

Supporting the Generation Z Nursing Student in Professional Identity Formation

Electra Allen

The International Society for Professional Identity in Nursing seeks to define and operationalize what it means to “think, act, and feel like a professional nurse” (Godfrey, 2020, p. 1). *Professional identity in nursing* is defined as “a sense of oneself, and in relationship with others, that is influenced by characteristics, norms, and values of the nursing discipline, resulting in an individual thinking, acting, and feeling like a nurse,” (The University of Kansas School of Nursing, 2019, p. 2) and is divided into four domains:

- Values and ethics.
- Knowledge.
- Leadership.
- Professional comportment.

Professional Identity Formation in Nursing Education

What are the ramifications of this work for nursing education? What can be done to nurture this process of professional identity formation? How is it taught? Where do faculty and administrators even begin their part in this process?

“Understanding the student is the foundation of being able to teach for formation of professional identity and this means understanding where they begin in terms of their existing identity,” (Klaassen et al., 2020, 29:48-29:58).

Seeking to foster this understanding of the student population happens through dropping judgements and personal bias and developing cognitive empathy through perspective taking, learning more about who these students are and their lived experiences (Fernandez & Zahavi, 2020). Being sensitive to avoiding stereotypes, there



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are things that can be understood generally that provide a starting point for knowing the emerging adult student population, Generation Z (Gen Z).

Seeking to Understand Generation Z Students

The current traditional undergraduate nursing student right now falls into the classification of Gen Z. There is variation in the specific years depending on the source. Those who belong to this generation are born somewhere around the turn of the millennium (1995-2001) and up until about the mid-2010s (2012-2018), so the oldest members are in their early- to mid-20s (Twenge, 2017; Elmore & McPeak, 2019). Emerging adulthood is an appropriate way to think of this older part of the group because 18 is the new 15 and emotional maturity is often delayed into the late-20s (Elmore & McPeak, 2019).

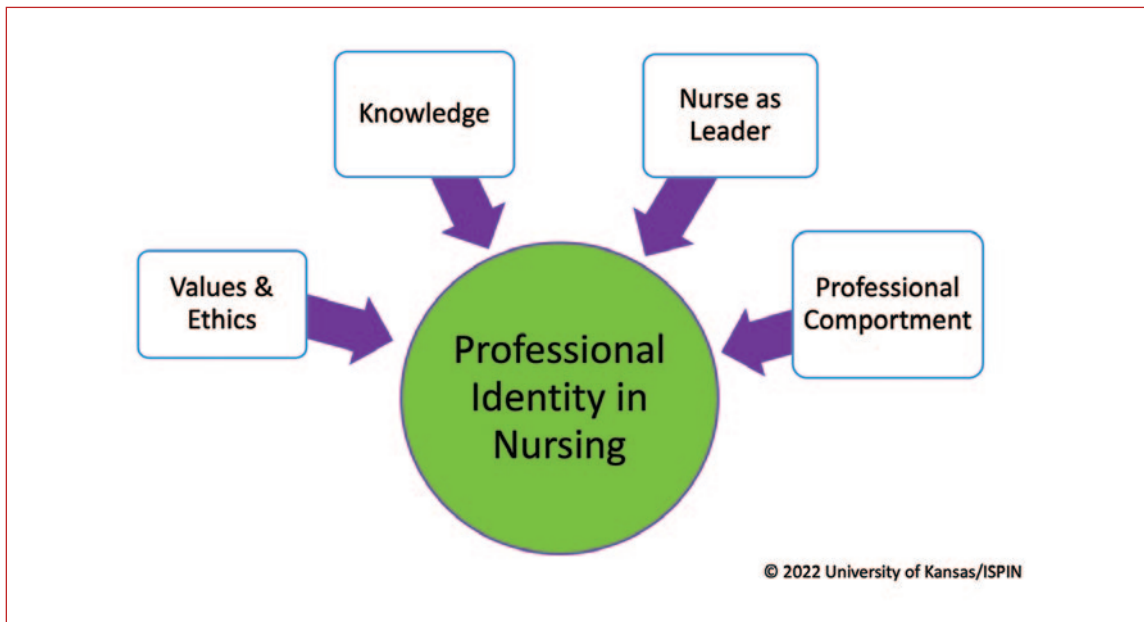
The lives of Gen Z are heavily directed by their parents, and this continues into young adulthood and college, so many Gen Z students have an external locus of control (Elmore & McPeak, 2019). Generation Z postpones

adulthood and adult responsibilities. Twenty-five percent do not even get their driver's license by the time they graduate high school, and other milestones such as getting jobs and moving out of the house are delayed as well (Twenge, 2017; Elmore & McPeak, 2019).

