

## **Nursing Students' Experiences with Life-Respecting and Protecting Practices: Qualitative Content Analysis Following Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory Process**

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### **Abstract**

**Purpose:** This study explored the effectiveness of practical education on respecting and protecting life for nursing students and the process of expanding their awareness of life. **Method:** Qualitative content analysis was conducted on 750 life protection practice reports written by 50 first-year nursing students over a 15-week period, based on Kolb's experiential learning theory process. **Results:** The students' practical experiences yielded themes organized into three categories: "Protecting My Own Life," "Respecting and Protecting Others' Lives," and "Respecting and Protecting the Lives of Animals and Plants." **Conclusion:** Through the practical process, the students expanded their concerns and actions to encompass all life, including themselves, others, animals, plants, and the natural environment, thereby cultivating an awareness of respect for life. Such experiences enhanced their respect for life and ecological sensitivity and made them aware of their responsibility toward others and environmental protection. In particular, life-protecting practices extended beyond the individual to the community level, confirming that this could have a significant impact on the formation of nursing students' bioethical awareness. Therefore, this study suggests the need to expand experience-based ethics education in nursing education programs.

**Keywords:** *Respect for Life, Pro-Life, Bioethics, Practical Education, Nursing Students.*

### **Introduction**

Nursing is a profession that deals with human life, and ethical values and moral judgment are extremely important for nurses. The Korean Nurses' Code of Ethics (2023)[1] also emphasizes the ethical responsibility of nurses to "respect and protect the value and dignity of life." Education on respecting and protecting life is an essential element for nursing students to perform ethical nursing in clinical settings. The importance of ethics education has also been emphasized in the recent 4th nursing education accreditation evaluations, and the awareness of respecting life plays a crucial role in establishing nursing students' professional identity as a core value of nursing ethics.

However, life ethics education in nursing schools currently focuses mainly on theoretical education, lacks consideration for qualitative improvement, and has low student satisfaction [2]. As a result, students have few opportunities to actually experience life-respecting behavior. Theoretical and rote-learning-based education alone is insufficient for cultivating the moral sensitivity and practical skills necessary to address ethical issues encountered in complex clinical environments. "Moral sensitivity" refers to the ability to understand and interpret situations from a moral perspective[3], which can be developed through direct experience and reflection.

Previous studies have primarily focused on surveys of nursing students' levels of bioethical awareness, researches for influencing factors and evaluations of the effectiveness of educational programs. However, there has been a lack of practical approaches that allow nursing students to directly experience life-respecting behaviors and explore the educational effects of such experiences[4-14]. This study was conducted against this backdrop, applying Kolb's experiential learning theory to provide nursing students with practical opportunities to engage in behaviors related to respecting and protecting life and to explore the educational effects of such experiences. Kolb (1984)[15] viewed experiential learning as a cyclical process of "concrete experience (CE) → reflective observation (RO) → abstract

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conceptualization (AC) → active experimentation (AE),” which aligns with the process of bioethics education and the acquisition of educational effects.

This study aims to qualitatively assess the impact of participatory practice education on the enhancement of moral sensitivity and ethical growth among nursing students according to Kolb's experiential learning theory process, thereby proposing a practical educational model that differs from existing bioethics education. Specifically, by analyzing nursing students' experiences in writing “life-protecting practice reports,” this study seeks to examine the patterns of expanding their consciousness for life-respecting and protecting, and to find its educational significance, and to explore practical methodologies for effectively cultivating respect for life in nursing education.

## **Research Methods**

### **Research Design and Theoretical Framework**

This study is a qualitative content analysis research that analyzes the Life-Protecting Practice Reports written by nursing students as assignments in a bioethics course to practically explore the effects of life-respecting education. The 15-week bioethics course covered various ethical theories and topics, incorporating problem-based learning (PBL), reflective journal writing, and discussions to encourage interactive and reflective learning. In particular, Kolb's experiential learning theory was applied throughout the course design, requiring students to complete a “life-protecting practice report” assignment each week, which involved performing and reflecting on daily life-respecting practices over the 15-week period.

### **Research Participants and Data Collection**

The participants in this study were 50 first-year nursing students at K University in W City, Gangwon Province, who voluntarily agreed to participate in the study after enrolling in the bioethics course in the second semester of 2023 and consenting to the study's purpose and procedures. A total of 750 reports written by the students over 15 weeks were used as qualitative content analysis data. Data collection was conducted over approximately 15 weeks from late August to mid-December 2023. The students were asked to freely perform actions that promote respect for and protection of life in their daily lives, document the content through photographs, and describe their feelings and reflections in approximately half a page of A4 paper. Repeated practices were also permitted, and all 50 students submitted reports without exception over the 15-week period. To ensure anonymity, the reports were labeled only with the week number, without any personal information.

