

Comprehensive Definition of Professional Nursing Accountability: A Critical Review of the Literature

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Abstract

This review explores the challenges of defining and integrating professional nursing accountability into nursing curricula. A consistent definition remains elusive, often relegated to the "hidden curriculum" through implicit learning. Through a review of literature, the paper proposes a multifaceted definition encompassing responsibility for actions, answerability for outcomes, addressing omissions, commitment to lifelong learning, and upholding professional standards. This comprehensive definition empowers educators to design targeted learning experiences, fostering the knowledge, skills, and attitudes essential for future nurses to deliver safe, high-quality patient care.

Key words: nursing, curriculum, educators.

Introduction

Nurse educators hold a critical yet challenging role in fostering students' understanding and practice of professional nursing accountability (1). While professional organizations, such as the American Association of Colleges of Nursing (AACN, 2008) and the International Council of Nurses (ICN, 2000), offer guidance, educators themselves report difficulty defining accountability (2-4). This inconsistency relegates accountability education to the "hidden curriculum," where it is implicitly learned through experience rather than explicitly taught (5, 6).

This review proposes addressing this gap by developing a robust definition of professional nursing accountability through a comprehensive literature review. A clear definition serves as a foundation for two key advancements: first, the intentional integration of accountability education throughout the nursing curriculum, moving it from the periphery to the forefront of student learning. Second, it facilitates meaningful research investigating how students

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understand and experience accountability within their education. By establishing a shared understanding of professional nursing accountability, nurse educators can create a more explicit and effective learning environment for future generations of nurses.

Review of literature

Professional nursing accountability serves as the bedrock of safe patient care (6). It ensures nurses' actions align with established standards for quality and safety (7). However, educators cannot assume inherent accountability in students (8). To prevent suboptimal patient care, nursing curricula must explicitly integrate theory-driven teaching strategies and learning activities that cultivate the knowledge, skills, and attitudes associated with professional accountability (7, 9). This shift moves accountability education beyond the "hidden curriculum" to a prominent place within the learning experience.

Professional accountability is a cornerstone competency for new nurses (2). However, research suggests a concerning gap between expectation and reality. Studies highlighted that many new graduates lack the ability to demonstrate accountability in practice (10, 11). A study by Berkow et al. conducted a study evaluating 36 new graduate nurse competencies. While new graduates excelled in utilizing information technology (53% leader satisfaction), only 35% of nurse leaders were satisfied with their ability to be accountable for their actions (11). This ranked as the second lowest competency, only surpassed by delegation skills (10% satisfaction). These findings underscore the need for improved preparation in accountability during nursing education.

Developing a clear definition of professional nursing accountability, as proposed earlier, can empower faculty to design targeted teaching strategies, learning activities, and evaluation methods (12). This comprehensive approach will ensure future nurses enter practice with the skills and behaviors necessary to deliver safe, high-quality patient care (13).

The Challenge of Teaching Professional Accountability

While professional accountability is ostensibly included in contemporary nursing curricula, evidence suggests it's often delivered implicitly or weakly (4, 14). These core professional behaviors are often deemed "elusive" and challenging to teach, relegated to the periphery of the curriculum (4). Killam et al. (2010) identify key obstacles: a "perceived lack of program standards" aligning with professional expectations and limited faculty skills in pinpointing accountability deficits in students (15). Consequently, educators may prioritize "concrete" and "objective" topics like cognitive skills and psychomotor techniques (15). Developing a robust, literature-based definition of professional accountability offers a solution. A clear definition can bridge the gap in understanding and provide a foundation for both faculty and students. This shared framework would facilitate meaningful learning encounters focused on the knowledge, skills, and attitudes essential for professional nursing accountability (15).

The Elusive Definition of Professional Nursing Accountability

Despite its centrality to safe practice, a consistent definition of professional nursing accountability remains elusive within the medical and allied health literature (16, 17). Authors grapple with defining related concepts like professional behaviors, leading to ambiguity in educational approaches (18). This inconsistency can translate into faculty dissonance when teaching accountability (16). A review identified numerous terms associated with accountability, including professional socialization, values, ethics, and development (see references within passage) (19). By systematically analyzing this extensive list, the paper aims to synthesize a clear definition of professional nursing accountability, drawing on the common threads within the existing literature (18).

