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**STUDENTS AS EVOLVING PROFESSIONALS –  
STUDENTS PERCEPTIONS OF THE EVOLVING PROFESSIONAL (EP)  
CONCEPT AS A PROFESSIONAL SOCIALIZATION APPROACH**

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**Abstract**

The Evolving Professional (EP) concept recognizes students as evolving oral health and dental professionals with specific professional attributes that must be developed and internalized in order to enhance students' potential for success upon graduation. It focuses and adds significance, coherence and clarity to students' professional socialization in dentistry and oral health. Professional socialization involves the acquisition of professional attributes and the development of a specific professional identity that defines self and aligns with community expectations. The primary tenets of the EP concept are: 1) early professional socialization empowers students by providing a context and reasons for deep learning and motivating them to strive for excellence; 2) a clearly defined professional identity is recognized as a significant determining factor in relations to work-readiness, recruitment, retention, job satisfaction and work-related motivation and 3) "the way of being" a professional cannot be assumed as a "natural by-product" of tertiary education but must be explicitly developed and practiced.

The aims of this study are to examine students' perceptions of the EP concept as a professional socialization approach, compare the perceptions of first year dentistry students vs. first year oral health students and compare the perceptions of the first, second and third year students.

Students were asked to complete an anonymous questionnaire during class time in Week 2, Week 5, Week 9 and Week 12 of the semester. The questionnaire contained both open-ended and categorical questions. Analyses were performed quantitatively using descriptive statistics (Microsoft EXCEL 2007 & GraphPad InStat v. 3) and qualitatively using computer-assisted content analysis (Leximancer v.3.07).

A total of 145 students participated in this study. Results indicate that students support the EP concept as an effective professional socialization approach. Over 85% of students across all three years and two programs stated in the Week 5 and Week 12 questionnaires that being treated as EPs is important, engages and motivates students to learn and imparts confidence. Students were also convinced that the effectiveness of the EP concept relied not only in students' self-perceptions but also from staff, who must believe and treat students as evolving professions. Comparison between dentistry students vs. oral health students did not yield any significant differences. Comparison between first year, second year and third year Oral Health students indicated that whilst the third year did support the EP concept, they felt that it was less relevant to them because they have already developed professional confidence, collaborative team skills and effective communication skills but they enjoyed the leadership development opportunities and being peer mentors. In conclusion, dentistry and oral health

students perceived that the EP concept is beneficial and important for professional socialization and the development of a positive professional self-identity.

## Introduction

Society has expectations of those they view as professionals. Students in professional undergraduate programs have the expectation that they will become a professional with expertise in their chosen field of study upon completion. How, does this transition take place? What are we doing as educators to help make that transition an assured, supported and positive one? And how do we ascertain that students keep on evolving as professionals to sustain excellence once they graduate?

Traditionally, the transition from student to professional is assumed to happen along the way. Professional identity, professional socialization and professional development are seen as “natural by-products” of tertiary education (Slotnick, 2001; Jayne et al., 2005; Masella, 2005 & 2007; Wagner et al., 2007) and little effort is placed in explicitly guiding students in “preparedness”, “to become” and “to walk the talk”. Many professional programs, especially the traditional professions like dentistry, emphasized the importance of technical rationality and the acquisition / transmission of abundant theoretical knowledge and practical skills as their primary learning objectives which rarely optimizes authentic learning (Schon, 1983; Boyd, 2002; Kinsella, 2007; Lovas et al., 2008). The focus in these traditional programs is solely epistemological. Students are taught what they need to know and what they need to be competent in doing but little attention is paid to ontological learning. Whether students integrate and internalize what they know and what they practice, into how they practice, who they become and “their ways of being a professional” is rarely explicitly taught ((Barnett & Hallam, 1999; Dall’Alba 2005 & 2009). At best, it is considered “assumed knowledge”, “tacit knowledge”, “the hidden curriculum”, “threshold concepts” and “troublesome knowledge” that cannot be or need not be taught (Perkins, 1999; Meyer & Land, 2003 & 2005; Masella 2005 & 2007). At worse, it is deemed irrelevant.

