences were developed in the education.**

Discussion

The issue of ethnicity is sparsely addressed in Danish nursing education despite documented ethnic inequalities in health (1). Nursing education must thus undertake responsibility to address ethnicity and its consequence in healthcare (2). However, ethnicity is beset with perplexity due to its political connotations and conceptual confusion causing reluctance among teachers to address this issue. The increasing ethnic diversity among students could provide the potential to support students' knowledge, awareness, reflectivity, and sensitivity of the meaning of own and others ethnicity and cultural background.