



Students' Experiences of Studying in an Accelerated BSN Program in Taiwan

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Today's global nursing shortage is having an adverse impact on health systems around the world and in Taiwan. Many universities in the United States have implemented accelerated BSN (ABSN) programs to create a shortcut for students who have bachelor's degrees in other fields to become nurses. Previous studies have revealed that students feel stress during the programs, especially in their first year. Students' first-year experiences in an ABSN program in the Taiwanese context are worthy of study.

Study aim: The purpose of the study was to understand nursing students' first-year experiences in an ABSN program in Taiwan.

Design: A qualitative research design was used in this study.

Setting and participations: A total of 25 students from a university in central Taiwan participated in this study to share their first-year experiences of studying in an ABSN program.

Methods: Data were collected from 3 focus group interviews and students' written reflections and were analyzed by qualitative content analysis with the help of ATLAS.ti 7.0.

Findings: Five themes were identified: (1) pursuing a brighter future, (2) positively facing doubts (3) challenges of surviving, (4) changing their learning attitudes and methods, and (5) seeking support.

Conclusions: The findings of this study may help nursing schools to provide the support students need and serve school administrators as a reference for refining such programs in the future.

Introduction/background

The nursing shortage is a major issue in most countries worldwide. In the United States, reports from the US Bureau of Labor Statistics and American Nurses Association show that 1.2 million new nurses will need to be added to the health care industry by 2022 to meet the needs of the U.S. community, to fill jobs, and to replace retirees (Porter-Wenzlaff & Froman, 2008; Small, 2015). In Taiwan, according to a national survey conducted by the Taiwan Union of Nurses Association (TUNA) in 2012, more than 90% of the 138 hospitals surveyed clearly indicated that they were short of nurses and had difficulties in recruiting nurses. The nursing shortage has led many hospitals to close wards or reduce the number of beds to downsize their services. Such downsizing has an adverse impact on health systems and affects the public's health care needs and the overall quality of health care (Lin, Huang, Kao, & Lu, 2013). According to statistics, over the next few years, Taiwan's nursing staff will still be short of more than 8000 nurses (Lin et al., 2013). Obviously, the inadequate nursing workforce in Taiwan urgently needs to be resolved. The successful experiences of ABSN programs in the United States have helped to increase the

number of baccalaureate graduates and are worthy of consideration for Taiwan.

The first ABSN programs were developed in the United States nearly half a century ago. The first such program was planned and designed by Saint Louis University in the United States in 1971. Since then, the number of ABSN programs has steadily increased. According to the American Association of Colleges of Nursing (AACN, 2017), a total of 272 ABSN programs were available in the United States in 2016, not including the 24 ABSN programs that were in the planning stage at that time. According to the same AACN report, ABSN programs offer the quickest route to licensure as a registered nurse for adults who have already completed a bachelor's degree in a non-nursing discipline. The majority of ABSN programs designed in the USA are full time, and the course plan lasts from 12 months to 18 months (Payne & Mullen, 2014), although a few schools offer programs of only 11 months (AACN, 2017; Suplee & Glasgow, 2008).

The ABSN programs in the United States and Taiwan have some important similarities and differences. Like the ABSN programs in the United States, such programs in Taiwan are geared toward individuals who have already proven their ability to succeed at a college level and

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have already completed a bachelor's degree in a non-nursing discipline. Like graduates of ABSN programs in the United States, who must pass the National Council Licensure Examination (NCLEX-RN) after graduation, Taiwanese graduates of such programs also need to pass a national licensure examination to become a qualified RN. However, the development of the ABSN programs in Taiwan is relatively new. In September 2016, the Ministry of Education issued approval to only four universities to begin enrolling students in such programs. Unlike ABSN programs in the United States, which typically require a minimum GPA of 3.0 for admission (AACN, 2017), none of these four Taiwanese ABSN programs require a minimum grade point average. Whereas some U.S. universities examine their students' skills in fields such as math, reading, and writing to screen students for such programs (Kowitlawakul, Brenkus, & Dugan, 2013), all four of these universities in Taiwan use written reviews and interviews for enrollment. Another main difference is the lengths of the programs. The ABSN programs in the U.S. last about 1 to 1.5 years, while their counterparts in Taiwan usually last about 2.5 to 3 years. The Taiwanese ABSN programs may be longer because the first-year students are typically working on their social studies and other science requirements (such as biology, anatomy, physiology, chemistry, and psychology) (Yang et al., 2016). Some of the public in Taiwan, and some nursing professionals as well, are skeptical of whether students in ABSN programs can acquire the difficult professional knowledge and skills of nursing within a period of only 2 to 3 years (Ping, 2013).

