



The Lived Experience of International Graduate Nursing Students Engaged With the US Educational System



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ABSTRACT

Background: Strategies are needed to address social and cultural challenges faced by international students pursuing education at American universities.

Purpose: The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of graduate international nursing students enrolled in a graduate nursing program.

Method: This descriptive phenomenological study explored the experiences of twelve international graduate nursing students.

Results: Through the use of Colaizzi's (1978) method of qualitative data analysis, five emergent themes were identified: Experiencing Cultural Differences, Taking on the New Role, Navigating Challenges, Reaping Benefits, and Unfulfilled Wishes. Within these themes, unique ideas of 'wanting to do good for their home country', strategies students used for 'cultural adjustment', and 'unmet or conflicting expectations' were present that have implications for nurse educators and program administrators.

Conclusions: Future recommendations for faculty include front loading professional writing support for students, exploring opportunities for increased intercultural interactions in and out of the classroom, and workshops to increase faculty cultural awareness. The theme of 'unfulfilled wishes' provides a rich understanding of goals that international students bring to the learning environment. Additional research studies are needed to explore the experiences of international nursing students in other fields and after they return home to their native country.

Introduction

As higher education institutions across the United States (US) are working diligently to enhance diversity, cross cultural experiences, and enrollment, recruiting international students is a solution that contributes to the "personality" and the financial security of the campus. There has been an influx of international students at our university over the past three years and faculty have made a concerted effort to provide these students with a smooth transition into America's culture, language, and education system. However, as part of our overall program improvement plan, there is a need to explore the student experiences deeper in order to gain a stronger understanding of ways the university could improve their experience and continue to build the diversity of our classrooms. This study sought to explore the graduate international nursing students' experiences and identify potential accommodations faculty can employ to facilitate success for international students in the US.

Background of the study

International students who attend universities in the US often experience barriers or obstacles that may inhibit their ability to succeed to their full potential in their education. Barriers include academics, social, cultural, financial, language and adjustment factors (Andrade, 2006; Sherry, Thomas, & Chui, 2010; Wu, Garza, & Guzman, 2015). Wu et al. (2015) analyzed these barriers using a qualitative approach at a southernmost university in the US. Participants were from a variety of cultural and program backgrounds, however, none of the students were nursing majors. The students revealed that most of their barriers to success were related to academics and study skills. The most common theme to this study was the interaction with professors. Many students expressed that the "norms" for class discussion are different in the US. Furthermore, students shared a concern of worrying that professors do not notice them or "call on them in class" (Gebhard, 2012; Lee, 2010; Wu et al., 2015). A second barrier that was noted under academics was isolation from classmates. Students identified they were not always included in group work or discussions within the class. In addition,

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language and communication skills seemed to be a barrier in academic performance as well (Andrade, 2006; Leong, 2015). These students expressed that they had a hard time understanding American professors and native students due to accents or different kinds of English speaking styles. They explained that they had to spend extra time trying to figure out the types of differences which took time away from academic performance (Wu et al., 2015).

Faculty also observed that the communication between US and international students was sometimes awkward when they interacted with one another. In addition, traditions among students varied. For example, the authors have received requests for international students for prayer time or a private location to face in the correct direction for prayer. For students who did not report having family nearby, loneliness, homesickness and social isolation impacted their learning due to difficulties in making friends (Andrade, 2006; Gebhard, 2012; Wu et al., 2015). Thirdly, international students reported “culture shock” as a barrier when they encountered differing moral and value systems in the US as compared to their home country (Wu et al., 2015). Specifically, the students reported experiencing prejudice against international students by classmates, and in academics. They noted that Americans did not seem to have an awareness of their backgrounds, and made conclusions about them without having an idea of what their culture is like. Culture and reception of the host institution, and challenges with cultural barriers were also reported by Leong (2015) which greatly impacted the students' experience. These international students stated that they were very willing to express their differences and explain their background to the Americans (Wu et al., 2015).