Contemporary philosophies in higher education suggest that this traditional emphasis on imparting knowledge and skill alone is limited and incomplete. Increasingly, both epistemology and ontology are recognized as essential for authentic learning and teaching. Cunsolo Willox and Lackeyram (2009) invoked that:

*“Teaching can never direct learning fully. It can ignite and incite it. It can encourage it, and provide the opportunities for its emergence, but teaching can never dictate the direction the learner will take his/her learning, nor can it ever foresee all possible meanings and nuances the learner will ascribe”*

To be relevant and applicable to the dynamic community and global economy we live in, graduates from professional programs need to possess more than just knowledge and skills, they need to know how to learn, how to enable learning, to be self-aware, to “walk the talk”, to construct their own meanings and perspectives through contexts, experiences and critical reflection, to be clear in their own minds about their professional identity, their professional ways of thinking and their professional ways of becoming (Slotnick, 2001; Dall’Alba, 2005 & 2009; Jayne et al., 2005; Page, 2005; Masella 2005 & 2007). Taking Cohen’s (2005) words about the medical professional across to dentistry:

*“The medical [dental] professional is defined not only by what he or she must know and do, but most importantly by a profound sense of what the physician [dentist] must be.”*

Masella (2007) went further to say that:

*“The most important mission of dental education is development of student professionalism. It is only within the context of professionalism that specialized knowledge and technical expertise find meaning.”*

## **The Evolving Professional (EP) Concept**

The Evolving Professional (EP) concept is a multi-level framework and approach that aims to empower, guide and develop the ways of knowing, thinking, practicing and being of learners and educators, to motivate and enable multi-dimensional integration, persistent improvements and sustained excellence, with the ultimate goals of enabling and driving changes for the betterment of the community and society. Exploring the EP concept in details is beyond the scope of this paper, hence the EP concept will be discussed primarily as a professional socialization approach for supporting, influencing, motivating and inspiring learners to become an oral health professional of excellence. In enabling professional socialization, the EP concept also serves as an ontological tool, which provides the essential context for the type of “meaning making” of knowledge and skills that leads to transformation.

From a learner perspective, the key tenets of the EP concept are: 1) early professional socialization empowers students by providing a context and reasons for deep learning and motivating them to strive for excellence; 2) a clearly defined professional identity is recognized as a significant determining factor in relations to work-readiness, recruitment, retention, job satisfaction and work-related motivation and that “the way of being” a professional cannot be assumed as a “natural-by-product” of tertiary education but must be explicitly developed and practiced (Jayne et al., 2005; Masella, 2005 & 2007; Page, 2005).

Metacognitively, the EP concept recognizes students as evolving professionals with desirable professional profiles or ways of beings that need to be developed and internalized in order to enable a smoother transition from students to work-ready professionally-attuned clinicians, to enhance students' potential for success upon graduation and to ensure continual evolution throughout their professional careers and as agents of change. It involves emphasis on the ways of being a professional through evolving professionalism, a culture of acceptance and recognition of students as EPs, a context for professional learning and specialized knowledge and skills, a platform for professional socialization for the enhancement and awareness of one's professional identity and the basis for scholarship development. By developing the scholarship of learning, the EP concept supports, enables and contributes to the hallmark of professionalism [defined here as high level of specialised skills, with sustained effort to continuously improve quality and maintained lifelong excellence] (Welie, 2004; Nath, 2005; Masella, 2007; Trathen & Gallagher, 2009).

Practically, the EP concept translates into series of EP learning activities which are deliberately designed, embedded, implemented and aligned with assessment requirements. In this way, the EP concept is maintained and sustained as part of the core curricula of the undergraduate professional training programs. The EP activities are diverse, and include course-specific as well as program-based activities, individually-focussed as well as team-orientated activities, and activities that are facilitated as well as activities that are self-directed. Each EP learning activity aims to enhance students' professional socialization, contribute to the shaping of their unique professional identity and support the development of one or more specific professional profiles or aspects of the ways of being a professional e.g. EP as reflective practitioners, EP as skilled and effective communicators, EP as collaborative team members. Under the EP concept, the onus of learning is always with the students.

## **Professional Socialization**

Professional socialization in this paper is defined as: the processes by which persons acquire, make sense of and internalize the knowledge, skills, values, attitudes, beliefs, dispositions and behaviours that pertain to a particular profession and enhances a sense of belonging, promotes self-awareness, shapes the development of a unique professional identity, drives, internalizes and “habitualizes” their knowing, thinking, practice and being, enables them to “walk the talk” (Ronnestad & Skovholt, 2001; Weidman et al., 2001; Pitkala & Mantyranta, 2003; Page, 2005). This definition takes into consideration the functionalistic as well as the interactionist approaches of professional socialization

(Merton et al., 1957; Reutter et al., 1997). The functionalistic approach emphasizes the importance of internalizing ideal shared values and professional norms (Merton et al., 1957 & Reutter et al., 1997). In contrast, the interactionist approach focuses on the significance of interacting reflectively with other individuals and the surroundings for the continuous shaping of the professional identity (Reutter et al., 1997). The EP concept as a professional socialization approach crosses over both socialization approaches. However, the EP learning activities fit better into the interactionistic approach.

