PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY OF NURSING STUDENTS IN LITHUANIA AND POLAND

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Abstract. *Nurses' professional identities develop throughout their lifetimes, from before entering nursing education, throughout their years of study and clinical experience, and continue to evolve during their careers. Education is, however, a key period as it is during this time students gain the knowledge and skills that separate nurses as healthcare professionals from people representing their professions. In order to purposefully shape the professional identity of nursing students, there is a need of knowing the level at which students identify themselves with the profession when graduating from a university. The aim of the study is to reveal the professional identity of nursing students in Lithuania and Poland and to make recommendations for improving the study process on the basis of the results of the study. A quantitative survey was conducted in the spring of 2017. The results of the research reveal that the professional identity of nursing students is rather of high level, the decision to work as nurses is strong, but there are some gaps in understanding of roles and responsibilities of nursing.*
Keywords: *development of professional identity, nursing, nursing students' professional identity, professional identity.*

Introduction

Professional identity is thus the self that has been developed with the commitment to perform competently and legitimately in the context of the profession, and its development can continue over the course of the individual's career (Tan, 2014). Identity can be defined as knowledge, emotions, abilities, and experiences that are organized around a social role. Profesional identity is referring to those elements organized around a particular professional role (Giddens, 1991). Professional identity is a matter of concern for so many different professions (Webb, 2017), because having a strong professional identity is crucial for increasing the likelihood of ethical performances, an advanced awareness of professional roles, and ultimately, a better chance for the profession to survive

(Woo, Henfield, & Choi, 2014) and successful professional leadership practices depend to a large degree on strong professional identities (Ritacco & Bolívar, 2018). Evidence shows that strong professional identity contributes to altruistic and honest behavior (Houdek, 2017).

The even more problematic issue is the development of professional identity. The professional identity of nursing students may fluctuate or even disintegrate when exposed to clinical realities. A self-identity must be integrated firstly with new expectations and modified within a social context to form a professional identity. In the process of developing a professional identity, students either develop a self-concept within a professional role based on attributes, beliefs, values, motives, experiences, morals and ideals of who and what a nurse is, or lack to develop in this role (Moola, 2018). Professional identity develops throughout lifetimes, from before entering professional education, throughout the years of study and work experience, and continue to evolve during person's career. The development of a professional identity that is aligned with the desired attributes of the professional-inpractice becomes a priority (Tan, 2014).

Professional identity cannot be achieved without the contribution of many actors. Education is, however, a key period as it is during this time students gain the knowledge and skills that separate them as the professionals from people representing other professions. Students have to be supported to understand their developing identities: in making sense of their experiences to relate to who they are, and who they might become as the professionals (Monrouxe, 2010). When explicit support for the development of their professional identity is not designed or provided for, students may inadvertently be influenced by the informal or hidden curriculum that can run counter to the desired outcomes of professional education (Tan, 2014).

In order to purposefully shape the professional identity of nursing students, there is a need of knowing the level at which students identify themselves with the profession when graduating from a university. Thus the aim of the study is to reveal the level of the professional identity of nursing students in Lithuania and Poland, to reveal the gaps in study process and to make recommendations for improving the study process on the basis of the results of the study.

Research methodology

The research was carried out in the universities of Lithuania and Poland. The data was collected in spring 2017. Participants consisted of 131 last year nursing students at selected universities (Lithuania n=65, Poland n=66).

Lithuania and Poland are developing countries and relatively new members of the European Union. Both states had to make certain changes in the training of

nurses regarding the regulation of European Union. The states are very different in territory and population size, and cultural context as well. The study carried out in these countries is likely to reveal gaps in the development of the professional identity of nursing students, and the insights made on the basis of the results of the study can be adapted to other new member states of the European Union. The study does not seek to compare the results of participating countries, but rather to find common trends.

Professional Identity Five Factor Scale (PIFFS) by C. P. Tan was employed in the research. Based on the literature review C. P. Tan extracted five key dimensions that contribute to the formation and development of a professional identity. These dimensions are 1) *knowledge about professional practices*, 2) *having the professional as a role model*, 3) *experience with the profession*, 4) *professional self-efficacy*, and 5) *preference for a particular profession* (Tan, 2014).