Lastly, adjustment or adaptation difficulties were experienced by international students (Gebhard, 2012; Lee, 2010; Sherry et al., 2010; Wu et al., 2015). However, these students were impressed by the resources that were available to them and utilized many of them to succeed. For example, they mentioned dorm activities that were available to them to relieve stress and to have fun. Also, they reported participating in language support, campus counseling, and student organizations on campus as a way to relieve stress, help with their feelings of loneliness, and to increase their interactions with American students (Wu et al., 2015).

While multiple challenges are faced by international students who choose to study in the US, the research also described support strategies that faculty may utilize to assist students with navigating these barriers (Andrade, 2006; Gebhard, 2012; Leong, 2015; Sherry et al., 2010 & Wu et al., 2015). While the universities were often prepared to meet the academic needs of the students with tutoring, pedagogical adjustments and counseling interventions, strategies are needed to address the social and cultural challenges (Andrade, 2006; Glass, Kociolek, Wongtrirat, Lynch, & Cong, 2015; Wu et al., 2015). Additionally, the university should be well prepared with strategies to enhance the communication abilities of international students (Leong, 2015). Deliberately planned receptions to greet the students on their arrival provide a positive first experience for international students (Gebhard, 2012; Wu et al., 2015). Lee (2010) found that the welcoming and inclusive environment was highly influential in international students' decision to recommend the institution to compatriots. Additionally, preparing the US students for engagement with diverse classmates is critical (Leong, 2015; Sherry et al., 2010; Wu et al., 2015). Sherry et al. (2010) also suggest that financial assistance and scholarships and creating opportunities for international students to work on the language and communication skills is of high importance to universities. These findings highlight accommodations that faculty may employ to facilitate success for international students.

Furthermore, evidence showed academic institutions need to consider the needs of the international student if they expect these same students to recommend the university to compatriots who may be seeking a US degree. As reported by Lee (2010), when international students had negative experiences such as unequal treatment, financial difficulties, and unacceptable quality of support services, attitudes of

the international students were negatively impacted. To better understand what motivates a student to recommend a school to their peers, Lee suggests that qualitative research is needed to better understand the experiences of international students.

Although the above research provides a beginning understanding for faculty planning for recruitment and admission of international students, none of the subjects in these studies were enrolled in a graduate nursing program. Our university, and specifically nursing, has experienced an increase in international student inquiries and admissions in both our graduate and undergraduate nursing and allied health programs. Anecdotally, we have identified some of these same barriers and challenges in our international students. However, what is not known is how these same students then interface with the US health-care system; a unique focus of our capstone courses in graduate nursing. The interface with both the academic and the clinical setting is a unique experience of nursing students and hence warrants further exploration. While many graduate students go through similar challenges and opportunities, the experience of nursing students is unique in that the students are required to interact both in academic settings and in healthcare arenas where implementation of what they have studied is carried out in practicum experiences. This practice requirement may present additional barriers or facilitators that should be explored to compile specific recommendations that are tailored to the needs of international students enrolled in graduate nursing programs.

The overarching goal of this research study was to explore these opportunities and barriers and provide recommendations to improve the quality of their education as well as help them succeed in their acculturation in the US. The more immediate purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of graduate international nursing students' enrolled in a graduate nursing program. Therefore, a descriptive phenomenological approach was utilized to examine and identify potential opportunities and barriers experienced by international graduate nursing students. Additionally, the findings may generate recommendations to facilitate the success of these students.

Methodology

This study employed a descriptive phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of international nursing students enrolled in the graduate nursing program. Husserl's four steps of descriptive phenomenology were employed: bracketing, intuiting, analyzing and interpreting (Polit & Beck, 2017). Data was collected through open ended face to face interviews. Data was analyzed using Colaizzi's (1978) seven step method of qualitative data analysis (Table 1).

Following approval from Indiana University of Pennsylvania's Institutional Review Board, all international graduate nursing students were invited to participate in this study by a hand delivered written letter from the graduate program coordinator. The letter described the study and provided the students with a copy of the informed consent. A graduate assistant distributed the letters prior to a class to avoid any perception of coercion to participate. Participants in this study ranged from 25 to 29 years of age (for those who reported an age). Participants were both male and female. The final sample of 12 participants was

Table 1
Colaizzi (1978) phenomenologic analytic method.