Deliberate socialization as part of professional programs, compliance with role expectations and competence in role integration, have been said to enhance the overall learning experience and lead to a more positive professional self-perception, better defined professional identity and better consolidation of their professional role post-graduation (Eli & Shuval, 1982; Gray & Smith, 1999; Pitkala & Mantyranta, 2003). On the contrary, a lack of focus on or inadequate professional socialization may have a negative effect on professional attitude and identity development (Eli & Shuval, 1982; Price et al., 1998), and subsequently lead to poor performance, job dissatisfaction, low motivation and demoralization (Nesler et al., 2001).

Furthermore, affirmation or legitimation by others e.g. teachers, peer mentors, patients is also important for professional socialization (Eli & Shuval, 1982; Gray & Smith, 1999; Pitkala & Mantyranta, 2003; Klossner, 2008). In particular, affirmation or legitimation by those more experienced, has been shown to improve self-worth and self-confidence, thereby driving motivation and the will “to become” (Pitkala & Mantyranta, 2003; Klossner, 2008).

## **Aim**

The aims of this study are to examine students' perceptions of the EP concept as a professional socialization approach, compare the perceptions of first year dentistry students vs. first year oral health students and compare the perceptions of the first, second and third year students.

## **The Intervention**

### *Participants*

During Semester One 2009, all students enrolled in the first year of the undergraduate dentistry (BDS*c*) and oral health (BOralH) programs and the second and final year of the oral health program, except those who received credit for Introduction to Clinical Practice I in BDS*c* I and BOralH I (ORAL1030), Community Oral Health in BOralH II (ORAL2010) and Dental Hygiene Practice III in BOralH III (ORAL3020) participated in the specifically embedded EP activities (n = 145, Table 1).

**Table 1 – Participant Demographics**

<b>Program &amp; Year</b>	<b>Female</b>	<b>Male</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>BDS<i>c</i> I</b>	26	39	65
<b>BOralH I</b>	28	5	33
<b>BOralH II</b>	25	0	25
<b>BOralH III</b>	22	0	22
<b>TOTAL</b>	101	44	145

*Learning activities*

The EP concept forms the basis for curriculum design in the BOralH program and in the first year clinical course within the BSc program. The EP concept runs through learning activities in all “ORAL” courses (courses with course codes ORALxxxx). The specifically embedded EP learning activities (Table 2) were scheduled into the students’ semester timetables as “EP sessions” (with the exception of the observational clinical rotations which had to occur at times when undergraduate clinics were running). Five EP sessions, each of 2.5hrs, were scheduled at specific intervals over the 13 weeks of the academic semester. The format of each EP session was similar and consisted of large group seminars facilitated by teaching staff or student presentations followed by EP team reflections, discussions and mentoring. In the first EP session, a substantial amount of time were spent explaining and discussing the EP concept, in particular, the EP concept as a professional socialization approach to support, influence, motivate, inspire students to become an oral health professional of excellence.

As EP activities were embedded into compulsory courses and considered as part of the practical component, attendance was specified as mandatory. Non-attendance without valid reasons was deemed unprofessional. The course profiles of Introduction to Clinical Practice I in BSc & BOralH I, Community Oral Health in BOralH II and Dental Hygiene Practice III in BOralH III articulated that EP attendance formed a component of the assessment requirements. The course profiles further stated that each assessment component must be passed in order to attain an overall passing grade for the courses.

