

## Analysis of attitudinal assessment in the education of mid-level nursing professionals

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### ABSTRACT

This is a qualitative study with the objective to analyze how the teaching and assessment of attitudinal contents in the education of mid-level nursing professionals have been carried out. Data were collected through documentary analysis and two focus group sessions with the participating teachers. The sessions were recorded, transcribed and analyzed by means of thematic content analysis. Two main themes were identified: assessment in the teaching-learning process of nursing technicians and teaching and assessment of attitudinal contents in the education of nursing technicians. In conclusion, attitudinal assessment is performed unsystematically, despite being considered a procedural method. Although the institution under study relies on a faculty with knowledge of other teaching and assessment approaches, there is no overcoming the disciplinary logic, theory-practice separation and summative assessment.

**Descriptors:** Evaluation; Education, Nursing, Associate; Educational Measurement.

### INTRODUCTION

Nationally, little attention has been given to the education process of mid-level nursing professionals - the largest workforce among healthcare professionals<sup>(1)</sup>. The challenge is even greater when this education is targeted to the needs expected by the Unified Health System (SUS).

Mid-level nursing education has been guided mainly by

traditional curricula, narrative methods and transmission of knowledge, in which professionals base their performances on conceptual and factual knowledge to be memorized by students and on procedural knowledge to be acquired over a two-year training period<sup>(2)</sup>, as to meet the wishes of the neoliberal labor market.

This fact does not contribute to the complex and multifaceted process of consolidation of the SUS regarding the training of professionals capable of acting in it. Professionals are expected to have critical sense and a certain degree of autonomy for the operationalization/creation of strategies relevant to the health work process<sup>(2-4)</sup>.

Part of this problem lies in the educational deficiency presented by most people who have sought mid-level nursing education. A recent study revealed that this public has difficulty in Portuguese and mathematics - basic knowledge for certain skills in this professional's performance<sup>(5)</sup>.

Another part of this problem lies in the fact that the majority of teachers working in mid-level nursing education do not have sufficient pedagogical knowledge to manage the current pedagogical trends for the education of professionals, in accordance with the national curricular guidelines established for nursing education and the scientific discussions about the subject<sup>(2,6-8)</sup>.

The problem worsens when observing the teaching-learning processes of technical schools, with emphasis on assessment. Assessment in this educational level has valued quantitative tools and the summative perspective, placing much value in grading for the pass/fail system. The main instrument used for assessment, even with limitations, has been the written test<sup>(2)</sup>. It is known that this assessment tool reaches mainly the cognitive dimension (factual and conceptual content)<sup>(9)</sup>.

Thus, the attitudinal dimension of education, responsible for the change of attitudes and directed toward national frameworks of humanization, democracy, citizenship and autonomy, among others, is relegated to the hidden curriculum, and indiscriminately worked in an unofficial and often unplanned and neglected way.

In view of the complex challenge of professional education to support the consolidation of the SUS, in the midst of this problematic raised, it is extremely necessary to study the assessment processes in the education of mid-level professionals in nursing. These should emphasize the teaching, learning and assessment of attitudinal contents that are coherent with SUS educational guidelines and principles, since this approach has great possibilities of transforming attitudes<sup>(9)</sup> and assists in the process of overcoming educational difficulties. Therefore, the relevance of this study and the existence of other studies that work on this direction are explained.

Thus, the objective of this study was to analyze the performance of attitudinal assessment in the education of mid-level nursing professionals based on the experience of a private school in the state of São Paulo. This proposition goes in the direction of reflecting on the conception and accomplishment of assessment by teachers of this technical school, linking this process to the quality of mid-level nursing professional education.

## METHOD

Descriptive exploratory study with a qualitative approach, developed in a mid-level technical education institution located in southeastern Brazil.

The study population consisted of seven of the eight nurse-teachers working theoretic contents in the nursing technical course at the mid-level nursing school. The criterion of inclusion of the participants was to be a teacher who teaches theoretical content in the course and that of exclusion, to be a teacher of that school for less than six months. The nurse-teachers were invited to compose this study, seven agreed to participate and one of them refused. In order to maintain the anonymity of the participants, they were not identified.

Data collection began through the analysis of documents (management plan of the educational institution, political-pedagogical project (PPP) and curriculum of the nursing technical course), highlighting the adopted education system; the conceptual, procedural and attitudinal learning contents described in the curriculum and the form of assessment adopted in the PPP in effect at the school in question.