Step analysis
1. Read all protocols to acquire a feeling for them
2. Review each protocol and extract significant statements
3. Spell out the meaning of each significant statement
4. Organize the formulated meanings into clusters of themes
5. Integrate results into an exhaustive description of the phenomenon under study
6. Formulate an exhaustive description of the phenomenon under study in as unequivocal a statement of identification as possible
7. Ask participants about the findings thus far as a final validating step

primarily from Saudi Arabia with one subject from India. No vulnerable subjects were asked to participate in this study.

As noted by McDermott-Levy (2011), Arabs value personal relationships and are protective of their personal privacy with strangers; a point we had to consider since many of our students were also of Arab culture. One of the faculty members on the research team (who was not part of recruitment nor the interviewing process) shared the same cultural background as most of the participants.

The team conducting this study consisted of five doctoral prepared faculty members, all of whom are registered nurses. The team members' areas of expertise are in qualitative research methodology, supervision of qualitative dissertations, international student teaching and advising, cross cultural research and mentoring graduate assistants.

A graduate assistant, trained in qualitative interview techniques by one of the project faculty, conducted the face to face tape-recorded interviews. The study interviews were conducted in a private conference room located in the nursing department. The interview tool contained several prompts for each interview question that allowed for in depth exploration of participant responses (i.e. Can you give me an example? Can you tell me more about...?). All interviews were transcribed word for word. At any time during the study, the student had the right to withdraw and all data related to them destroyed without any repercussions. None of the participants chose to withdraw. Final confirmatory interviews were also conducted in a similar manner as part of step 7 of Colaizzi's (1978) steps for data analysis. There were no known risks to participation in this study. The graduate assistant coded the interview with a pseudonym so that the researchers reading the transcript were not able to link the transcript to the student. Only the research assistant had access to the master file that identified which participant was assigned to which pseudonym. Every member of the research team read each of the interview transcript alone, highlighted meaningful statements and then began the process of developing themes. The group met several times to do peer review of one another's findings, further develop the significant statements and themes, organize the formulated meanings into clusters of themes, and then compile the final exhaustive description of the phenomenon of interest in this study.

Results

Using Colaizzi's (1978) method of qualitative data analysis, five emergent themes were identified: Experiencing Cultural Differences, Taking on the New Role, Navigating Challenges, Reaping Benefits, and Unfulfilled Wishes. Each of these are described here.

Experiencing cultural differences

Theme captures the experience of engaging in an intercultural learning and living environment. A few students experienced minimal stressors related to engaging in an intercultural learning environment since they were already living in the US for either part of their undergraduate education or had been studying at another university and were already acclimated to living in the US. Hence their cultural adjustment had already occurred. For most of the students, there was a cultural adjustment period that was experienced as they began their studies at IUP. The university was described as a positive learning environment, providing good international student experiences and most participants stated that they did not experience any discrimination. However, off campus, some minor cultural discrimination did occur and appears to be directly related to the wearing of the Hijab.

"...especially because I am wearing a Hijab. So like that is a big question mark...because it is a small town and most people do not know about Muslim...I go to the grocery store and they are not nice. I hear some words against us. On campus, I do not experience this."

One student shared that there was one day of a campus issue that

"was not a big deal".

Issues associated with this cultural adjustment are described as needing to quickly learn a new culture, feeling different or not fitting in, needing to learn the 'new' way of interacting with faculty and peers, language and communication challenges, learning what to expect in this new culture, struggling to maintain some of their own cultural norms and overcoming stereotypes. One participant when comparing learning in her home country with learning in the US stated, *"both [faculty] may be teaching the same subjects...but here [the] way of education and styles is different. ...Here I learn to be motivated."* Another student, when describing the cultural differences associated with language stated, *"like with English language, it makes me sad and frustrated because sometimes you know the answer and have an idea, but you have to think of one word that would make the sentence appropriate. ...sometimes that makes me be silent in class."*

Positive aspects of cultural adjustments were also described. Some participants liked the independence associated with living in the US. One student stated, *"I have explored many things from the library, a lot of resources, games, and culturally things we can explore while we are here."* The researchers interpreted this to mean that for females, there are less restrictions, since most of the participants were from conservative backgrounds. This interpretation was supported during the confirmatory interviews. Experiencing new ways of learning in this culture was an enriching experience for many of the participants and will be further explicated in the theme of "learning the new role". However, one student's comment highlights their excitement of learning in new ways.