**Table 2 – Overview of the EP activities in Semester One 2009**

Specifically embedded EP activities (BOralH I, II, III and BSc I)	Learning Objectives <sup>^</sup>		
	EP 1	EP 2	EP 3
• Professional development seminar series covering the EP concept, EP profiles, teamwork, study habits, time management, critical reflection & peer learning facilitated by teaching staff	*	*	*
• In-class EP team reflections / small group discussions facilitated by BOralH III within EP teams	*	*	*
• Formal in-class and informal out of class, peer mentoring / peer learning via EP teams		*	*
• Year I BSc-BOralH observational clinical rotations to BSc III/IV & BOralH II/III undergraduate clinics	*	*	*
• Community-based group research & oral presentation on oral health beliefs vs. practices of health vs. oral health professionals (incl. peer mentoring in EP teams, role modelling with Year 2 presenting oral presentations in EP seminar time prior to Year 1 presentations in their own class time, peer evaluation & feedback for Year 2 by both Year 1 and Year 3 and self /group evaluation for Year 1 & 2)	*	*	*

*Data analysis*

Whilst all students participated in the EP sessions because they formed part of the core curricula within specific ORAL courses and all students were provided with the opportunity to provide formal feedback, comments and suggestions via the experience and perception questionnaires, consent was sought to obtain permission for their analyses and publishing purposes. Students were asked to complete these questionnaires anonymously, during class time in Week 2, Week 5, Week 9 and Week

12 of the semester. Each questionnaire contained both open-ended questions and statements that students responded to using the five-point Likert scale (labelled as strongly agree, agree, uncertain / neutral, disagree and strongly disagree). Quantitative data was analysed using Microsoft EXCEL 2007 & GraphPad InStat v. 3. Alpha value was set at 0.05. Qualitative data was analysed with the help of computer-assisted content analysis (Leximancer v.3.07). The study was approved by the University of Queensland Medical Research Ethics Committee.

## Findings

### *Likert statements*

A total of 145 students participated in this study. Results indicate that the majority of students support the EP concept. The mean percentage of students across all three years and two programs who indicated that EP is a good concept for professional socialization in Semester 1 was 86% (Table 3). Comparisons of student responses in each of the cohorts at Week 2, Week 5 and Week 12 indicated that significantly fewer third years perceived the EP concept as a good idea for their professional socialization in Week 2 compared to Weeks 5 and 12 ( $p < 0.02$ , Table 3). Moreover, comparisons of students responses across the years at Week 2 indicated that significantly more first years perceived the EP concept as a good idea than third year students ( $p < 0.03$ , Table 3). Similarly student responses across the years at Week 12 revealed that significantly more first years perceived the EP concept positively compared to second year students ( $p < 0.05$ , Table 3).

**Table 3 – Student Agreement to the Statement  
“EP is a good idea for professional socialization” from Week 1, 5, 12 of Semester 1**

Students	% Agree / Strongly Agree				
	Wk 1 <sup>c</sup>	Wk 5 <sup>d</sup>	Wk 12 <sup>e</sup>	Mean Wk1,5,12	P value <sup>b</sup> Wk 1,5,12
<b>BDScl<sup>a</sup></b>	83	94	96	91	$p > 0.05$
<b>BOralH1<sup>a</sup></b>	88	100	96	95	$p > 0.05$
<b>BOralH2<sup>a</sup></b>	72	90	81	81	$p > 0.05$
<b>BOralH3<sup>a</sup></b>	64	88	82	78	$P < 0.02$
<b>TOTAL</b>	77	93	89	86	

<sup>a</sup> Respondent no.= BDScl: Wk 1 = 65, Wk 5 = 48, Wk 12 = 47; BOralH1 Wk 1 = 33, Wk 5 = 22, Wk 12 = 25; BOralH2 Wk 1 = 25, Wk 5 = 10, Wk 12 = 21; BOralH3 Wk 1 = 22, Wk 5 = 16, Wk 12 = 22

<sup>b</sup> Chi-Square Test

<sup>c</sup> Fisher Exact Test: Week 1 BDScl vs. BOralH1  $p > 0.05$ ; Year 1 vs. Year 2  $p > 0.05$ ; **Year 1 vs. Year 3  $p < 0.03$** ; Year 2 vs. Year 3  $p > 0.05$

<sup>d</sup> Fisher Exact Test: Week 5 BDScl vs. BOralH1  $p > 0.05$ ; Year 1 vs. Year 2  $p > 0.05$ ; Year 1 vs. Year 3  $p > 0.05$ ; Year 2 vs. Year 3  $p > 0.05$

<sup>e</sup> Fisher Exact Test: Week 12 BDScl vs. BOralH1  $p > 0.05$ ; **Year 1 vs. Year 2  $p < 0.05$** ; Year 1 vs. Year 3  $p > 0.05$ ; Year 2 vs. Year 3  $p > 0.05$

In the Week 5 questionnaire, students agreed or strongly agreed that *being treated* as an EP is important (97%), *being treated* as an EP engages (93%) and *being treated* as an EP imparts confidence (94%). In comparison, lower percentage of students agreed or strongly agreed that *thinking as an EP* motivates learning (86%) and inspires excellence (79%). Comparisons between first year BDScl and first year BOralH students and comparisons across the three year levels did not yield any significant differences.