Two focus group meetings were held with the seven participants, at the school, lasting approximately two hours each. The focus groups were coordinated by two researchers, who have been trained for the development of the technique. The first meeting was conducted using a semi-structured script with questions relating to assessment in technical nursing education. How do you apply the programmatic contents? Do you address attitudinal contents and assess them? What are the easy and difficulty points related to the theme? At the second meeting the discussions started from the preliminary results of data analysis of the first meeting and data extracted from the analysis of the documents.

The focus group technique allows its participants to discuss a specific topic, when they receive incentives for the debate. It is distinguished by its characteristics and by the group interaction process resulting from the data search<sup>(10)</sup>.

The data obtained in the focus groups were taped and recorded in digital media, transcribed, read and systematically organized. The material was analyzed using thematic content analysis, which consists of discovering the core meaning produced by a communication process. The presence or frequency constitutes meaning for the analyzed object and for an analysis of meanings. The presence of certain themes indicates relevance in the studied discourse<sup>(11)</sup>. This analysis was performed observing the following steps: data organization, exhaustive reading and formulation of the themes<sup>(11)</sup>. A synthesis of the documents of the educational institution was also used.

Data collection began after the approval of the project by the research ethics committee of the Ribeirão Preto College of Nursing, under CAAE number 858.824/2014.

## RESULTS

The participants of the research consisted of seven of the eight nurse-teachers who work theoretical contents in the course of mid-level nursing technicians in the educational institution in question. Three of

them have had a full degree for four years, one has a master's degree and another three have a teacher training degree.

The mean length of mid-level teaching experience was four and a half years. All participants have another job besides teaching in technical education.

Two themes were extracted from the analysis of the collected data: assessment in the teaching-learning process of nursing technicians and teaching and assessment of attitudinal contents in the education of nursing technicians.

### **Assessment in the teaching-learning process of nursing technicians**

Research participants understand that assessment is a component of the teaching-learning process in the institutional context and should be consistent with the school's PPP. However, they reported that each teacher assesses students differently, without clear parameters. There are reports that raise the need for clearer and more objective parameters to be followed by all teachers in relation to student assessment. This proposition is moving towards the need for sharing the teaching and assessment assignments to be carried out by the different teachers in the classroom. Some statements reinforce this idea:

*...I believe that the assessment, it has to be consistent with the course format...*

*...the political-pedagogical project of the course has to be coherent with a type of assessment...*

*...here each one assesses in a way and we do not have much of a parameter or anything that collaborates in this sense...*

Teachers also reportedly seek an assessment model that, in their views, can go beyond the identification of strictly cognitive learning, but is broad enough to assess the student holistically. It is noteworthy that several strategies are listed to assess the theoretical contents taught in the classroom:

*...I usually do both ways: constructive and participatory assessment, attendance, punctuality, all ... in the classroom, more training or cognitive assessment...*

*...I can see an improvement in this student that is not only the training here of technical knowledge, but also of comprehensive knowledge;*

*...I promote group work, individual assignments, it depends a lot on the course, the goal I want to achieve with that particular course...*

Some statements demonstrate the teachers' awareness regarding the existence of gaps in the education of nursing aides and technicians in relation to teaching and assessment. These gaps also arise from the difficulties presented by the teachers regarding the planning of teaching, creation of several assessment strategies and their relation to the PPP of the course, with the intention of giving appropriate feedback to the students' education. Some speech fragments depict these propositions:

*...maybe I'm not teaching what would be best, which would be more appropriate, maybe I'm not assessing the best, and I will not be preparing a professional who will be so suitable ...*

*...he said here that he's got a lot of exams to correct. I keep wondering...*

*...the time we spend there on the weekend, our free time, to plan, to prepare for class and then to correct all those tests ...*

These facts are also related to the documents analyzed since the teacher demonstrates ignorance of the content of the PPP, the curriculum of the course and the management plan. The teacher has been working independently of these guiding documents that bring the pedagogical, methodological and assessing references of the course.