"I like that students can share their ideas and speak in class. I also like how the students live their lives because it's different than our culture. They can depend on themselves and find their own job for example, they can have a part-time job and still be at the University."

Learning to communicate better in English was another cultural adjustment as students are required to engage in high level thinking and discussions in class at the graduate level. Students described feeling supported by their American peers and found this to be one of the positive aspects of the program as evidenced by one student's statement: *"American students are very good; I love them."*

Finally, it should be noted that there were some deficiencies described when participants were asked about their intercultural experiences. Because the cohort was comprised of mostly foreign students, some participants described a lack of enough diversity in the classroom and desired more intercultural mixing. An unmet need for many of the participants was this desire for more cultural immersion in the US culture. This will be further discussed in the theme of 'unmet needs'.

Taking on the new role

One of the most richly described themes was the experience of "learning the new role" as an international student. Although students came to this program having completed their undergraduate nursing degree in their home country, there was much to learn for them regarding the role of a master's nursing student. One common experience described was the task of learning to be a US student. For them, the way that faculty and students interacted through email, expectations of students, degree of classroom interaction, both inside and outside of the classroom was different. The adjustment to this new role generated many barriers or challenges for the student. Student comments included, *"I remember my first assignment was like whoa! I didn't know what APA style is or what references were. But now it's ok."* and

"I think cause in my country we have a relationship with the faculty that is very formal. The teacher is one way relationships where the professor gives us information and we listen. We don't have a lot of opportunity to participate and be active but here it is different. I think that it's still difficult for me to contact with the teacher..."

Several students shared strategies they implemented to become US graduate students. One strategy was the task of learning to be self-motivated. Students had to overcome their own cultural shyness and engage actively in class discussions and group work. Learning to be assertive is another strategy participants used to take on this new role of being a US student. One student shared her experience, “*We should not procrastinate our work. We have to ask if we have any confusion.*” Taking control of their own learning was described as part of this role transition.

Adjusting to this role also meant that students had to work with faculty to learn the proper ways to engage and to develop realistic expectations of their faculty. Faculty were not always on email and were not readily available to all students. One student expressed her frustration with availability of faculty, “*I know that Americans like to use email a lot if you want to communicate. But some of the doctors [faculty] are so late to reply to my emails, I think this is part of your culture.*” One participant described the classroom bullying that took place with her same culture peer and shared that while peer support is helpful, it can also become a negative experience.

One interesting theme described as part of role transition was the idea of learning to learn outside of the classroom. Students described how to learn material in more than one way, how to navigate or advocate for resources to help them outside of the classroom such as the writing center, and watching how other students learned proved to be beneficial for them. One student stated, “[I] looked for a lot of resources not just the source that the professor provides me. Sometimes makes me look for different ideas...not included in the textbook for class.” Although this was a new way of learning for them, most students described this US graduate student role as positive and liked the new ways of learning. The data revealed that one of the positive outcomes of ‘learning the new role’ was the success they experienced in class and with role building projects. One student shared, “*I presented a poster. I took so many pictures for my family to see.*”

Navigating challenges

By far the most talked about theme is the “navigating challenges” among international students and indeed it was the focus of the research. While many of these barriers were encountered because they are international students and as part of the role transition, a separate category for this concept emerged from the data.