Gen Z is sometimes referred to as iGen because they do not remember a time before the internet, and they are the first generation to experience the formative years of adolescence with a smartphone (Twenge, 2017). Though the technology is cordless, this generation is tethered “reach[ing] for a smart device every [seven] minutes” (Styring, 2015, 16:21-16:34). The constant pings and longing for ‘likes’ on social media play into a shortened attention span of 6-8 seconds, an intolerance for boredom, and a need for instant gratification (Twenge, 2017; Elmore & McPeak, 2019). They have access to more information than previous generations; however, are often not taught to reflect or think critically about what they consume or post. These students are tech dependent, not tech savvy (Yeh, 2021). Savvy implies discernment and skill. While they may excel at Googling and posting to social media, they do not necessarily know how to use library databases or other technologies without just-in-time, step-by-step instruction.

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Figure 1.
Professional Identity in Nursing



Source: The University of Kansas/International Society for Professional Identity in Nursing (ISPIN). Reprinted with permission.

Why call or email when you can text? Why text when you can instant message? Gen Z does not read large passages; they tell stories in images and short form videos through platforms such as Instagram and TikTok. The use of such digital modes of contact meant that they – even before a time of remote schooling during COVID-19 – were touch-deprived and longed for the connection that comes from authentic relationships. They grew up in a post-9/11 world where existential threats such as terrorism, school shootings, economic down turns, and climate change are pervasive realities that increase their need for both physical and emotional safety. Gen Z needs “therapists, life coaches, and parents” (Twenge, 2017, p. 313).

This generation has higher levels of anxiety and depression, which may be associated with the amount of screen time, and most are not receiving adequate treatment. Just one in five teens who experience anxiety are being treated (Twenge, 2017; Elmore & McPeak, 2019).

Implications for Professional Identity Formation

Having this enhanced empathy for Gen Z students brings to light several implications for professional identity formation. Each of the professional identity in nursing domains is impacted,

with overlap evident, and very strong considerations are clear for the domains of values and ethics, knowledge, professional compartment, and leadership (see Figure 1).

Values and ethics are “a set of core values and principles that guide conduct,” (The University of Kansas School of Nursing, 2019, p. 4). If parents have been a primary motivating force and adult responsibilities are postponed, it begs the question of which values and principles have really been internalized by Gen Z. “Gen Zers have increasingly embraced platforms that provide anonymity, such as Snapchat,” (Chun et al., 2016, p. 2). This anonymity and the impermanence of disappearing “snaps” limit accountability for their conduct (Parker, 2020).

Knowledge is the “analysis and application of information derived from nursing and other disciplines, experiences, critical reflection, and scientific discovery,” (The University of Kansas School of Nursing, 2019, p. 4). Decreased attention spans make it more difficult to learn – let alone analyze and apply information – especially with traditional pedagogies. The hyper-personalization of so many other parts of their life, combined with limited critical thinking about media consumption and polarized voices posting about ‘fake news,’ could lead to questioning the value of scientific discovery and truths.

Professional compartment is “a nurse’s professional behavior demonstrated through words, actions, and presence,” (The University of Kansas School of Nursing, 2019, p. 4). Levels of anxiety and struggles with diminished confidence and self-worth subvert professional presence and the ability to effectively communicate with an inter-professional team. Short-sighted or impulsive social media posts may have long term effects on a nurse’s career.

Leadership is “inspiring self and others to transform a shared vision into reality,” (The University of Kansas School of Nursing, 2019, p. 4). This generation is more interested in leadership (Elmore & McPeak, 2019); however, in the context of previously limited accountability for less than professional behaviors, they may not be granted the same opportunities to take on traditional leadership roles. Even if Gen Z is afforded the space to lead, they may lack the confidence and intrinsic motivation to step up and inspire change in themselves or others.