### **Teaching and assessing attitudinal contents in the education of nursing technicians**

The teachers of this study report their knowledge about attitudinal content. It is possible to notice some situations experienced by them and that were considered as context or favorable opportunities for the approach and assessment of these contents, being noticeable that they are not necessarily clear and/or agreed with the students previously, as an assessment criterion. Some speech fragments make this identification possible:

*The student who arrives late, it is bad. He will have a negative attitudinal assessment..."*

*...because there were three people who talked and talked...*

*...according to the attitudes, you go on telling the student: Look, this attitude you are having here in the classroom, it's wrong.*

*...It is imperative for a nursing professional to have posture, empathy, focus on the environment. So, I cast some things that, for me, are priorities...*

Some difficulties brought by teachers regarding the students' attitudinal assessment refer to the need to give specific numeric grades in the assessment of attitudinal contents and manage to give sufficient relevance to the attitudinal contents of the course, as to pass or fail by this criterion. Here are some reports that outline such difficulties:

*...valuing a particular attitude, posture, an initiative to participate, that sort of thing is very controversial, does not have a checklist, does not have a mechanism that can help us in this process...*

*...but there is one thing I think, that it is not enough to help, I think we have to have a penalty for him to see that it's not a joke...*

Some assessment criteria are described in the course program and those that are considered indispensable for the students' education are scored, that is, identified by teachers as something that facilitates the development of the attitudinal assessment. One can notice, in the teachers' reports, that the development and assessment of attitudinal content are relevant for giving feedback to students, reprimanding them (when necessary) and guiding them through the course. These ideas can be identified in the following speech fragments:

*I write it down there, it will be worth one point all that involves attitudinal [...] punctuality, attendance, attitude,*

*and participation in class.*

*... it is difficult to quantify this, but do you know when I can do the attitudinal? When I plan the course program because I cannot work without the course program.*

*...it will be an assessment to guide, to monitor, to reprimand students, to get to know them more...*

Although it is stated in the PPP that the assessment must be global and comprehensive, one can notice that the attitudinal assessment, illustrated in the speech fragments of these teachers, has a close relationship to a fragmented, punitive and quantitative teaching perspective.

## DISCUSSION

In the group discussions, it was seen that the choices of the assessment methods are carried out by the teachers in diverse and isolated ways. They use the summative assessment that, at the end of the pedagogical units, represents quantitatively the final average of student learning. They did not mention the coordination between the way they assess and the guidelines expressed in the school documents.

A Canadian study on student assessment also identified that when there are no clear assessment criteria by the educational organization, the tendency is for each teacher to rate their assessment by their own criteria, based on behaviors that they consider important<sup>(12)</sup>.

The non-reference to the PPP of the school demonstrates the lack of knowledge of this institutional document, which has the function of defining the objectives to be achieved, politically, by the learning institution in the education of mid-level nursing technicians, as to have better results<sup>(13)</sup>.

The documentary analysis emphasizes that this school's PPP is structured in the curricular model and describes that student assessment must be a continuous cumulative process based on the overall performance of the students. The assessment in the teaching-learning process should be understood as a diagnosis of the student's development during the course<sup>(14)</sup>.

In the constructivist approach, an assessment model capable of triggering an effective professional education process would be the formative assessment<sup>(15)</sup> that can be developed in three steps: 1) Initial assessment, which takes as its starting point getting to know the students as to understand what they can do and how they are; 2) regulatory assessment, which aims to understand how needs are presented in order to arrive at certain results and 3) final or integrative assessment, which will provide the result of everything that the student was able to learn within the pre-established period<sup>(9)</sup>.

The formative assessment is considered a dialogic assessment that allows intervention as to contribute to an effective relationship between teacher and student, collaborating in the construction of knowledge. This type of assessment can be enhanced by the discussion and formulation carried out by the pedagogical team and by the design of its work<sup>(16)</sup>. One of the roles of the professional education school is the propulsion and development, in the student, of this sense of moral and personal responsibility for the ongoing process of education throughout the professional trajectory<sup>(17)</sup>.

Thus, the approach and knowledge that the teachers of this school have about the assessment in the

teaching-learning process is questioned, since it does not seem that the paths taken by them lead to the achievement of an assessment that can meet the skills sought in the education of mid-level nursing technicians or develop the idea of a continuing professional education<sup>(18)</sup>.

There are experiences developed by technical schools of the same state that depict the education of nursing technicians in the perspective of active teaching-learning methodologies, focusing on problem-solving strategies and envisaging interprofessional training using assessment techniques consistent with the PPP and with the expected profile of alumni<sup>(19)</sup>.

It is noteworthy that learning assessment has not been planned in the studied school. The purpose, understanding, target, definition of who will be assessed, content and type of assessment are important components of teaching planning. Traditionally, the objectives, contents, activities, resources and tests applied at the end of the unit are chosen, characterizing the traditional maintenance of teaching and assessment<sup>(20)</sup>.