One of the challenges is related to the communication and language barriers these students bring to the learning environment. Though faculty are quite aware of this, the perspective from the student view was important to explore. Language affects how we communicate and is thus fundamental to the learning process. Language barriers were discussed as one of the major obstacles to overcome. Language made completing the reading assignments in a timely manner more difficult for the students as participants frequently mentioned the need for more time. One student captures this challenge well in her statement, “*Sometimes it's hard understanding what we have to do for the assignments. So, they give us time because we are slow readers. ...and I started to read more to understand. I get to improve my writing through reading.*” One student also described a need to re-listen to what the teacher said and wished that taping the classes was permitted in all classes to ‘hear’ the content again.

Some students also noted that they felt the English barrier affected their grades on written work. The theme of fairness came up in discussions as students shared their lack of knowledge regarding “APA rules” and “English grammar”. The frustration is reflected in one student's statement, “*...two classes I got a B because of a grammar mistake. I don't want to lose 5 points because of a grammar error. APA is good but I don't want to lose points for not having exactly what I need for APA.*” The communication barriers also led to feelings of isolation for some of the students. While not every student shared language barrier issues, they noted the importance of anticipating that there may be language

barriers to overcome.

Students' discussions about writing were linked both to language barrier issues and the struggle to balance their desire for good grades with overcoming writing barriers and being accountable for their own work. The communication issue also challenged students who believed they knew the material, but due to communication difficulties felt they were not communicating what ‘we know’ to the instructor effectively. A consistent theme was this idea that they were not on the same foundational level as their American peers. They did not know APA writing style, did not know how to express their thoughts effectively and struggled with the pace of learning in 7-week block courses. One student shared the following, “*We have 7 weeks to finish one curricula [course], so it is stressful. We have to do everything faster and quickly.*”

While navigating communication issues, students also described the struggle to learn this new way of being a student in the US. Learning what to expect of faculty and needing to get on the same page as their American peers was important in order to avoid feelings of being treated unfairly. These relationship issues were frequently described by the student as different from their previous learning in their country; demonstrating that the cultural impact is much broader than rituals and practices associated with religion or beliefs. The international students described the challenge to learn what to expect of this culture of faculty. They described a need for faculty to be flexible or display more understanding. The participants were challenged to leave their comfort zone of their own language and peers and interact more in the classroom. Students described this as needing to get up the courage to do this. Evidence of the struggle to navigate these challenges is summarized in this student's comment, “*Just the whole problem is we need someone to guide us about the new system. They have their strategies of teaching and we are not so familiar with that.*”

Strategies to overcome the language and class expectation barriers included seeking help outside of the classroom from faculty and peers and use of university resources. “*Sometimes we make like groups to remind each other of assignments.*” The writing center was frequently mentioned as both a help and a hindrance to students. Resources were helpful and not helpful, “*the library resources and writing center. Sometimes it is helpful, sometime not.*” Besides needing editorial support, participants were struggling to complete different styles of writing assignments while also mastering the grammar and APA rules. This was described as overwhelming and challenging. Resources, while helpful, did not meet all their needs.

Another theme in the category of barriers was the lack of knowledge of how the US healthcare system worked and their lack of clinical experience. Most of the students were not licensed yet and thus could not work in the US healthcare system. “*Another barrier...not able to work here because of the license. [Hence] cannot engage in the healthcare facility.*” Students felt like they did not have the same foundation upon which to scaffold their learning. Students described that all their learning was theoretical learning and described the need for a bridge upon which to place some of this learning. Simulation was mentioned as one possible alternative to clinical practice for these students to engage in.

“*You are giving the students the classes...but what I would like is simulation...because if you do not connect the skills and principles, the information you have learned here will not be successful when you go back because you will not have to practice what you learned. This will cause a gap between what you learn and what you can do.*”

An additional stressor students identified was the stress of preparing for licensure in the US. Since the program recognized their native license as acceptable for admission, to obtain a US license students stated they had to work through a lengthy application process and are aware they face low odds of passing the licensure exam. According to the National Council of State Boards of Nursing (NCSBN), as of September 2017, the pass rate for first time test takers who are internationally educated is 38.68% as compared to 87.85% for US educated first time

test takers during the same period (NCSBN website). Many students voiced a desire to practice nursing in the states and thus needed support as they worked toward this goal. Additionally, this led to a feeling of not being connected to their American classmates.