The literature shows that the students in ABSN programs tend to be older and have a bachelor degree, and they also have some work experience, know what they want, are willing to learn, demonstrate a high commitment to nursing, and are able to face the challenges of the clinical environment (Lekan, Corazzini, Gilliss, & Bailey, 2011; Raines, 2007; Ray, 2008; Starck, Schumann, Watson, & Brooke, 2008; Suplee & Glasgow, 2008). Students in ABSN programs also tend to have higher learning motivation (Payne & Mullen, 2014). In general, the nursing students in ABSN programs are likely to encounter stress during the first year (Kowitlawakul et al., 2013). Due to the curriculum plans of ABSN programs, the students are under great pressure to acquire the professional knowledge and skills of nursing within a short period. Additionally, financial stress increases the difficulty of students' surviving the program, so some students might need support and counseling assistance (Kowitlawakul et al., 2013).

So far, the majority, if not all, of the research on ABSN programs has been conducted in the United States. Most of the studies have focused on the differences in the backgrounds, study attitudes, or learning outcomes of students in traditional nursing and ABSN programs (Kemsley, Mccausland, Feigenbaum, & Riegle, 2011; Siler, DeBasio, & Roberts, 2008). So far, no relevant research has been conducted in Taiwan. This study is the first in Taiwan to use qualitative research methods to understand nursing students' first-year experiences in an ABSN program in Taiwan, including their motivation for entering the program, the challenges they perceived in the learning process, and their needs regarding help. The findings from this study will increase our understanding of how Taiwanese nursing students perceive their first-year experiences in the ABSN program. The results of this study will also inform nursing schools regarding the support students need and serve policymakers as references for refining such programs in the future.

Study design and methods

The researchers used a qualitative research design to understand nursing students' first-year experiences in an ABSN program in Taiwan. Based on the study purpose, data were collected from focus group interviews and students' written reflections to understand students' first-year experiences in the ABSN program. The methods of data collection and analysis were as follows.

Sampling

After approval was received from the Institutional Review Board of Kuang Tien General Hospital (Taiwan) (No. 10532), a purposive sampling approach was used to recruit participants. The study site was a university in central Taiwan. All students (39 students) enrolled in the ABSN program of the university in September of 2016 were invited to participate in this study. Initially, 32 students responded that they were willing to participate; however, seven of them decided not to participate because of work and time conflicts. Finally, a total of 25 (64%) students participated in the study and signed the informed consent form. We examined the face values of any differences between the groups of participants and non-participants and found no differences between the groups in gender, age, marital status, and work experience.

All student participants signed the consent form at least one week before participating in the focus group interview. The consent form included the purpose of the study, the data collection process, and the rights of research participants in the study. Although the third author of this research report, who conducted all three focus group interviews, was a faculty member of the same university as the student participants, none of the authors were teaching any courses that the participants had enrolled in during the time of the study. Additionally, while conducting the study and preparing this research report, we continuously monitored and maintained the privacy and confidentiality of our participants as well as the security of research data at all time.

Data collection

Data were collected using focus group interviews and written reflections of students' experience between September 2016 and August 2017. The 25 study participants were randomly assigned to one of the focus groups, with each group consisting of 8 or 9 participants. Each focus group interview lasted approximately 1.5 h and was audio-recorded with the agreement of the participants. The third author of this report conducted all three focus group interviews. All focus group interviews used the same format with the same questions, which asked the participants to share with their group (1) their motivation for entering the ABSN program, (2) the challenges they have faced while studying in the ABSN program, and (3) the types of help they would like to receive.

Upon the completion of each focus group interview, the interviewer instructed the participants to reflect on and write down their learning experiences as a first-year ABSN student. They were encouraged to reflect on and write down their experiences from their first semester as well as their first year in the ABSN program, which might include both classroom and clinical learning experiences. As the purpose of the study was focused generally on students' first-year experiences, the interviewer did not use any specific questions or additional instructions while the participants intuitively reflected on and wrote down their first-year experiences in the ABSN program.

Data analysis

The three focus group interviews were transcribed into verbatim reports by the researcher. Both the transcripts and the students' written reflections were analyzed using the method of qualitative content analysis suggested by Graneheim and Lundman (2004) with the help of ATLAS.ti 7.0, the qualitative data analysis and research software. The analysis procedures included the following steps: (a) repeatedly listening to group interviews and transcribing them, (b) viewing and reviewing all transcripts and students' written reflections, (c) highlighting the meaningful units and coding the units, (d) linking and comparing data, and distinguishing differences and similarities between different units, (e) continuing to develop a conceptual framework and associated attributes to achieve full clarification, and (f) integrating the results to develop an exhaustive description of the phenomena.

