Evolution and influencing factors of professional role identity in Flemish nursing students during their education

Background

The current shortage of nurses, resulting from high turnover rates and a limited influx in nursing education, creates a significant challenge for health care. According to the Federal Knowledge Centre for Health Care, one in four nurses is dissatisfied with their job, and 36% are at risk of burnout [1]. Previous findings suggested that intention to leave is highest amongst nurses with low job satisfaction and inadequate development of their professional role identity [2]. Developing your professional identity is a dynamic process which can be stimulated during nursing education, as well as during the transition from student to nurse in the workplace [3,4].

Aim(s)

This study investigated the development and evolution of professional role identity of Flemish Bachelor nursing students. Furthermore, the influence of internships, sociodemographic factors, training-, work-, and perception-related factors were investigated. Additionally, the relationship between professional readiness and the level of professional role identity was investigated.

Methods

A quantitative, cross-sectional, observational study was performed in which 896 Flemish nursing students participated. A convenience sample was sought through the distribution of a poster within five nursing schools. Perceptions and self-reported readiness-to-practice were investigated using the 'Macleod Clark Professional Identity Scale' (MCPIS) and 'Readiness to Practice Casey-Fink Questionnaire' [5,6]. Data collection was performed using an electronic survey between Febr 1 and March 31, 2023.

Results

Students' respective stage of training did not directly influence their level of professional role identity (stage 1: mean 37.07 (SD 4.11) vs stage 2: mean 36.53 (SD 4.55) vs stage 3: mean 36.97 (SD 4.35) vs stage 4: mean 37.10 (SD 4.30); $p = 0.475$). However, analysis at item level revealed a significant increase in feeling part of the profession ($p>0.001$), but a significant decrease in happiness to be part of it throughout training ($p= 0.036$). Work experience ($r=0.077$, $9=0.003$) and professional self-confidence ($r=0.327$, $p>0.001$, $n=762$) were positively correlated with the level of professional role identity. Respondents ($n=647$) who perceived reflection as important had higher professional role identity scores (mean 37.30 (4.18) vs 35.43 (4.94), $p>0.001$).

Discussion

This study found no significant differences in total scores on professional role identity between training stages. However, when analyzing specific statements, differences emerged. In contrast to socio-demographic data, this study showed that professional readiness is a significant predictor of the development of professional role identity. Furthermore, some methodological limitations should be mentioned. For each participating college, one measurement moment was organized once within each training phase, which resulted in unequal study groups.

Implications and future perspectives

The study emphasizes the importance of developing professional role identity as part of nursing students' training programs. It suggests integrating the concept of professional role development to different training stages, providing support systems like mentoring, and offering educational sessions on nursing-related topics. Given the predicted shortage of nurses, nursing retention has become a global concern [7,8]. Understanding and promoting professional role identity can guide educational pathways and curricula, leading to increased

engagement with the nursing profession. These findings provide a basis for creating more targeted training programs and encouraging additional research.

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