Reaping benefits

Participant responses revealed significant benefits to being a graduate nursing student. This category is characterized by the positive outcomes experienced by students in the program as well as the growth they acknowledged as a direct benefit from this program. Students liked this university specifically as well as the US education system and the exposure to healthcare practices. Students identified several categories of positive program outcomes including the university itself, specific faculty traits that were helpful and positive experiences throughout the coursework. Within the program, students felt supported. When prompted for specifics students shared that they liked learning with simulation (something many of them have not been exposed to in their native country); the practicum experiences; positive role building exercises; improved writing; and becoming a better reader and writer of English. Students also identified that support came from their peers as well. This program and university support has allowed them to reach for new goals and develop a hunger for learning. Strengths of faculty included the direct support they gave to students, faculty flexibility, and sensitivity to the international student experience. Students specifically noted they experienced success!

One unanticipated positive experience was the students' desire to do good and “payback” for their home country. Student expressions of ‘wanting to do good for their home country’ was evident in the sharing or feeling of excitement about learning in a different environment and discovering how to bring this new knowledge and skill set home. This is best summarized by this student's comment, “*I learned how to lecture and become a leader...and how to get this when I go back to my country. [I want to] improve the vision of nursing care there.*”

Unfulfilled wishes

Participants discussed shortcomings or unmet needs that they had hoped to meet when coming to the US. This category is important for educators and program administrators seeking to address student needs to improve student success and overall program satisfaction. As mentioned earlier, one major concern shared by students was the inability to engage in active practice in the healthcare system. Although all the students are ‘licensed’ in their home country, obtaining the US registered nurse (RN) license proved to be a difficult obstacle for them. Hospitals and agencies were unwilling to allow students to enter patient care areas without a valid US license. One student lamented, “*I want to practice in the US because I want to explore everything here.*” This proved to be a hindrance to their ability to apply some of what they were learning about the US healthcare during their program of studies and specifically during the practicum culminating experience.

Inability to practice was also linked to their desire to experience inter-cultural experiences. Student believed that an immersion into clinical practice would have expanded their inter-cultural experiences. One student suggested,

“It is really hard to go back home with all of this theories and all of this principles...and not be a nurse in clinical. If there is any simulation program or like, they can work as part time in any facility that allows them...to give the idea of the nursing clinical work. That way when [we] are at home it will be familiar with what [we] will do in the facility to help...to teach or work in hospitals.”

Although most students were in cohorts with many of their international peers, the number of US students in these same face to face classes was limited (most US students have opted for the online version of coursework). When discussing the desire for more cultural diversity,

one student notes, “*The problem is...we are interacting with other Saudi students...I can't interact with other Americans.*” Hence, while some inter-cultural experiences took place, there was a desire for more.

Educational unmet needs also included the need for more writing support. The writing center on campus was helpful to them to an extent but they voiced that the writing support, had it occurred earlier in their studies, may have been more helpful. “*It was hard to engage in the college life. The second semester was better, the first...mostly the issue was like the perceiving or thinking different cultures... When they ask something, we understood something differently for the assignment...so we are different than the American students.*” Strong writing support is needed up front for students to bridge the writing and language gap. Thus, one obstacle appears to be the clarification of what is fair or unfair when it comes to evaluating student writing; both from the perspective of the international and US student but also on the part of the faculty member.

Discussion

The findings in this study mirrored many of the themes uncovered in the literature with other international and minority students. Much of the literature findings reflect that the language barrier is a major barrier for international students studying in a foreign country (Leong, 2015; Wu et al., 2015). Students considering international study from outside of the US consider Speaking English fluently as the most common goal among students surveyed (“Know your neighborhood”, 2016). In a metasynthesis examining qualitative literature on challenges faced in nursing education for students with English as an additional language (EAL), Starr (2009) found that language was the number one barrier. Students are described as “living in two cultures”; their own native culture and their current university culture. This was consistent with our study in which students were both challenged by the language barrier but also could identify that this forced them to learn to converse, write and master the English language. As noted by Ryan and Dogbey (2012), fostering the acquisition of English language skills is paramount for university faculty. English immersion was a theme identified in a study of 12 female Omani nurses earning their Bachelor's degree in the US (McDermott-Levy, 2011). The women found that “speaking with native speakers required a different level of comprehension and conversation” (p. 273). Similar to the students in this study, our participants found it difficult to both write and adapt to the different grammar rules required in higher education.