All the meaningful units and themes were discussed fully among the three authors until consensus was reached. During this process, several codes and themes were repeatedly compared for similarities, differences, and relationships. Finally, the authors identified five themes to further understand nursing students' first-year experiences in an ABSN program in Taiwan. We also achieved data saturation in this study, for new data repeated what was already expressed in previous data. The identified five themes were then shared with three student participants, one student participant randomly selected from each of the three focus groups. All of them agreed that these findings appropriately reflected their first-year experiences in the ABSN program.

Trustworthiness

To increase the trustworthiness of the study findings, the authors frequently met to discuss the data, and they also checked and rechecked the labeling, sorting, and naming of themes during the analysis for verification as suggested (Morse, Barrett, Maya, Olson, & Spiers, 2002). The results were shared and discussed with three participants, and all of them agreed that these findings appropriately reflected their experiences of studying in the ABSN program. All three authors are seasoned university faculty members and experienced qualitative researchers. We believe our collective experience enables us to conduct qualitative content analysis of students' experiences in a trustworthy manner.

Results

A total of 25 student participants were included in the study. They were aged from 22 to 56 years old (mean = 27.16). Most (20; 80%) of them were female, unmarried (24; 96%), and less than three years out from receiving their first degree (14; 56%). Most (16; 64%) of them were employed for a period after earning their first bachelor degree, while 9 participants (36%) entered the ABSN program immediately upon receiving their first degree. Most (14; 56%) of them had part-time jobs during the ABSN program, and nearly half (12; 48%) of the participants had tuition loans. Data analysis revealed that participants' first-year experiences of studying in the ABSN program were captured by five themes as follows.

Theme 1. Pursuing a brighter future

All participants in this study had completed a university degree; some had had jobs. The reasons given for choosing the ABSN program were roughly the same; mainly, that they lacked confidence in finding a good job with the previous degree, or that their working conditions, salary, and future development prospects were not satisfactory.

Social workers in this society are not treated well. For the same hard work, the salary in nursing is relatively high (C14).

After I graduated, I started my first job as a secretary, and I encountered a lot of pressure at work. I was looked down on by some colleagues, and the salary was very low. I was warned that I could be replaced at any time (C10).

A few students (4 participants; 16%) wanted to fulfill their personal dreams of becoming nurses. They had been unable to enter a nursing program previously because they had not passed the entrance exam a few years before. They decided to fulfill their wish to study nursing after graduating from college with their first degrees.

I was interested in studying nursing, but because my scores did not reach the requirements of the nursing program, I could not study nursing. After I graduated from college, I learned that there was an ABSN program, and my parents encouraged me to apply for it (C16).

The participants were aware that nursing work is hard; however, compared with their previous work or previous degree, the nursing

profession was perceived as highly professional, highly technical, helpful, meaningful, more accomplished, more stable, higher paid, and worthy of respect from the public and their families. Therefore, for all the participants, a career in nursing could give them hope of a brighter future.

Because family members grow older and have many diseases, learning nursing can help people and help your own family, so it is really a good job (C6).

Because I do not have any professional skills, it is very easy to lose my job sooner or later. In other words, if I go along like this, it will be very easy for me to be unemployed when I am middle-aged. I must find a professional position that is not easy to be replaced, a stable job with a satisfactory salary. (C1)

We all need a chance to open a door to what we missed before...to create an opportunity for ourselves to learn and change our lives (C7).

Theme 2. Positively facing doubts

Nearly all (23, 92%) participants revealed that their decisions to enter the ABSN program had been questioned by many of their relatives. They were reminded by others that nursing is not an easy job, and they were told that choosing nursing was a bad decision. Participants were also told that there was no need to earn another degree since they were too old to be students and physically unable to endure the nursing workload and night shifts.

Some relatives or friends would perceive that I was wasting my time. After all, I have graduated from a college. Compared to re-studying a degree, it is better to use this time to go make money. (C17)

They know that I will be 35 years old when I graduate from nursing school. They doubt whether I can adapt to the shift work like young people (C03).

In Taiwan, ABSN programs have only recently been established, unlike the other four-year nursing programs. Public opinion, the news media, and many nurses in the nursing profession also question whether the students can acquire the professional knowledge and skills of nursing within 2 to 3 years. The participants shared their related experiences.