### **Data Analysis Procedures**

Data analysis was conducted using the qualitative content analysis procedure proposed by Elo and Kyngäs [16] and the grounded theory approach (open coding, axial coding, selective coding) by Strauss and Corbin [17]. Kolb's four-stage experiential learning process was applied as a theoretical analytical framework to classify and interpret the students' experiences by stage. To enhance the validity and reliability of the data, the researcher repeatedly analyzed and reviewed the data. Additionally, the researcher consulted with an external nursing professor with extensive experience in qualitative research in the field of nursing to verify the appropriateness of the interpretation and consistency of the analysis.

### **Ethical Considerations of the Study**

Before this study began, the researcher fully explained the purpose, process, and use of the data to the participants and obtained their written consent. The collected data was used solely for research purposes, and ethical measures were followed, such as ensuring anonymity and emphasizing that participation would not affect grades. To ensure the reliability of the study, the four criteria for qualitative research proposed by Guba and Lincoln [18] were followed: factual value, applicability, neutrality, and consistency. The researcher is a nursing major who has taught bioethics courses for over a decade, has consistently shown interest in qualitative research methodology, and has participated in related academic conferences and workshops, as well as having published qualitative papers.

## **Research Results**

The qualitative analysis of the bioethics education program conducted with nursing students revealed that the learners gradually developed a sense of respect for life and ethical sensitivity in accordance with Kolb's experiential learning cycle. The practical actions related to life-respecting and protecting that the participants carried out each week were classified into 5 thematic clusters and 13

themes under 3 major categories: 1) protecting my own life, 2) loving others and protecting the lives of others, and 3) loving animals and plants and protecting life.

**Table 1. Categories-Thematic Clusters and Themes-Topics**

Categories	Thematic clusters and Themes		Topics
Protecting my own life	Taking care of my physical health	Food	Cooking
			Eating healthy foods
		Exercise	Walking a lot
			Exercising regularly
	Taking care of my mental health	Regular lifestyle	Going to bed early and waking up early
			Watching movies
		Having leisure time	Reading books
			Watching videos about the global environment
Loving others and Protecting the lives of others	Living with others	Developing ecological sensitivity	Taking an interest in environmental protection
		Respecting others	Respecting the elderly
		Caring for others	Cleaning
		Practicing sharing	Donating blood
Loving animals and plants and protecting life	Protecting and loving animals	Raising pets	Making donations
			Raising cats
			Raising dogs
			Raising Korean red ants
			Raising guppies
			Raising hedgehogs
			Raising freshwater clams
			Raising ducks
		Pet volunteer and sponsorship activities	Caring for cats
			Sponsoring stray dogs
		Protecting wild animals	Caring for wild cats
			Disposing of masks properly
	Protecting and loving plants	Using vegan products	Using vegan cosmetics
		Growing plants	Watering potted plants
			Growing various plants

### Protecting My Own Life

Concrete Experience (CE): Participants practiced activities to promote physical health, such as cooking their own meals instead of ordering delivery food (Participant 01) or walking short distances (Participant 07) to protect their own lives. They also made efforts to care for their mental health by

watching movies with their families (Participant 37) or reading books related to the environment (Participant 41).

Reflective Observation (RO): Participants gained an understanding of the value of health promotion and environmental protection through cooking (Participant 12) and became aware of the harmful effects of sleep deprivation and irregular eating habits on the body (Participant 09). Through environmental protection activities, they developed ecological sensitivity and became interested in living in harmony with the global environment, moving away from self-centered daily routines. This led to an improvement in their sense of respect for their own lives and positive self-perception.

Abstract conceptualization (AC): Through self-management, participants gained the insight that "health is the most important factor in whatever I do in the future. I must be healthy in order to help others" (Participant 04). They realized that healthy lifestyle habits are connected not only to their own lives but also to their responsibility toward others, and their belief system based on bioethical values became more solidified.

Active experimentation (AE): A participant who challenged himself to drink enough water vowed to continue consciously drinking more water beyond this life-protecting experience (Participant 05), while another participant expressed a strong determination to continue efforts to improve his health for a better life (Participant 25). These strengthened resolves also led to a commitment to fulfill their role as future nurses.

### **Loving Others and Protecting the Lives of Others**

Concrete Experience (CE): The participants directly engaged in various acts of kindness for others, such as driving an elderly person who's lost (Participant 44), actively participating in blood donation upon hearing news of blood shortages (Participant 07), and volunteering to clear snow accumulated in front of their homes to ensure the safety of family and neighbors (Participant 49).

Reflective Observation (RO): Participants felt a sense of pride knowing that their blood donations helped those in need (Participant 07) and took pride in participating in life-saving activities as nursing students (Participant 24). Through the experience of helping the elderly, participants developed a heightened sense of responsibility toward others and ethical sensitivity, and realized that even small actions can influence the health and safety of those around them (Participant 49).