A study on undergraduate nursing corroborates this complex context of teaching and assessing attitudinal contents. The appreciation of the conceptual and procedural contents discriminated by the curriculum in a fragmented and punctual way makes it difficult to perceive the individual characteristics of the students, as well as their learning process<sup>(21)</sup>. Thus, it is considered that the assessment of attitudinal contents in the education of nurses runs through all levels of education.

There is a tendency to reproduce in teaching and assessment the model of education by which teachers were prepared<sup>(5)</sup>. Since nursing teachers are nurses, their undergraduate process may influence the teaching and assessing of attitudinal contents.

New experiences help transform the students' prior knowledge<sup>(22)</sup> and this idea is in line with meaningful learning, which needs to start from the understanding of education as a set of cognitive, affective and psychomotor experiences, aiming at the empowerment of the individual<sup>(23)</sup>. Therefore, it is necessary to have a closer look at assessing practices, so that these are in line with the educational presuppositions of mid-level nursing technicians.

In this sense, teachers must plan their activities in a continuous way, with participation of the collective of teachers who are involved in the process of teaching and learning<sup>(13)</sup>. However, one must take into account the educational process of these teachers which, does not necessarily prepare them pedagogically.

Another important issue is the double or triple working shifts, low wages and other aspects that may also interfere directly with planning and teaching. Most of the teachers who work with mid-level education have another job, and are paid according to the hours/classes taught monthly. Work in teaching is taken as a complementary part to the monthly income. With this, they are not exclusively dedicated to teaching. The resources for preparation and planning are scarce and difficult, hindering the practice of teaching<sup>(19)</sup>.

In this sense, thought is given to the difficulties cited as gaps in the teaching process reported by participants, assuming that they may be related to issues that pervade the organization of working conditions and society as a whole. Even when there are physical, pedagogical and curricular structures organized in

order to respond to legislation and guidelines for education, it is not possible to state that the education provided according to this recommended organization meets the quality expected for the education of workers for the SUS<sup>(19)</sup>.

As much as teachers go through teaching courses to support their professional practice, they tend to be overwhelmed by the practical problems of everyday classroom life - considered difficult. One of the aspects that can help overcome such difficulties is the systematization of their activities, sharing them with their peers and discussing with them the subjects related to the education of students<sup>(24)</sup>.

The minimum necessary for a professional education must be pedagogically established, such as the knowledge, skills and habits to be seized by students. Such assignments should not be taken and assessed individually by each teacher. Regardless of the choice of grading, passing or failing should be based minimally on the learning of the required knowledge<sup>(25)</sup>.

In order to assess the attitudinal content, teachers must understand such contents and devise strategies to perceive them. When attitudinal content is not explicitly part of the course program and teaching occurs individually, only quantifiable aspects can be assessed, such as punctuality, attendance, observation of institutional norms, use of uniform, attitude, participation in activities, initiative, responsibility and commitment<sup>(21)</sup>.

The responsibility of showing students that the learning of attitudinal contents is as important as the learning of procedural contents is also up to teachers. To do so, teachers should always observe and respect students' autonomy, dignity and individuality. The individuals involved, teachers and students, must recognize one another as important and protagonists in this process<sup>(5)</sup>.

## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The results of this study showed that the teaching and assessment of attitudinal contents are considered important by teachers in the education of mid-level nursing technicians. However, they seek to carry out teaching and assessment of aspects such as punctuality, attendance and other more objective attributes. They feel unprepared to address the difficulties presented by students, especially those expressed in relationships with colleagues, teachers, and patients. In the institution studied, there are no criteria or agreements that guide the teaching staff and each of them ends up performing the assessment the way they believe to be the best.

Although the institution studied counts on a nursing faculty who are familiar with other forms of teaching and assessment and know the importance of the PPP as a guiding document, there is no overcoming the disciplinary logic. There are also the hourly conditions of the teachers' employment contract, with the difficulties that can arise in the insertion of these workers in education.

The education of mid-level nursing technicians is a sensitive field for Brazilian health and other studies of teaching-learning process and assessment should be performed.

Both teaching strategies and assessment strategies are aspects of pedagogical planning closely related

to ethical and political stakes that can extend the education of manpower centered in the strictly technical-marketing performance or the formation of citizens who take care of people with rights and desires.

The study limitation was the approach of only one aspect of the assessment - attitudinal. However, it is very relevant to reflect upon and propagate initiatives that move towards research on the assessment of learning in mid-level nursing.

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