I have been asked by some relatives and friends, "Are you still studying? A post-graduate degree?" I said it was an accelerated BSN program. Everyone thought it was impossible to finish a nursing bachelor's degree in two years; if it were possible, they said, the students who spent four or five years would be fools. (C10)

Faced with external doubts, many students went through periods of persuading themselves and persuading others. At the time of the interviews, they firmly believed that they had made the right choice to study nursing. They also believed that through their own efforts, they could achieve their goal, complete the nursing degree, and become a nurse at the end of the three years. As for the doubts of others, they tended to ignore them.

My friends often questioned my decision to attend a nursing school ... but I told them that every job has its hard part. Although it will take another three years to finish my nursing degree, my future job as a nurse is clear and steady (C16).

Of course, my family fought about it in the beginning. However, I think that my future is my own. I have to decide how to live or work for myself. I expressed my strong determination and perseverance to my family and told them that I would certainly fulfill my promise and steadily work toward the future I want (C4).

Theme 3. Challenges of surviving

During the program, the participants experienced many challenges that affected whether they could continue their educations or survive in the nursing program. The challenges mainly arose from financial pressures and the heavy study burden. Some participants shared their concerns, especially those who did not want to increase the burden on their family.

In fact, we all have some financial pressure. We are old and unable to rely on our family to support us totally. Like myself, I have to support my family, but I also want to attend this program. Therefore, my family must first hold on and support me till my graduation in 3 years. So, for these three years, the pressure to study is great, and especially the financial pressure is greater to me (C2).

The tuition fee is really a big expense. The problem is that we are unable to work normally for these three years. We must face the problem of “living off past gains.” Therefore, the pressure is really tremendous (C1).

Additionally, most of the participants felt the difficulty of studying courses in medical and nursing science. Even participants whose first degree was in health-related subjects felt at the time of the interview that they could barely cope with the materials. Those without health-related degrees felt a lot of stress. Some participants were also worried about keeping up with other students' progress.

When I was in high school, I was in a social science group, so we did not study physics and chemistry. Therefore, the biochemistry in this semester is very difficult and laborious for me (C5).

My first degree was in art. In the courses I am taking now, such as biochemistry, I can barely understand what the professor says in the lectures (C8).

Theme 4. Changing the learning attitude and methods

To face the challenges of studying, most participants referred to individual changes and adjustments in their learning attitudes, methods, and time management to overcome the academic challenges.

Because I thought I had already spent 4 years on my first degree, and now I am working toward another bachelor degree for another 3 years, I feel that my attitude should not be so casual as before, and I have to be responsible for myself (C9).

In my last degree program, I felt one's youth is the time to enjoy the fun, so I always went out with my friends to find entertainment, even in the middle of the night. But I think now that we all have some mission and financial pressure, I myself spend most of my time reading books (C4).

In addition, the participants perceived that their study methods also needed to be revised or adjusted to cope with the current study and homework loads.

In the beginning, I used my past approach to study nursing, and I failed some of the courses. I later used another way to study. For example, when I studied the bones, I touched my bones while reading, and suddenly I could remember them (C6).

I arrange the time for self-study after class; therefore, my grades can still be maintained above the standard (C3).

Theme 5. Seeking support

When the students faced the difficulties of financial and academic stress, they tended to seek help from teachers, classmates or relatives, especially relatives and friends with a nursing background.

Mainly in the money part, the tuition fee is really a heavy burden. If I were not supported by my family, I would not be able to go on with my studies. I am fortunate to have a family willing to support me. (C5)

Because my sisters are both nurses, during last semester, I would ask them if I did not understand the part in the books and sought support from them. (C7)

I ask if I don't know how to do something. I think the teacher is very nice and willing to help us. (C4)

Discussion

Based on the study findings, we identified five themes: (1) pursuing a brighter future, (2) positively facing doubts (3) challenges of surviving, (4) changing the learning attitude and methods, and (5) seeking support. These five themes enable us to understand nursing students' first-year experiences in an ABSN program in Taiwan. We found that the participants' experiences were extracted as thick descriptions of the study phenomena. We believe nursing faculties should pay attention to students' adaptability, concerns, and needs for help, and especially to two groups of students: those whose academic backgrounds are not in health-related sciences, and those who have financial difficulties. Furthermore, the administrations of ABSN programs should provide appropriate assistance to the students in a timely manner. Some critical issues around our five themes are worthy of further discussion. Additionally, we also discuss the similarities and differences in the students' experiences in ABSN programs in the USA and in Taiwan.

The 25 participants' demographics, including their age range, gender, marital status, past academic qualifications, and time of entering the ABSN program, are similar to those reported in previous studies conducted in the USA (Siler et al., 2008). The reasons given by the participants regarding their motivation for entering into nursing tend to be the perception of the nursing profession as a higher level of professionalism, the higher number of job opportunities, the greater stability of nursing positions, and the higher pay, and these reasons are also similar to those cited in studies in the United States (Siler et al., 2008).