Abstract conceptualization (AC): Defining blood donation as "a noble act of love and sharing life, where healthy people voluntarily donate their blood without compensation" (Participant 09), emphasizing that blood cannot be artificially produced and that blood donation is the only means to save patients in need of transfusions (Participant 33), participants gained a deeper understanding of the social and ethical significance of life-saving actions.

Active Experimentation (AE): Participants resolved to engage in regular blood donation or volunteer activities (Participant 06) and made plans to regularly visit and serve elderly people in their communities (Participant 34). They demonstrated an ethical commitment to actively act as future medical professionals by accepting life-respecting actions for others as an ongoing obligation rather than a one-time event.

### **Loving Animals and Plants and Protecting of Life**

Specific experiences (CE): Participants cared for pets, rescued and nursed stray cats (participants 15 and 34), volunteered at animal shelters (participant 21) and sponsored them (participant 17), and cared for stray cats (participant 05). Additionally, they engaged in various protective activities for animals and plants, such as properly disposing of disposable masks to prevent harm to wildlife (Participant 14), using vegan products (Participant 45), and watering plants or growing various plants (Participants 24, 31).

Reflective observation (RO): Participants felt sadness and compassion upon seeing abandoned cats (11 participants) and felt guilty and a sense of responsibility for not properly disposing of masks after learning about cases of wildlife harm caused by improperly disposed masks (14 participants). They realized that plants are living beings that die without water and nutrients and can feel pain if treated carelessly (Participant 24), and came to understand how precious each life is (Participant 31).

Abstract conceptualization (AC): Participants recognized that thoughtlessly discarding masks is dangerous to animals and learned the proper disposal method (participant 14), and conceptualized that walking with pets is an opportunity to improve social skills (participant 12). Through these, they

developed a broad understanding of the ecosystem and animal rights and acquired a life-centered value system.

Active Experimentation (AE): Participants committed to diligently continuing to care for their seriously ill dogs (Participant 15) and concluded that life-related practices are not a choice but a necessity, vowing to become a person who strives to protect the environment and life in the future (Participant 14). They established an identity as protectors of life that encompasses the ecosystem and internalized a bioethical perspective in which humans and nature coexist in harmony.

## **Discussion**

This study explored changes in nursing students' awareness of respect for life through the writing of a 15-week "Life Protection Practice Report," and the results present the following points for discussion.

First, it offers implications for a paradigm shift in bioethics education. Beyond the limitations of traditional theory-centered education, the changes in students' lives and behaviors demonstrated in this study show that participatory experiential learning is effective in internalizing bioethical values. This aligns with previous research findings on experiential learning-based nursing education[19-20] .

Second, the expansion of interest from self to others and to animals and plants observed in this study well illustrates the process which participants expand the scope of their ethical concerns. This is similar to Gilligan's development of care ethics or Kohlberg's stages of moral development. In particular, the fact that caring for others naturally followed after self-care experiences suggests the importance of self-care in nursing professional education.

Third, it suggests a discussion for the sustainability and dissemination of educational effects. The 15-week process of practice and reflection contributed to many participants internalizing behavioral changes, and some participants expressed their willingness to continue practicing even after this life-protecting experience was completed. This suggests that educational interventions have the potential to lead to sustainable behavioral change.

Fourth, it concerns the formation of professional identity and ethical awareness. Through the Life Protection Practice Reports, participants deeply reflected on their roles and values as nurses. This is a strength of moral education through practice, promoting the formation of professional self-concepts among nursing students and enhancing their ethical awareness and respect for their profession[21].

Finally, there is the potential for application in the context of nursing education. The "life-protecting practice reports" program implemented in this study can be carried out without additional budget or complex equipment, and participants accepted it as a meaningful activity. Considering the level of each grade, it can be expanded and applied from practice centered on personal life to ethical practice linked to clinical practice.

## **Conclusion and Recommendations**

This study demonstrated the value of a practical educational model that complements existing theory-centered bioethics education, by qualitatively analyzing nursing students' experiences in practicing respect for and protection of life. Through 15 weeks of practice and reflection, participants showed growth in their awareness of respect for life, starting with self-care and expanding to others and the ecosystem. This process enhanced their moral sensitivity, formed their ethical identity, and instilled a sense of responsibility as nurses.

Based on the implications of this study, the following recommendations are proposed.

First, experiential practical tasks should be actively incorporated into the curriculum of bioethics and nursing ethics in nursing education.

Second, self-care should be established as the starting point for life-protecting education, guiding students to learn and practice how to care for their own lives and health.

Third, follow-up research is needed to quantitatively evaluate the educational effects of this study and generalize the practical process.

Finally, the life-protecting practical education proposed in this study is a useful approach to help nursing students cultivate a holistic ethical consciousness that integrates knowledge, emotion, and will. If nursing educators creatively apply and develop the results of this study in educational settings, it is

expected that more aspiring nurses will deeply understand the dignity and value of life, and create an environment where they can put this understanding into practice.

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