Based on a literature review C. P. Tan summaries:
- the first dimension, knowledge about professional practices, anchors the knowledge in terms of the professional contexts and central aspects or tasks of the profession. These are important for students' introduction and initiation into the profession. The knowledge of the discipline that the students gain, and the technical terms they learn to use, provide a start for them to begin identifying with and be identified with the community of practitioners;
- the second dimension, having the professional as a role model, refers to students having access to professionals as role models to look up to, and learn from. Students can observe from their role models: (1) ways to approach, reason and deal with profession-related issues; (2) understand what it means to act professionally, and (3) to behave and dress appropriately for the role;
- the third dimension is experience with the profession. Experience is defined as authentic contact with clients in a professional context that enables students to learn about the professional practice and the role of the professional. Experiences in the field contribute to students' understanding of what it means to act as a professional-inpractice;
- self-efficacy is concerned with judgments of how well one can execute courses of action required to deal with prospective situations. Self-efficacy research in education has shown that such personal beliefs influence students' decisions to put in effort to successfully complete their tasks;
- the fifth dimension is a preference for a particular profession. Studies in motivation have shown that when students personally identify with the importance of their learning - and hence experience greater

autonomy in their learning - they are more likely to work hard, enjoy school, and cope with failures In summary, the five key dimensions described above are expected to contribute to the professional identity development of students over the course of their vocational and professional education (Tan, 2014).

A measurement scale with 25 items for the five dimensions was used. All the items were on a five-point Likert scale, with 1-Never True, 2-Not Really True, 3-Neutral, 4-Somewhat True and 5-Definitely True. Reliability analysis was run and the results were reasonably good, with Cronbach's Alpha coefficient ranging from .75 to .87 for all the factors.

Research data were processed using SPSS 21.

Professional identity of nursing students

Professional identity include knowledge about professional practices, aving the professional as a role model, experience with the profession, professional self-efficacy, and preference for a particular profession. The mean score of students professional identity is 4.03 (SD=0.93) and can be interpreted as rather of high level.

The subject of the research was also the development of students' professional identity during their studies at the university. First of all, it needs to be mentioned that students refer that the future work they prefer is related to the diploma they are enrolled in (4.26; SD=1.14) and their university education is relevant and useful in preparing for the future career (4.26; SD=0.98).

On the basis of the presented data it can (Figure 1) it can be noted that students' knowledge about professional practices is the strongest component of their professional identity developed during the study years, while experience with the profession is the weakest component.
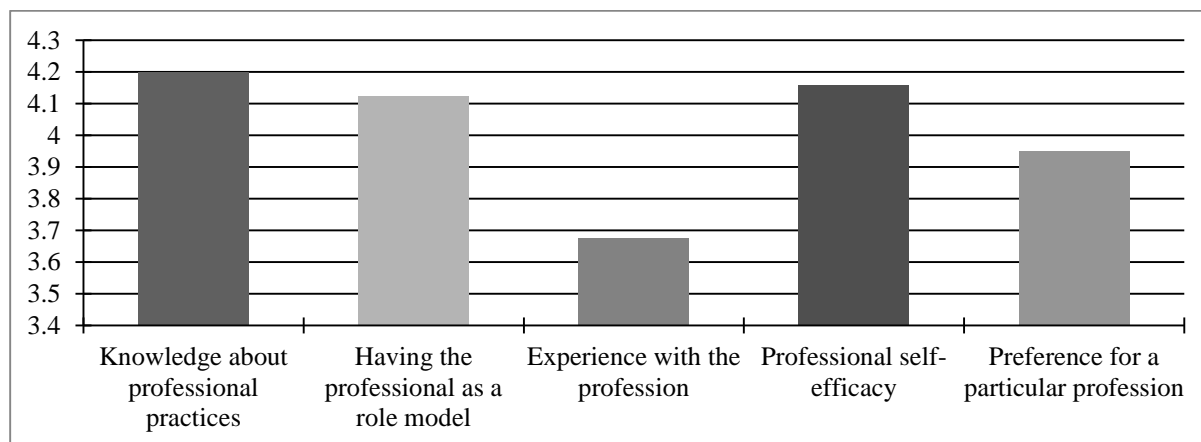

Figure 1. **Components of students' professional identity**

The mean of students' knowledge about professional practices is rather high and most of the elements are distributed evenly (Table 1), except for knowing the rules and regulations in health care and nursing.