At the end of the semester, most students remained convinced that EP is important to them (87%) and that EP engages and motivates them to learn (84%) (Table 4). Comparison between first year dentistry students vs. oral health students did not yield any significant differences in student perceptions of the

EP concept as a professional socialization approach at the end of the semester. In contrast, significantly greater proportion of first years agreed with these statements compared to second and third years students (Table 4).

**Table 4 – Week 12, Semester 1, Student Perceptions of the EP Concept**

WEEK 12 STATEMENTS	% Agree / Strongly Agree				Mean
	BDS <i>c</i> 1 N=47	BOralH1 N=25	BOralH2 N=21	BOralH3 N=22	
EP is important to me <sup>a</sup>	94	100	76	77	87
EP engages and motivates me to learn <sup>b</sup>	89	88	81	77	84

<sup>a</sup> Fisher Exact Test: BDS*c* I vs. BOralH I p>0.05; Year 1 vs. Year 2 p<0.02; Year 1 vs. Year 3 p<0.02; Year 2 vs. Year 3 p>0.05

<sup>b</sup> Fisher Exact Test: BDS*c* I vs. BOralH I p>0.05; Year 1 vs. Year 2 p>0.05; Year 1 vs. Year 3 p>0.05; Year 2 vs. Year 3 p>0.05

*Open-ended questions*

Students in their written comments to the open-ended questions provided reasons explaining why EP is a good idea to them and why they supported EP in their courses and programs. The reasons for supporting EP were grouped into themes. The main themes identified are: peer support /peer mentoring, teamwork /collaborative skills, communication skills and professional development/ identity development:

*“Overall EP was helpful...helped me to find out my role in the dental team and developed my sense of being a professional. Learnt also about other roles in the dental team through interesting case discussions in my EP team. Clinic visits were also an eye-opener, third years are very insightful.”* BDS*c* I student, week 12

*“EP concept is very helpful for us because it reinforces teamwork and peer learning, and I got to know many others from first and third year”* BOralH II student, Week 12

*“Great concept. Because you may hear, discuss and learn about incidents you haven’t yet encountered and this helps to increase awareness and insights into what it means and how it is as an oral health professional. You gain greater perspectives to how others deal with problems and how they react and these help with your own professional development.”* BOralH III student, Week 5

Responses to the open-ended questions also indicated that students were also convinced that the effectiveness of the EP concept relied not only in students' self-perceptions but also from staff, who must believe and treat students as evolving professions.

Students also provided suggestions to improve the EP sessions. The main themes identified as negative were related to logistics: timetabling of the EP sessions including both problems with scheduled times and location, venue not suitable for group work, duration of sessions i.e. sessions being too long and/or running overtime and not including BDS*c* students from other years. Students in second year of the BOralH program in particular were concerned about the EP sessions being scheduled in their dental therapy practice preclinic time:

*“My main concern is that we are cutting out time from therapy preclinic – we are already tight for time!! I need to practice that clinical stuff more than I need EP right now. EP is important, but would be more important if the sessions did not eat into my therapy time!!!”* BOralH II student, Week 9

*“I want to do both EP and therapy but it was hard to appreciate EP fully when it cuts into my precious therapy time. I always felt rushed as I wanted to get back to Yeronga for therapy as quick as possible.”*

*BOralH II student, Week 12.*

Comparison of the open-ended responses obtained in Weeks 2, 5, 9 and 12 from across the first year, second year and third year of the programs supported the findings from the Likert statements that the EP concept is perceived as relevant and helpful as a professional socialization approach in general by all students but perceived as the most relevant by the first year students.

The second and third year students also indicated that they perceived the EP concept as more relevant for the first year students in both BDBSc and BOralH than for themselves. They felt that it was less relevant to them because they have already developed some level of professional confidence, collaborative team skills and effective communication skills. Whilst both second and third year students felt similarly about the relevance of the EP concept to them, only the third years commented that they enjoyed the leadership development and peer mentoring opportunities avail to them through the EP learning activities.

