

Professional Identity for Nursing Students: Development and Enhancement in the Academy

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Abstract

Establishing a professional identity in nursing school proves challenging as imposter syndrome comes into the equation. There are defining moments when students feel like a “real nurse”, unique and individualized to the scholars. Incorporating nursing core values through interaction with cohort members, patients during clinical rotations and faculty contribute to students formulating nursing students’ professional identity (Pullen, 2021). Nursing faculty play an integral role in supporting students’ journey defining identity, academic success, and program completion. Developing professional identity in nursing school requires the examination of personal values, integrity, and experience attributed to formulating personal and professional identities.

Keywords: professional identity, nursing students, student retention, workplace retention, values

“A nurse develops a professional identity when they internalize and consider the profession's key values, take part in personal and professional development activities, and gain experience in clinical settings as they advance in their careers.”

National League for Nursing (2022)

1. Introduction

Establishing a professional identity in nursing school is essential for scholars with various contributing factors. Nursing students attribute defining moments to feeling like a “real nurse”; however, stellar leadership and hands-on experience are integral for nursing students to develop professional identities (Vabo et al., 2021). Remaining cognizant when entering nursing school that students encompass life-changing scenarios (relocating for school, moving from support groups such as family and friends, etc.) that potentially impede quick assimilation into the profession and establishing their professional identity and values (McDonald et al., 2018). A sense of community and belonging advances the professional identity of nursing students and this can be established by joining organizations and peer study groups within nursing divisions (Fatemeh & Fatemeh, 2022). The purpose of this paper is to explore the concept of nursing students' professional identity and how personal and professional values influence the role. Students and faculty alike possess the ability to examine experiences that mold future nurses and contribute to their unique contributions to the profession. Respecting the individuality and diversity of nursing students provides educators with the aptitude to their role advancing into the profession.

2. Professional Identity

Nursing students’ professional identity begins to configure when making the decision to enter the nursing profession and is coupled with personal and others’ impressions of the profession as a whole (Goodolf and Godfrey, 2021). Establishing professional identity is paramount for nursing students and comprises three components: the self, role, and context (Rasmussen et al., 2018). Ultimately, when the nurse is content in the professional setting and the role assumed, professional identity is positive. However, discord from stress and instability in the position and establishment contribute to a negative professional identity. It is noteworthy to understand early in the profession that retention of staff, patient care, and medical outcomes directly correlate with professional identity (Rasmussen et al.,

2018). Four domains underpin establishing a professional identity in nursing: 1. Ethics and values 2. Knowledge 3. Nurse as a leader, and 4. Professional comportment (Godfrey, 2022). Professional identities assist with defining occupations and encompass education and moral principles defined by society (Maginnis, 2018). As nursing students matriculate through the program, faculty and leadership must remain cognizant of the significance of effective role modeling, establishing a positive learning experience, and promoting an environment conducive to guiding students as their professional identities evolve.

Establishing intentional opportunities to promote the concept of professional identities in nursing students has proven challenging for nursing faculty; yet the National League for Nursing (NLN) Nursing Education Competency Model emphasizes the concept throughout every classification of degree sought in the realm of nursing (Williams & Burke, 2015). Incorporating professional nursing values and ethics in the curriculum assists with identifying expectations that underpin the nursing profession. The transition from lectures and employing interactive techniques focusing on cognitive and affective domains shape professional identity in nursing students with a focus on reasoning and self-evaluation with critical thinking skills (Simmonds et al., 2020). Salient to devising professional identity in nursing students is self-esteem contributing to professional values defining one's profession (Daly et al., 2012). Ultimately, values, personal beliefs, and ethics define professions and significantly contribute to professional identity.