A review of the literature reveals "responsibility for nursing actions" as the most frequent theme associated with accountability, appearing in 11 out of 19 references (20). This definition suggests nurses bear the burden of their actions and their outcomes. However, Dohmann (2009) challenges this equation, arguing that responsibility implies having the authority to complete a task, while accountability arises from personal commitment to ensuring a desired outcome. From a practical standpoint, Dohmann suggests that nurses are responsible for carrying out actions, but accountable for the results (16). This distinction aims to clarify accountability as a separate professional behavior, facilitating better identification, labeling, and ultimately, education on the expectations associated with professional nursing accountability.

Responsibility and Accountability: Two Sides of the Coin?

While Dohmann (2009) differentiates responsibility from accountability, Bovens (1998) argues they are intricately linked. Etymologically, "responsibility" stems from the German "responder," meaning "to give an answer" or "justify oneself" (Bovens, 1998, p. 23) (21). This aligns with dictionary definitions, where both terms emphasize answering for one's actions (22). The frequent association of responsibility with accountability in the literature further strengthens this connection (23). Therefore, a definition of professional nursing accountability for educational purposes should likely incorporate aspects of responsibility for one's nursing actions. This combined perspective acknowledges the nurse's obligation to perform actions and the subsequent obligation to answer for the outcomes (24).

The second most frequent theme links accountability with answerability to oneself and those impacted by one's actions (17, 25, 26). For example, Snowdon and Rajacich (1993) emphasize the need for comprehensive education to prepare nurses for full accountability, highlighting answerability for their actions (p. 10) (25). Similarly, others emphasize the professional obligation to be answerable regardless of external influences (17). A study by Bovens et al., further suggests that accountability reflects taking responsibility for tasks, acting thoughtfully, and being answerable for consequences (p. 26). This concept of answerability clearly emerges as a core component of professional nursing accountability and should be included in a teaching-focused definition (21).

Beyond Actions: Additional Dimensions of Accountability

The literature identifies four additional, equally prevalent (four mentions each within 19 references) areas that contribute to a comprehensive definition of professional nursing accountability:

- **Accountability for Omissions:** Nurses are responsible not only for their actions but also for their inactions. A study emphasizes the need to justify both actions and omissions (p. 301) (23). A study by Dohmann et al., identifies a lack of accountability when nurses fail to make choices or commit to evidence-based practice, viewing statements like "I'll try" as omissions that relegate care to chance (16).
- **Lifelong Learning:** Professional accountability necessitates a commitment to lifelong learning to maintain competency in a dynamic healthcare environment.
- **Quality Patient Care:** Accountability is intrinsically linked to ensuring high-quality patient care.
- **Upholding Professional Standards:** Nurses are accountable for adhering to the established standards of their profession.

A clear definition for educational purposes should incorporate these essential elements, encompassing both the nurse's actions and their commitment to ongoing learning and upholding professional principles (20).

Lifelong Learning, Quality Care, and Professional Standards: Pillars of Accountability

The reviewed literature identifies three additional, equally prominent areas that contribute to professional nursing accountability:

- **Lifelong Learning:** Nursing organizations and educational bodies consistently emphasize the link between accountability and a commitment to lifelong learning. For instance, the International Council of Nurses' (ICN) Code of Ethics explicitly states that nurses are accountable for maintaining competence through continuous learning (3).
- **Quality Patient Care:** Accountability is inherently tied to delivering high-quality patient care. Both the ICN and American Nurses Association (ANA) Codes of Ethics highlight this connection, with Butts et al., stating these codes "serve as a mandate for accountability" related to patient care (p. 88) (27).
- **Upholding Professional Standards:** Nurses are accountable for adhering to the established standards set by their profession. A studies by Lewis and Batey eta l., and Caulfield eta l., further emphasize this link, viewing quality care and adherence to standards as outcomes fostered by accountability (17, 28).

Including these key elements within a teaching-focused definition of professional nursing accountability would provide educators with clear guidance on the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to cultivate in future nurses. By emphasizing lifelong learning, quality care, and upholding professional standards, educators can equip graduates to navigate the complexities of contemporary nursing practice and embrace the core principle of accountability.

Conclusion

This review identified the multifaceted nature of professional nursing accountability, encompassing responsibility for actions, answerability for outcomes, addressing omissions, lifelong learning, and upholding professional standards. A clear and comprehensive definition empowers nurse educators to integrate accountability education throughout the curriculum, moving it from the periphery to the forefront. By equipping students with the knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary to be accountable nurses, educators can ensure future generations prioritize the delivery of safe, high-quality patient care. Further research is warranted to explore effective teaching strategies for fostering accountability in nursing students.

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