*“EP is not a bad idea but perhaps I would appreciate it more if I had a mentor in my first and second years. Also I would appreciate my mentor role more. Sharing clinical experiences with my EP buddies was good, made me realise how much I actually do know...”* BOralH III, Week 9

*“EP was good for leadership skills development. I learnt leadership skills and mentoring skills which I did not have before.”* BOralH III, Week 12.

## Discussion

Professional socialization and identity development is an implicit outcome of dental and medical education (Slotnick, 2001; Jayne et al., 2005; Masella, 2005 & 2007; Wagner et al., 2007). Yet, traditionally these education programs gave “privileged status to systematic, preferably scientific knowledge” and placed very little emphasis, time and efforts toward professional socialization and identity development (Lovas et al., 2008). The EP concept as a professional socialization approach is an attempt to refocus and make explicit the implicit “ways of being” a professional. Students in this study concur that the EP concept is a good idea and relevant as a professional socialization approach for supporting, influencing, motivating and inspiring learners to become an oral health professional of excellence.

This study was subject to several limitations. The use of questionnaires only for data collection may lend itself towards social desirability bias i.e. choosing to respond “in the expected” manner. The risk of this occurring was minimized by clarifying to students prior to handing out each questionnaire that they are to be completed anonymously and in verifying responses to force-choice statements through open-ended questions. The study sample also came from one School only which may render the results less generalizable. The timeframe of the study is limited to one semester which provides limited information regarding any sustained effects. Furthermore, the study limited its exploration of the EP concept to being simply a professional socialization approach which did not take into account the multi-perspective nature of the EP concept. In recognizing these shortcomings, plans have been proposed to explore the EP concept from multiple perspectives, longitudinally and in different and multiple settings and contexts.

The findings of this study have relevant implications for the development of the EP concept. Whilst all students supported the EP concept, significantly more first year students perceived EP as a good idea and important. Moreover, the second and third year students perceived EP to be more relevant to their first year peers than to themselves, because they have already developed some level of professional confidence, collaborative team skills and effective communication skills. Another explanation may be related to first year students having more “idealistic” views of dentistry and oral health than their senior counterparts and therefore more receptive to the EP concept as a means of attaining the ideal professional identity. Skelly & Fleming (2002) in their study exploring the

perceptions of successful dentistry applicants compared to fifth year dental students and found that the “soon to be first years” were more idealistic perception of dentistry and what it means to be a dental professional. In planning future EP learning activities, the prior experience of all students and in particular, the prior knowledge and skills of the more experienced students should be considered to ensure learning activities engage and provide clear benefits to students from all year levels and at all different stages of professional socialization and identity development.

The third year BOralH students took on the mentor / leader role within the EP teams and many commented that they enjoyed the leadership development and peer mentoring opportunities avail to them through the EP concept and its learning activities, which were previously not available. In particular, in passing on knowledge, skills and experiences to the less experienced students, the third years felt their confidence and professional identity were enhanced. This is of relevance as leadership training for undergraduate dental and dental hygiene students is being increasingly recognized as important overseas (Victoroff et al., 2008; Taichman et al., 2009). Yet in Australia it is not explicitly taught and there is a lack of research findings regarding students’ perceptions of the relevance of leadership skills and leadership training to their professional career (Victoroff et al., 2008; Taichman et al., 2009). For oral health students, an added complexity needs to be considered under current legislation, the dentist is the leader within the dental team setting and has supervisory role over oral health therapists, dental hygienists and dental therapists legally. Should leadership training and positions of leadership within a dental team context (as in the EP teams) be extended to oral health undergraduate students? How best should leadership training be delivered for dentistry and oral health students without causing ethical dilemmas and confusion?

Students articulated that being treated as an EP is more important and relevant than thinking as an EP. This is consistent with the literature. Legitimation or affirmation by others is important for professional socialization; especially when legitimation or affirmation conveyed by the respected and experienced others, self-worth, self-confidence and motivation are enhanced substantially (Eli & Shuval, 1982; Gray & Smith, 1999; Pitkala & Mantyranta, 2003; Klossner, 2008). In optimizing the EP concept, it is relevant to ensure students are both being treated as an EP and thinking as an EP themselves. Together, synergy will occur to ensure a positive professional socialization and identity development process, leading to better work-readiness, greater job satisfaction, sustained career longevity and higher work-related motivation and productivity ((Ronnestad & Skovholt, 2001; Molnar et al., 2006; Cowin et al, 2008). In enhancing the legitimation aspect, the consideration and inclusion of key stakeholders’ perspectives e.g. academics, visiting private dentists, visiting oral health therapists, representatives of the professional bodies may add value and insights.