3. Retention

Critical shortages of nurses nationwide are an ongoing phenomenon; over 1,000 community colleges offering nursing courses struggle with soaring attrition rates of nursing students (Kubec, 2017). Students' expectations of nursing programs contribute significantly to attrition rates and the lack of intrinsic motivation is a deciding factor in dropping out of nursing programs (Hoeve et al., 2017). Extensive diversity among nursing students complicates personal and academic motivation for program completion including language barriers, work obligations, and family responsibilities (Everett 2020). Motivation, persistence, and success are enhanced when nursing faculty provide social and academic support throughout the nursing program. Cultivating an atmosphere conducive to learning, formulating peer study sessions, content relevancy, clear expectations, inclusivity, and transparency of rigor mitigate the retention of students. Devising stress reduction and techniques are critical for the first year as students assimilate into the rigor to support diverse learning needs and backgrounds to meet the increasing demand for new nurses to enter the profession filling the critical shortages (Smith-Wacholz, 2019).

Gender bias warrants being addressed when working with male nursing students navigating barriers with maternal health topics to promote inclusion (Powers et. al, 2018). Non-academic factors contribute to soaring attrition rates in nursing programs across the nation that need to be examined to promote the completion and support of students. Sound support from family and friends are factors that directly correlate with retention in nursing programs. Circumstances including financial constraints, and crises in personal lives are noteworthy contributors to attrition; faculty relationships with students are positioned to provide resources and assistance to promote retention so students can complete the program (Priode et al., 2020).

Nursing faculty retention challenges negatively affect nursing students: limiting cohort sizes due to lack of student/faculty ratio and lowering standards to entice educators to leave bedside nursing for academe (Harris, 2019). As individuals retire, experience burnout, and contend with workplace politics and family challenges, nurses exit the profession further crippling the profession. Predominant factors correlating to nurse retention include intrinsic motivation, strategic planning and benefits for nurses, proximity from work to home, and passion and fulfillment of the job (Efendi et al., 2019). Emotional exhaustion and increased stress levels are attributed to a mass exodus. Increased workloads with higher patient acuity, shortages of resources, ineffective policies and procedures coupled with incompetency are additional factors challenging the retention of nurses (Labrague et al., 2020). The vicious cycle of students not completing nursing programs and professional nurses leaving the profession is paramount to the critical shortages of nurses needed to fill employment gaps nationwide.

4. Applying the Nursing Process

Personal and professional values are emphasized in nursing, guiding one's practice. Personal values guide actions and are established when individuals gain an understanding of right or wrong and change throughout time. Culture, religion, politics, and morals influence personal values. Oftentimes, personal values are congruent with the professional values of the desired profession. This is an influencing factor driving entrance into the desired profession. Professional values guide individuals on how to conduct themselves within their professional role. Examples include work ethic, reliability, accountability, and positivity. However, periodically there is a conflict between the two. Conflict with diverse populations, disabilities, and religious standpoints contribute to challenges in fulfilling the expectations of the professional role.

Developing professional values in nursing students is influenced by personal and environmental factors. Personal attributions encompass employment history, relationships with others, belief in God, and self-value (Shafakhah et al., 2018). Environmental factors include the work atmosphere, society's perception of the nursing profession, and discipline within the profession (Shafakhah et al., 2018).

Professional values of nursing students contribute to the motivation to become a nurse, guide individual stances for the profession's foundation, and influence care provided to patients, colleagues, and community members (Poorchangizi et al., 2019). Faculty should demonstrate and instruct nursing students on ethical behaviors to transfer into the profession, as defined by Florence Nightingale when the profession evolved (Çöplü & Kartın, 2018).

Professional identities in nursing are critical components for the profession that begin to formulate as nursing students enter school preparing to enter the professional role. Positive professional identities contribute to contentedness on the job, a stronger sense of community, strong interpersonal and interdisciplinary relations with colleagues, and heightened self-esteem. Remaining cognizant that barriers impede positive professional identity is necessary to identify areas for improvement. Mitigating negative contributors will ultimately enhance patient care and outcomes.

