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Research

Becoming a pharmacist: Students' perceptions of their curricular experience and professional identity formation

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Abstract

Introduction: Student professional identity formation is important for enabling the successful transition between academic education and professional practice. Recognition of this has resulted in significant changes in professional education (e.g., the inclusion of experiential placements and authentic learning experiences). There is limited research that examines how the curricular experience influences pharmacy students' professional identity formation.

Methods: Using focus groups, comprising 82 students from all levels of a four-year Australian undergraduate pharmacy course, this study examined students' perceptions of their overall curricular experience and examined how these experiences influenced the construction of their professional identities.

Results: Our analysis found that the pharmacy students struggled with their professional identity formation. Many were entering the degree with little understanding of what being a pharmacist entailed. Once in the educational context, the nature of the role became both apparent and idealistic but not enacted. Students experienced dissonance between the idealistic notion of pharmacy practice and the realities of placements, and this may have been enhanced by a lack of patient-centered care role models. This struggle left them concluding that the role of the pharmacist was constrained and limited.

Conclusions: We argue that professional identity formation needs to be in the foreground from commencement of the degree and throughout the curriculum.

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Introduction

Professional identity, while lacking an agreed definition, can be seen as the result of the interaction between self and context and comprises three common characteristics.^{1–3} First, it is formed through an evolutionary and iterative process whereby individuals are always making choices, in response to the professional context, about who they want to be.^{1,4} Second, it is influenced by both *context*, for example, society's expectations, interactions with peers

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and role models, the educational context, and *individual* factors including taking on the characteristics of the profession and reasons for entry to profession.^{3–6} Third, a professional identity is made up of sub-identities that need to be harmonized.^{1,3,4} The existence of multiple sub-identities means that the identity may become conflicted when who you thought you were meant to be is not validated in context.⁶ For example, a pharmacist might see their core identity as being a clinician, but the context of their workplace may have different goals and thus their “clinician” identity may not be fully enacted.

Professional identity forms the core of what it means to be a professional and influences how professionals function in their role.^{7–11} The formation of a strong professional identity, early in a student’s career, has been found to enable the successful transition to the workplace, motivate the beginning practitioner, and assist in establishing confidence in their role.^{2,10,12}

For the last 20 years, pharmacy has been undergoing a transformation whereby its philosophy of practice has shifted from a focus on dispensing medicines to becoming a patient-centered profession.^{13,14} However, the process of change is ongoing, and several commentators have argued that pharmacists have not yet become fully patient-centered practitioners.^{15,16}

Pharmacy educators, however, have attempted to enhance students’ development as patient-centered practitioners by supporting the process of professional socialization.^{17–19} Despite the important work and changes that have been made to pharmacy education, these changes have commonly been *ad hoc* and concerns have been expressed that,

Pharmacy education on the whole has not yet been effective in socializing the pharmacy student with the attitudes and beliefs needed to bring about the paradigm shift from product-orientation to patient-orientation.²⁰

While professional identity is linked to professional socialization, it is also quite distinct. Wenger²¹ explains that socialization theories focus on the acquisition of membership by newcomers, where acquiring membership is defined as internalizing the norms of a social group. He argues that there is a difference between imitation and the internalization of norms by individuals and the construction of identities within communities of practice.²¹

As an important part of the process of socialization, professional identity formation has received little attention in pharmacy education. Similar concerns from other professions, including nursing¹⁰ and medicine,¹¹ have been raised about professional socialization as it does not consider the individual’s perspective of their professional self and how context influences this. There is evidence from recent research suggesting that pharmacists often lack a clear sense of identity and can be more focused on the traditional drug-related aspects of pharmacy rather than being patient focused.^{22,23} A preliminary study examining

pharmacy culture and pharmacists’ personality traits in Canada found that pharmacists tended to lack the ability to deal with situations of ambiguity, were fearful of new responsibilities, were overly concerned about the perceptions of others, and were risk averse.²⁴ Traits such as these imply weak professional identities and are in stark contrast to the pharmacy profession’s aspirations to be patient-centered practitioners.^{13,14,25,26}

Professional education plays an important role in supporting the formation of students’ professional identities.^{1,3,4,11} Contemporary educational theorists argue that the curriculum should be understood, not only as a means for professional socialization but also as an “identity-forming project.”^{27,28} Research into student professional identity formation has shown that the intentional support of the formation of students’ professional identities can assist them to become the kind of professionals they want to be, sometimes in spite of the realities of practice.^{2,29} Thus, health professional education, including medicine and nursing, and other professions (e.g., teaching) are taking note of student professional identity formation in their education programs and now see it as a major goal of their curricula.^{11,30–33}

While there is a long history examining students’ professionalism and professional socialization through pharmacy education, the influence of the curricular experience on students’ professional identity formation is not well understood.^{17,19,34} An early study examining the influence of the curricular experience on medical students’ professional identity formation³⁵ and a more recent study in pharmacy³⁶ both suggest that identity formation, unless intentionally supported, is often delayed until after graduation.

It is evident from research from other disciplines that the curricular structure and resultant learning experiences can be designed to support identity formation. In a comparative study, examining the emerging construction of professional identities within teacher education and clinical psychology, the four key factors found to influence students’ professional identity formation included opportunities for imagination, that is, imagining what might be possible; observation, that is, observing role models and expert practitioners in action; experimentation, that is, opportunities to enact the professional role; and evaluation, that is, claiming the identity for one’s self and being recognized by others as a professional.²

A large part of the Australian pharmacy curriculum experience, while incorporating experiential placements and employing teacher practitioners, remains rooted in traditional learning experiences, particularly lectures, tutorial, and laboratory classes. These traditional learning activities can lack texture for identity formation because they are decontextualized from practice and the complexities of practice may not always be evident.²¹ While this seems obvious, the formal curricular experience forms a significant part of the students’ learning experience. Izadinia’s³³ recent review of student–teacher professional identity formation

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