The main themes identified as negative were related to logistics: timetabling of the EP sessions including both problems with scheduled times and location, venue not suitable for group work, duration of sessions i.e. sessions being too long and/or running overtime and not including BDS students from other years. Students in second year of the BOralH program in particular were concerned about the EP sessions being scheduled in their dental therapy practice preclinic time. As a result of student feedback, the EP concept and its learning activities were redesigned in semester two to minimize logistic inconveniences and impracticalities to maximize its potential. In-class EP learning activities that involved all three year levels were substituted with online activities, including online EP team reflective discussions via EP blogs and community-integrated learning activities. The findings from the semester two iteration will be reported in a separate paper.

Four themes were identified as the main benefits or outcomes of the EP concept as a professional socialization approach: peer support / peer mentoring, teamwork /collaborative skills, communication skills and professional development / identity development. It is worth noting that the two of the benefits highlighted by students also happen to be two of the professional profiles that the EP concept aim to develop, namely EP as skilled and effective communicators and EP as collaborative team members. With the rise of multiple different oral health professionals than dentists including oral health therapists, dental hygienists etc., teamwork and collaborative skills and communication skills

within the dental team setting is said to be critical. This needs to start during undergraduate training, “to promote awareness and acceptance” of the professional roles and abilities of non-dentist oral health professionals (Ross et al., 2009).

The other key professional profile, EP as reflective practitioner, was not mentioned as a benefit or outcome of the EP concept and its learning activities in semester one by many students. Reflective learning and reflective practices, both reflective writing and reflective discussions are included into each of the year levels and assessed as pass or fail, as a component of course requirement. This highlights that perhaps critical reflection is viewed by students as occurring outside of the scheduled EP sessions and/or that the in-class reflective group discussions were not as critically reflective as they were intended to be. Exploration into how reflective practices can be best developed for dentistry and oral health students is underway.

### **Future Directions**

The second iteration of the EP learning activities was implemented in semester two. Findings and implications from this and the second iteration will be used to improve the third iteration due to roll out in 2010.

Since its implementation into the first year BDS program this year, the EP concept is beginning to be recognized beyond the BOralH program. A number of experienced staff within the School of Dentistry are seeking to collaborate and develop the EP concept in dentistry beyond the first year.

As a result of student and staff support for the EP concept, opportunity arose to translate the EP concept into a School-wide initiative, with the EP concept being embedded into the School philosophy. The EP concept will also contribute to the redevelopment of the personal and professional development teaching and learning stream of the School. In having evolving professionalism as a module of the personal and professional development stream, the potential for making substantial differences in the BDS program and for enhancing interactions between BDS and BOralH students will be increased; while barriers relating to logistics and practicalities will be, hopefully reduced.

Moreover, the national registration and accreditation scheme for health professions due to be implemented from July 2010. Opportunities exist to develop the EP concept in alignment and collaboration with the scheme’s student registration component. Plans are also underway to develop and expand the EP concept collaboratively with other disciplines, in particular, in developing the EP concept through community integrated learning in EP teams..

The EP concept is transferrable and relevant to also both health and non-health professions. In producing a more professionally attuned professional workforce, the EP concept will have far-reaching impact, for individual, for specific communities and for the society. Would you like to join me?

### **Conclusion**

This study examined students' perceptions of the EP concept as a professional socialization approach and found that students did perceive the EP concept as generally relevant and helpful. There were no differences in perception between dentistry vs. oral health students. In contrast, significantly more first year students perceived the EP concept as a good idea for professional socialization. The findings also highlighted that the EP concept was perceived as significantly more important and relevant for first year dentistry and oral health students by the other two year groups, who felt that they have already attained a certain professional identity and developed socialization skills. Based on the findings of this study, modifications have been made to the subsequent semester of EP learning

activities to ensure inclusion of activities that provided relevance to students from across the years and to address the negative aspects articulated by the students. Furthermore, students' strong support for the EP concept has translated it into a School-wide initiative and will contribute to the redevelopment of the personal and professional development teaching and learning stream of the School.

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