The challenges of *Taking on the New Role* as students adapted to other styles of teaching and learning in this study is also consistent with the literature on international and minority students (Edgecombe, Jennings, & Bowden, 2013; McDermott-Levy, 2011; Starr, 2009; Wu et al., 2015). Wu et al. (2015) in a study of 10 international students studying at both the graduate and undergraduate level, found that students needed to confront and deal with the different ways of thinking and doing in the US. Like students in this study, these participants had to learn to engage in class discussions and interact with professors in ways that were new to them. Starr's (2009) metasynthesis also found academic challenges as an overriding theme in their review of challenges for EAL students. As noted by Edgecombe et al. (2013), these different pedagogical approaches that vary by culture, can be a hardship for students to navigate. Additionally, the Omani women in McDermott-Levy's (2011) study noted they had to engage in self-directed learning to be successful. Many students found this exciting and rewarding once they learned how to take on this new role.

Culture, specifically *Experiencing Cultural Differences*, also played an important role on the experience of graduate nursing students both in our study and in the literature. Participants described the feeling of not fitting in because the language and learning was so different from their home country, and there were many obstacles or barriers to overcome. This is referred to in the literature as cultural and/or social isolation (Edgecombe et al., 2013; Gardner, 2005; Sherry et al., 2010; Starr, 2009; Wu et al., 2015). Gardner (2005), in a qualitative study of 15

minority nursing students' experiences while enrolled in a predominantly white nursing program found themes of “loneliness and isolation”, and “differentness”. Starr (2009) also describes themes of “social isolation” as part of the academic experience of EAL students. Conversely, McDermott-Levy (2011) described this in a more positive theme of “having new freedoms” and “shifting paradigms”. While it appears that due to language barriers and cultural differences, students may feel isolated, this can also be a time for them to adapt and embrace the new learning styles and appreciate new ways of learning.

While the literature certainly supported the challenges these students mentioned, the benefits of studying abroad or *Reaping Benefits* was less mentioned in the literature. Unique to this study was the participant's desire to extend the benefits beyond their personal benefits and return home to improve healthcare and education in their native country armed with this new learning and insights. Gardner (2005) found that minority nursing students were attending nursing school as undergraduates to build a better future despite the obstacles and hardships they are enduring. The Omani women in McDermott-Levy's (2011) study noted that they were growing professionally and personally because of having experienced new freedoms, shifting paradigms and engaging in self-directed learning.

Furthermore, *Unfulfilled Wishes* was a theme also less reported in the literature but certainly of importance to faculty and administrators in nursing. Edgecombe et al. (2013) found that issues for international nursing students at the undergraduate level included unmet aspirations and expectations. Students reported less American friendships than anticipated, a finding consistent with the Omani women (McDermott-Levy, 2011) and the international students at the University of Toledo (Sherry et al., 2010). Finally, as participants in this study also reported, being left out of authentic or valued experiences in clinical situations was also reported by Edgecombe et al. (2013). There appears to be a strong desire to immerse in the new culture in authentic and meaningful ways that is perhaps overlooked by universities or perhaps is complicated by administrative requirements for true engagement in clinical practice or patient care areas. Meeting this need must be balanced with the current trend in nursing for programs to deliver the entire program online; an environment that will require faculty to construct deliberate and purposeful opportunities to experience the cultural immersion international students are seeking. Many of the international students in our study were prohibited from completing more than two courses online to justify their country's sponsorship of their study abroad.

