The influence of professional identity formation on the attitudes of health care professional students toward interprofessionalism

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Abstract

An expectation of interprofessional education is improvement in attitudes toward other professions. However, theory surrounding professional identity formation suggests this expectation may be premature. The objective of this study was to quantify first-year health professional students’ attitudes toward their own and other professions and to investigate the relationship between strength of professional identity and attitudes toward other professions and interprofessional learning. Using a pre-post-test design, researchers administered the Readiness for Interprofessional Learning Scale (RIPLS) and the Interdisciplinary Education Perception Scale (IEPS) to 864 first-year health care students in the Academic Health Center at the University of Minnesota. The findings showed a decline in student attitudes toward their own and other professions. Additionally, a positive correlation showed a decline in student attitudes toward their own and other health-related professions.

Methods

Subjects were 850 students enrolled in the semester-long interprofessional learning course, Foundations of Interprofessional Communication and Collaboration (FIPCC), at the University of Minnesota. FIPCC is a required course for all first-year students from ten different health care professions in the Academic Health Center, including occupational therapy, clinical laboratory science, dentistry, dental hygiene, dental therapy, medicine, nursing, pharmacy, public health, and veterinary medicine. The purpose of the course is to expose students to the concepts of interprofessional collaboration and promote understanding of health profession roles as students learn more about their own profession. Students were divided into interprofessional small groups consisting of a facilitator and 12 students. The small groups met for 190 hours in discussions five times throughout the semester. Using a pre-post research design, two questionnaires were administered online in the fall of 2011. Both instruments are established to provide a strong measure of change to student attitudes toward other professions, and have been confirmed to demonstrate reliability and acceptable levels of content and construct validity. The students were asked to complete the questionnaires before the first day of the course and again after the fourth small group meeting.

Data Analysis

Means and standard deviations were calculated for each subscale in both the pre- and post-test scores as well as for the change scores. ANOVA was used to compare changes in summed subscale scores within individuals from pretest to posttest. Pairwise comparison between groups was calculated using the Tukey-Kramer method. The correlation between subscale scores was calculated using Pearson’s Correlation Coefficient.

Results

Instruments

RIPLS Questionnaire (scoring based on Parcell)

Mean (SD) of Subscale Scores

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subscale</th>
<th>Pre</th>
<th>Post</th>
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</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SS1 (neg)</td>
<td>5.86 (1.98)</td>
<td>10.51 (1.60)</td>
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</tr>
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<td>SS2</td>
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Pearson Correlation Coefficients between All Subscale Change Scores (Pre-Post)

Correlation analysis suggests statistically significant positive correlations between most subscales in the change scores. Note that the negative correlation between negative professional identity and attitudes toward other professions indicates that as scores in negative professional identity are weakened, scores in other subscales are strengthened.

Discussion

Findings revealed that following participation in an interprofessional education course there was a deterioration of student attitudes toward IPE as well as toward their own and other professions. A positive correlation was found between declining attitudes and a weakening of professional identity. The results of the study supported Kegan’s theory of professional identity formation, which describes a process by which individuals move through stages of identity in an effort to construct an understanding of what it means to belong to their professions. Students in the study were found to be in the first stage of professional identity formation which is characterized by self-orientation and lacking a broader view of professionalism that includes roles outside of their profession. Application of Kegan’s theory to IPE may inform faculty of students’ stage of professional identity, which may be instrumental in planning IPE courses and setting realistic expectations for IPE outcomes.

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Purpose

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