Table 1 **Students' knowledge of professional practices**

Item	Range (SD)
I know the nature of the work I will do in my future profession	4.39 (0.75)
In most work environments, professionals with different backgrounds work together. I know of the different types of professionals I will be collaborating with	4.32 (0.67)
I have a good idea about the roles and responsibilities of my future job	4.14 (0.78)
I know what kind of applications, tools, and equipment I will handle in my future occupation	4.21 (0.76)
I understand the nature of decision making in nursing	4.5 (0.66)
I have a good idea about the rules and regulations in health care and nursing	3.64 (0.90)

Though students admire nursing professionals who are already working in the area and concentrate on what is believed to be needed to know when entering future occupation is high, it is still difficult to think and reason like a nursing professional (Table 2).

Table 2 **Having the professional as a role model**

Item	Range (SD)
When working on problems in class, I imagine myself to be in the shoes of a professional in my future work environment	3.95 (1.07)
I concentrate in my studies on what I believe I would need to know and be able to do when I enter my future occupation	4.57 (0.65)
I believe I can already think and reason like a nursing professional	3.69 (1.08)
I admire most those teachers who are professionals in nursing	4.07 (0.99)
I admire nursing professionals who are already working in the area	4.34 (0.80)

The weakest component is students' experience with the profession. The minor part of research participants had some prior work experience related to health care or nursing or worked part-time in a hospital or primary health center (Table 3). Still, knowing personally some people who work in my future

profession and attending the nursing training during the studies at the university strongly contributes to professional identity of nursing students.

Table 3 **Students' experience with the profession**

Item	Range (SD)
I work part-time in a hospital or primary health center	2.27 (1.71)
I have attended the nursing practicum during my studies at the university	4.72 (0.79)
I know personally some people who work in my future profession	4.75 (0.75)
I follow developments in my future profession in newspapers and on television	3.92 (0.97)
Before I entered university, I already had some prior work experience related to health care or nursing	2.20 (1.54)
I have interacted with nursing professionals outside of university or through events organized in university	4.19 (1.30)

Students believe that they will easily get along with the future colleagues and get their cooperation, they are pretty confident that can do an excellent job in the future and are sure about the kind of challenges faced by the nursing professional (Table 4). Still, they have some doubt about how well they are prepared for a real job.

Table 4 **Students' professional self-efficacy**

Item	Range (SD)
I am sure I will have no problems behaving professionally	4.16 (0.79)
I feel well prepared for a real job	3.76 (0.96)
I believe that I will easily get along with my future colleagues, get their cooperation, and have informal conversations with them	4.26 (0.80)
I'm confident that I can do an excellent job in the future	4.24 (0.78)
I have no doubt that I will master all the skills necessary to succeed in my future work	4.19 (0.77)
I am sure about the kind of challenges faced by the nursing professional	4.33 (0.74)

Though students are sure they will be able to adapt to the nursing working environment, they doubt what institution they would like to work in after completing their university education (Table 5).

Table 5 **Students' preference for a particular profession**

Item	Range (SD)
I am sure I will be able to adapt to the working environment of the profession	4.24 (0.88)
I am already pretty sure where I would like to work after completing my university education	3.66 (1.25)

Conclusions and recommendations

The professional identity of nurses is crucial to foster leadership, honest behavior, and professional achievements. Level of the professional identity of last year nursing students in Lithuania and Poland is rather of high level and students express their willingness to work as nurses. It can be assumed that universities make a significant contribution to the development of students' professional identity.

Still, some gaps in the study process can be seen, i.e. the rules and regulations in health care and nursing are not learned well, doubts if well prepared for a real job arises, students do not know their carrier opportunities, etc. The findings indicate that universities provide much professional knowledge, but there is a lack of students' experience with the profession.

According to this, some recommendations for improving the study process on the basis of the results of the study can be offered:

- since knowing personally some people who work in nursing profession positively influence the level of professional identity, the universities could invite more working professionals to give lectures or discussions;
- since attending the nursing training during the studies at the university strongly contributes to professional identity of nursing students, the universities can organize more practical training and pay attention to preparing mentors of the high qualification;
- since knowing carrier opportunities contributes to the higher level of professional identity, more opportunities for the future carrier can be explained to students.

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