An interesting phenomenon is that in Taiwan, the students in the ABSN program tended to be challenged by others, including close family members, other relatives, and friends, regarding two factors: (1) their age (too late to learn nursing) or (2) the possibility of becoming familiar with nursing in the short period of three years. Few (if any) challenges were founded on their previous studies. It has been argued that age is positively related to academic performance (Salamonson & Andrew, 2006). However, part-time employment can be negatively associated with academic performance, and the amount of time spent in paid employment is the strongest predictor of academic performance in both pathophysiology and nursing practice (Salamonson & Andrew, 2006). In addition, no doubts regarding the possibility of whether the students could finish the ABSN program in 3 years or a shorter period were reported in studies held in the United States. This difference is understandable since the ABSN programs in Taiwan are still in their early stages of development and no students have successfully graduated yet. The effectiveness of ABSN programs is as yet unproven (Ping, 2013). However, the number of ABSN programs in the United States has significantly increased in recent decades (AACN, 2017; Kowitlawakul et al., 2013). The ABSN programs in the USA also show that even in a short period, students in such programs display willingness to learn, high commitment to nursing, and the ability to face the challenges of the clinical environment (Lekan et al., 2011; Raines, 2007; Ray, 2008; Starck et al., 2008; Suplee & Glasgow, 2008). Given the above evidence, the worries of some of the Taiwanese public and of nursing professionals may be unwarranted. In the face of external questions, almost all the participants felt very confident and perceived that they could

acquire the nursing knowledge as long as they worked hard. The students generally felt that the choice of the ABSN program was the correct one and would create a bright future for them. In addition, they expressed that the hard work was worthwhile.

The students generally felt financial and academic stress, as reported in previous studies (Kowitlawakul et al., 2013). This study found that more than half of the participants (14; 56%) had part-time jobs, and nearly half relied on tuition loans (12; 48%). Regarding academic stress, those with science-based and health-related educational backgrounds could be better expected to adapt to medical and nursing science. In contrast, a lack of scientific education or an unrelated learning background, as expected, affected performance in the course of study, as also reported in the United States (Kemsley et al., 2011; Lyon, Younger, Goodloe, & Ryland, 2010). Kowitlawakul et al. (2013) claimed that students' academic performances in the first semester are highly correlated to their scores on the entrance exam. However, at present, the four schools in Taiwan with ABSN programs recruit students by reviewing the students' academic records, work experience, portfolios, and interviews.

The participants, in pursuit of their intended goals of nursing careers, responded positively to the internal and external stresses (e.g., academic and financial burdens) they faced (Gibbons, Dempster, & Moutray, 2008). To overcome the challenges, the students changed their attitudes and learning practices beforehand, and they sought help from teachers, relatives, friends, and classmates. Similarly, studies have pointed out that in the United States, teachers and peers are perceived as being the most significant source of support during the learning process in ABSN programs (Cangelosi, 2007; Kemsley et al., 2011).

Recommendations for nursing education

Faculty and administrative members of ABSN programs are advised to consider students' concerns and needs for help and to provide appropriate assistance to the students. Some issues found in this study, such as students' experiences of positively facing doubt, the external social support by families and friends while in school, and the need to achieve work, school and life balance, are vital and worthy of future studies.

Limitations

Despite the contribution of our study in further understanding Taiwanese first-year nursing students' experiences in an ABSN program, certain limitations must be noted. First, this study represents the views of 25 students who were enrolled in an ABSN program in a university in central Taiwan. Therefore, the perceptions presented here may not be generalized beyond the scope of this study. Second, this study was conducted in Taiwan. Although it seems reasonable to expect that ABSN students in other countries may have similar experiences and perspectives, such an assumption should be tested in further similar research with larger samples, preferably in education systems in other nations.

Conclusion

This is the first study in Taiwan to explore nursing students' first-year experiences in an ABSN program. The findings increase our understanding of their motivation for a nursing degree, their experiences of being questioned by others, their difficulties due to financial and academic stress, and also their strategies for staying in the ABSN program. Although the backgrounds of some of the students in the ABSN program, and the financial and academic stresses they faced, are similar to those reported in previous studies on such programs in the USA, our findings revealed an interesting phenomenon: The ABSN students' decisions to earn an additional degree and to study nursing were often questioned by others. The students firmly believed that the choice of

the nursing profession was the right direction for a brighter future. More importantly, they looked positively at the problems they faced and sought solutions. They changed their attitudes and manner of studying, sought help from the school, and engaged their personal resources for help.

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Conflict of interest

None.

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