Implications for nursing

Faculty and administrators working with or seeking to recruit international students can glean many recommendations from this research. First, it is imperative that faculty develop cultural relativism. This is referred to as the ability to view the culture against the culture's norms, not from their own culture's view. As this study explored student experiences, new insights into how their culture affects their communication, learning, classroom interactions and learning goals proved informative. Participants believed that at times faculty failed to view the learning experience from the student's individual perspective. The literature describes this gap between what faculty know and expect and what international students need as cultural unawareness. This suggests that some American faculty do not always have an awareness of the international students' culture (Wu et al., 2015).

Perhaps the strongest finding in this study is the students request for ‘up front’ mentoring about learning in the US, communicating in English beyond their initial conversation mastery of English, writing expectations, and evaluation of learning. Students coming from pedagogical practices characterized by one-way communication and memorization need to unlearn these practices and engage in higher level thinking and learning to be successful in graduate nursing education. Creating deliberate learning opportunities for international students

early in their program of study may improve their success and satisfaction with their learning experience (Sherry et al., 2010). While this may place additional demands on faculty time, as noted by Del Fabbro, Mitchell, and Shaw (2015), fostering students' success not only in language but also in their ability to engage in self-directed learning and developing an internal locus of control, may yield long term benefits (McDermott-Levy, 2011; Ryan & Dogbey, 2012; Starr, 2009). Participants seek faculty support and recognition to overcome obstacles encountered (Gardner, 2005).

Next, faculty need to find ways to enhance American students' appreciation of diversity and foster socialism of international students with the academic and surrounding community (Edgecombe et al., 2013; Wu et al., 2015). Student suggestions to deliberately create diverse learning environments would help students achieve their goal of cultural immersion and perhaps disperse myths or misunderstandings about other cultures. Student mentor programs may prove useful for facilitating this socialization need as well as perhaps shortening the cultural adjustment period. Faculty development may also provide faculty with the background information on international student's home country and present evidence based strategies to foster their success. Faculty and administrators would be wise to enhance the diversity of their students that mirrors the populations and needs of the communities they serve.

Students in this study cited lack of active clinical practice as a gap in their learning. While simulation offers one solution to the lack of clinical engagement for students who lack a US license, finding ways to support their NCLEX-RN success and create opportunities to apply what they are learning is important if students are planning to take this information back to their native country to improve nursing education there (Edgecombe et al., 2013). Graduate nursing programs should consider offering an NCLEX-prep class for international students wishing to sit for the NCLEX-RN licensure exam during their time in the US.

Strengths and weaknesses

There are strengths and weaknesses noted with this study. Strengths include exploring previously undocumented experiences of international graduate nursing students studying in the US. The research team utilized criteria for quality enhancement prescribed by Guba and Lincoln (1994) for qualitative inquiry: dependability, confirmability, transferability, credibility and authenticity. The quality of the study was enhanced through the use of a prescribed data analysis strategy, prolonged engagement with both the study participants and the data, audio recording of the interviews, use of confirmatory interviews to enhance accuracy and confirm findings (member checking), intercoder checks with the research team, peer review and debriefing, maintaining comprehensive field notes, maintaining and carefully documenting the audit trail, and thick vivid descriptions of each theme identified. Having insights into the data analysis from faculty who share cultural heritage with most of the participants was also a strength of the study. Limitations include the lack of heterogeneity among participants.

Suggestions for future research

Future research is needed to explore other experiences of graduate nursing students to identify whether their experiences are similar. Research regarding the effects of deliberate strategies to improve the mastery of the English language earlier in the program may help administrators seeking to recruit and retain international nursing students. Faculty would benefit from research on best practices for obtaining cultural immersion in online or hybrid learning environments. Research to explore international students' experiences after they return home may build on the theme of “doing good”. A second post-graduation research topic would be to explore whether students taught in the pedagogy of their home country or whether they chose to teach

using some of the learned “American” pedagogies they experienced. Finally, to assess transferability, exploring experiences of students in other graduate programs is needed.

Conclusion

Utilizing a phenomenological approach, deeper meanings for previously identified themes in the literature for international undergraduate and graduate students were uncovered. A new theme of wanting to “do good” for their home was identified. Faculty who are teaching in graduate programs that include international students can use the identified themes to inform the development of pedagogies and strategies that will best suit the needs of diverse learners.

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