Supporting the Gen Z Nursing Student

The call is to “[create] a safe and caring educational environment and then [implement] educational strategies that are designed to stimulate formation of identity,” (Klaassen et al., 2020, 29:08-29:17). What are some practical ways programs can create this type of safe

learning environment and what potential pedagogical approaches may be effective in the formation of professional identity in Gen Z nursing students?

Creating a Safe Learning Environment

Brown (2017) charges educators to “create a culture of courage,” (14:58-15:00) in the classroom that promotes “shame resilience,” (18:58) and a sense of emotional safety for students. The need for safety applies beyond the classroom and into office hours, simulation, and clinical experiences. Faculty may offer and share personal stories of their own growth in professional identity, demonstrating a vulnerability that will help to establish trust.

With the world of information accessible at their fingertips, the role of the faculty moves beyond content expert to that of a mentor and facilitator. A holistic approach and well-being strategy can encourage students to focus on gratitude (Yeh, 2021). Teach students a growth mindset that embraces challenges and seeks progress over perfection (Dweck, 2007). Role model how to fail and how to cope with failure. Show them they are cared for. Put an emphasis on worth, especially while providing feedback (Yeh, 2021). If a student hears ‘you are bad,’ instead of ‘that action was bad,’ then trust is eroded by a sense of shame which perpetuates a fixed mindset and interprets criticism as a personal attack (Dweck, 2007; Brown, 2017).

For students who experience anxiety and varying levels of trauma, validate what they have been through and point out that they are developing grit. *Grit* is a “perseverance and passion for long-term goals [that] entails working strenuously... maintaining effort and interest ...despite failure [and] adversity...” (Duckworth et al., 2007, p. 1,087-1,088). Alternatively, if their struggles are ignored or downplayed this leads to an “empathic failure” (Brown, 2017, 31:12-31:35) exacerbating shame and torpedoing trust. Become familiar with resources for students who may need to be referred to higher levels of support, care, and treatment.

Pedagogical Approaches

“Only after using what they know about the student to create a safe and caring learning environment can nursing educators start implementing the pedagogies that support formation of nursing

identity,” (Klaassen et al., 2020, 31:30-31:41).

Educational strategies that take the traits of Gen Z, as well as many best practices of learning science into account, can be implemented to support the formation of nursing identity. Use chunking of learning materials, incorporating videos, graphics, and infographics. Gamify activities using technology that allows for personalization of learning where possible. Give frequent feedback framed in wanting them to succeed. Reflection, narratives, and stories, as well as experiential learning such as simulation and clinical, are safe and effective ways to build professional skills.

Despite preferring active learning, Gen Z seeks out shortcuts and faculty may encounter ambivalence and resistance with techniques other than lecture (‘This is so extra.’). “[Gen Z] may comfortably become passive consumers of their education. ‘Quickly and precisely tell us the five key points that will be covered on tomorrow’s exam so that we can pass it.’” (Chun et al., 2016, p. 11). To combat this, it is vital that activities are relevant and rationale is provided for the ‘why’ and the ‘how’ of the learning activities selected.

When possible, communicate with students using shorter messages. Avoid a case of ‘tl;dr’ – “Too long; didn’t read” (Urban Dictionary, 2021, para. 1) – by using clear, concise language and design principles that maximize readability with section headers, colors, bolding, and highlighting, instead of endless black and white text. Consider reinforcing messages with audio, video, and graphics when possible.

Without pandering, meet students where they are and provide them with explicit guidance about expectations as they develop their professional identity. Consider creating and sharing a code of professionalism that includes behaviors such as how to address faculty, when is it okay to send a text versus email, respectful and professional communication, punctuality, class attendance and engagement, and dress code. Equip students with resources for writing that meets professional standards. It is not that Gen Z does not write, they just do so in a much different format than a scholarly 10-page APA-Style paper.

The Impact of Gen Z on the Nursing Profession

Gen Z is “the most ethnically diverse

generation in American history” (Twenge, 2017, p. 18). They grew up witnessing marriage equality and the first African-American U.S. president. They are more inclusive and redemptive than previous generations and “want everyone to feel respected, no matter who they are” (Elmore & McPeak, 2019, p. 30). Gen Z is more entrepreneurial and has an increased interest in leadership; “They believe they can change the world because they’ve grown up in a world that is already changing” (Elmore & McPeak, 2019, p. 31.) If they have the understanding and support needed to develop their professional identity, imagine what impact this unique generation can have to enrich the future of nursing! **DN**

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