Identifying Critical Thinking Indicators and Critical Thinker Attributes in Nursing Practice

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ABSTRACT

Background: Critical thinking is an essential skill in the nursing process. Although several studies have evaluated the critical thinking skills of nurses, there is limited information related to the indicators of critical thinking or evaluation of critical thinking in the context of the nursing process.

Purpose: This study investigated the potential indicators of critical thinking and the attributes of critical thinkers in clinical nursing practice. Knowledge of these indicators can aid the development of tools to assess nursing students’ critical thinking skills.

Methods: The study was conducted between September 2009 and August 2010. In phase 1, a literature review and four focus groups were conducted to identify the indicators of critical thinking in the context of nursing and the attributes of critical thinkers. In phase 2, 30 nursing professionals participated in a modified Delphi research survey to establish consensus and the appropriateness of each indicator and attribute identified in phase 1.

Results: We identified 37 indicators of critical thinking and 10 attributes of critical thinkers. The indicators were categorized into five subscales within the context of the nursing process to reflect nursing clinical practice: assessment, 16 indicators of ability to apply professional knowledge and skills to analyze and interpret patient problems; diagnosis, five indicators of ability to propose preliminary suppositions; planning, five indicators of ability to develop problem-solving strategies; implementation, five indicators of ability to implement planning; and evaluation, six indicators of ability to self-assess and reflect.

Conclusion/Implications for Practice: The study operationalized critical thinking into a practical indicator suitable for nursing contexts in which critical thinking is required for clinical problem solving. Identified indicators and attributes can assist clinical instructors to evaluate student critical thought skills and development-related teaching strategies.

Key Words

indicator, attribute, critical thinking, nursing education, Delphi research.

Introduction

Nursing students must have critical thinking abilities to respond constructively to diverse healthcare environments (Brunt, 2005a; Yuan, Williams, & Fan, 2008). Both the National League for Nursing Accrediting Commission (2007) and the American Association of Colleges of Nursing et al. (2011) have identified critical thinking as an essential element of the nursing curricula. In addition, the Joint Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations (2005) highlighted critical thinking as a key nursing skill and included it in their accreditation standards.

Critical thinking has been defined from multiple perspectives, with various definitions presenting the concepts of cognition, attitude, process, and skill. In nursing practice, critical thinking is usually defined as a skill, with a focus on solving practical problems (Brunt, 2005a; Staib, 2003). The nursing process provides nursing professionals the means to resolve patient problems. The several steps in the nursing process include collecting data systematically from the patient or family during the assessment phase, making a nursing diagnosis, formulating a plan to resolve the patient’s problems, initiating the plan to implement solutions, and evaluating the effectiveness of these solutions (Su & Huang, 2000). Nursing is a challenging profession that requires astute clinical judgment, decision-making, and problem-solving skills. Critical thinking is required at each phase of the nursing process (Chabeli, 2007; Huckabay, 2009).

Assessing nurses’ critical thinking abilities should be addressed in the context of the five stages of the nursing process. However, little information has been published to date on the measurement of critical thinking skills in professional