Stress is the most profound contributor to negative professional identity in nursing students and nurses in the professional setting. Prevalence of stress is exemplified in nursing school as students strive for academic success with higher benchmarks observed than general courses and other degrees sought. Stress from managing family obligations, work commitments, full credit loads in school, and other tasks heighten stress levels for nursing students. Nursing faculty continually had stress to promote student success in programs, while also ensuring pass rates on the national boards meet benchmarks so programs remain accredited. Sun et al., 2016 argue enhancing professional identity overall might benefit nursing students' approach to managing role stress.

Incivility in nursing programs and the profession influences poor professional identities and carries on when entering the profession. Muliira et al., 2017 argue incivility impeded learning in the academic arena, poor patient care and outcomes. Jean et al., 2018, assert faculty promote resilience in practice to overcome adversity with professional identity training centered around resilience should be included in education. The aim is to mitigate challenges contributing to retention in the profession while focusing on continued support and reflection of scenarios.

As nursing students identify weaknesses correlated to beliefs and values, remaining receptive to changing mindsets and practices is suggested. Remaining dedicated to development and change throughout schooling and the professional career correlates with job satisfaction, retention, and the ability to critically think and deliver optimal patient care (Walls, 2022).

Nursing programs should deliberately be orchestrated to promote student success and the ability to garner positive self-esteem. Promoting positive professional identities early in nursing programs will help students as they matriculate through academia and enter the industry. Establishing programmatic goals in nursing programs promotes learning and performance are critical. Executing SMART goals (Specific, measurable, attainable, realistic, and time-bound) in courses demonstrates enhanced student performance, specifically noted in a simulation where students prepare for real-life scenarios in a no-harm patient setting (Aghera et al., 2018). Ultimately, implementing SMART goals results in improved educational actions which is educators' aim to promote excellence in education.

Assessment of student performance and program learning outcomes should be analyzed early in the program, midway, and at the end to evaluate long-term goals to aid in optimal academic experience which directly correlates with professional identities. Continual evaluation of goals based on evidence-based practice is necessary to align practice with learning opportunities. As students advance in programs and demonstrate mastery of skills their professional identity is enhanced.

Nursing students' professional identity evolves during nursing school and is influenced by support systems including peers and faculty. Accountability must be assumed, and advocacy must transpire when impediments are present. Proactivity and regular contact with nursing faculty are proven effective in promoting positive student professional identity. Interconnectedness with students is a determinant of academic success and directly correlates to professional identities (Ingraham et al., 2018). Nursing faculty must be present on campus to demonstrate professionalism and support students' academic growth.

Nursing programs must remain in compliance with the college/university accreditation bodies. In addition, nursing programs must adhere to the state board of nursing and the nursing program-specific accreditation body. Community colleges are accredited by the Accreditation Commission for Education in Nursing (ACEN) and universities by the Commission on Collegiate Nursing Education (CCNE). The governing bodies ensure the education delivered meets benchmarks. Students pass rates, and hours of training opportunities in a wide array of clinical settings ensuring

students are competent with skills to deliver safe patient care. All governing bodies contribute to the development of professional identities in nursing students.

5. Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to explore the concept of nursing students' professional identity and how personal and professional values influence the role. Educational leaders must remain cognizant they influence the process. Educators can incorporate content in the curriculum to build and strengthen the perception of the students' self, and the role of the professional nurse. The nursing process provides a foundation for all aspects of the nursing profession, regardless of specialty and area of practice. The nursing process: Assessment, Diagnosis, Planning, Implementing, and Evaluation are a systematic approach to ensure holistic and patient-focused care if delivered by nurses. Adopting this model during professional training to prepare for entrance into the nursing profession aids in developing personal and professional identity in nursing students.

Limitations encompass conducting a comparative analysis of nursing students pre and post-pandemic. Life-altering changes transpired, and nursing schools have adjusted their teaching approach. Students have re-evaluated personal and professional convictions that correlate with the expectations and roles of nursing. Coupled with the changed landscape of nursing education, student perspectives have evolved. Further research devoted to salient identifying factors of establishing the professional identity of nursing students is advised. Understanding the relevant components and factors will guide educators in supporting students matriculating through nursing programs.

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