Lived Experience of African Nursing Students
Insights for Enhancing International Students’ Success

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Abstract: Being an international student entails studying within a cultural environment that is unfamiliar. There is a need to study this experience because of its peculiarity, the increase in the international student population, and the gap in literature about African students in the health sciences. Thus, the study seeks to understand the lived experience of African nursing students in the US and how the students interpreted that experience. The methodology used is qualitative and the design is phenomenology. The target population is African nursing students in Maryland and the sample consists of eleven purposely selected African nursing students. Data collection is done through interviews. Data are analyzed through thematic analysis. Suggestions are made for students, educators, and administrators based on the study outcomes.

Keywords: African Students, International Students, Students in Health Sciences, Foreign Students

Introduction

Of the almost 600,000 international students in US colleges and universities, nearly 40,000 are African students (Manyibe, Manyibe, and Otiso 2013). Their number continues to grow (Institute of International Education 2017). Some of the students’ contributions to the US economic and educational systems included expenditure of millions of dollars into the economy, serving as teaching and research assistants, and bringing diverse perspectives that added to the quality of education on their various college campuses (2017). They leave their home countries and come to the US with the hope that successful study will yield benefits for their lives and, in many cases, for their families, governments, and sometimes sponsoring employers as well.

Even though the idea is laden with a lot of anxiety of the unknown for the students, coming to study in the US is a dream in which it is worth investing a lot of their life resources (Inyama, Williams, and McCauley 2016). Once the students are in the US, they have to confront realities that might be very different from their expectations and the situation in their home countries. That difference might constitute an additional burden in their quests for academic success. Most of the challenges faced by the students relate to differences in language, cultural expectations, and other aspects of their new cultural environment (Constantine et al. 2005; Mattila, Pitkajarvi, and Eriksson 2010).

Even though the challenges inherent in the students’ experiences might have the potential to jeopardize their academic success, unfortunately not many studies address those challenges. Lee (2010) concludes that, while there are some studies about the experiences of international students, there are very few studies that examine the lived experiences of African students in predominantly white environments, especially African students in the health sciences. That particular gap in literature is what this study sets out to fill. The purpose is to explore the lived experience of African nursing students in the US. The outcomes of the study will be useful for making suggestions for enriching students’ experiences and enhancing their academic success.

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Problem

The population of international students enrolled in US colleges increased by 10 percent between 2014 and 2015 and 7 percent between 2015 and 2016, i.e. from a total of 886,052 to 1,043,839 (Institute of International Education 2017). In spite of the enduring potential to be a growing population within the US academic system, international students experience difficulties related to finance, unfamiliar curricula, and cultural mores that may impair their success (Inyama, Williams, and McCauley 2016; Colling and Liu 1995). Therefore, the students’ experience needs to be understood in-depth and data sought directly from the students themselves in order to develop effective plans and strategies for working with them. Yet there are only few studies that address the students’ experiences and their attending issues. There is a need for an inductive exploration of the phenomenon so as to illuminate the essence of the experience and the attending challenges that might be inimical to the students’ academic success. On that premise, this study seeks to understand the lived experiences of selected African students in the US, including how the students described and interpreted those experiences and what the experiences mean to them. The central question of the study is: what is it like to be an African nursing student in the US?

Literature Review

The purpose of this study is to gain an in-depth understanding of the lived experience of being an African nursing student in the US. What is it like, and what does it mean, to be an African nursing student in the US? There are no studies that directly examine the phenomenon, particularly as it relates to African nursing students. The few studies in literature that address issues relevant to the phenomenon focus on international students as a whole.

African and other international students, especially from developing countries, come to the US with a mix of excitement, aspirations, and some anxiety of the unknown (Inyama, Williams, and McCauley 2016). They have high expectations to study and start a better life that they hope will also benefit their relatives back in their home countries. However, when they get to the US, they face the reality of cultural adjustment and the need to modify their previous beliefs that they would be coming to a perfect place (Constantine et al. 2005). As they relocate and transition from their home countries, the students have to adjust to the reality of a new environment. In the earlier part of the transition, they may still be dealing with the emotionality of separating from friends, family, and home-places, and they may still be experiencing homesickness (Boafo-Arthur 2014; Sanner, Wilson, and Samson 2002).

Once in the US, the students may experience culture shock, especially at the beginning of their transition into both the general society and the US educational system. They may experience isolation and the feeling of “being different.” Because they are in the process of adjusting to leaving home, an accepting environment, they may feel different and sometimes feel like they are treated as inferior (Maura 2008; Constantine et al. 2005). Even though many of the students may be experiencing feelings of alienation and isolation, as would be expected when adjusting to the subculture of a new academic setting, the experience is made more stressful with the additional issues of discriminatory and prejudicial treatment (Boafo-Arthur 2014; Khawaja and Stallman 2011; Hyams-Ssekasi, Mushibwe, and Caldwell 2014). Some of the discriminatory treatment experienced by the students can be attributed to existing stereotypes in the dominant culture about cultural background of African and other foreign students (Lee 2010; Beoku-Betts 2004).

Also, despite evidence in literature that African students experience isolation, there is not adequate social support to facilitate their transition and integration (Walton and Cohen 2007;
Nebedum-Ezeh 1997; LaFleur 2010; Childs et al. 2004). On the other hand, the African students themselves do not actively reach out for formal help. In a study by Malau-Aduli (2011), African students only later realized that they were now in a culture where it is necessary to ask for help to survive. This might have been different from their home cultures, where help is offered even without a request (Clark et al. 2012). The observation was similar to Manguvo’s (2013) findings that African students turn to help groups formed by their fellow Africans rather than seeking formal help available in the school.

Another issue that impacts the experience of African nursing students in the US is the difference in educational systems. Sharif (1994) explains that the structure and process of American higher education is different from those in the countries of origin of many African students. Previous instructional systems for most of the students emphasize depth and cognition, recall, and explanation of facts, whereas the American system mostly emphasizes breadth, problem-solving, and application of principles.

Conclusively, this study is significant in that it fills a specific and important gap in the literature. It provides an in-depth understanding of the experience of African students in the US, especially those in health sciences such as nursing. After reviewing twenty-five years of literature relevant to African students in the US, Inyama et al. (2016, 5) conclude that even though there has been some progress, “further work is needed to enhance the learning of African students in developed countries studying in the health sciences…The dearth of information on the experiences of black African health sciences students [i]s evident.”

Method

The method used for this study is qualitative. The design is hermeneutic phenomenology using the van Manen (2007) approach. The purpose is to understand the essence and meaning of being an African nursing student in the US. The meaning of the experience as lived by the students in their everyday existence, in their life worlds, is explicated. The process is a dynamic interplay of the following phenomenological research activities: turning to the phenomenon; investigating the experience as lived; reflecting on the emerging themes; describing the phenomenon through writing and rewriting; maintaining a strong and oriented pedagogical relation to the phenomenon; and balancing the research context by considering the parts and the whole.

Turning to the Phenomenon

Turning to the phenomenon means the disclosing of the starting point, perspective, or standpoint from which the researcher is entering the lifeworld of the participants in order to understand their own description and interpretation of the phenomenon in question. In turning to the phenomenon of being an African nursing student in the US, relevant personal experiences were recalled and etymological origins of words relevant to the phenomenon and personal biases and assumptions were reflected upon. Through the turning, personal connection to the phenomenon was identified, thereby providing a starting point for framing the study. After all, phenomenology as a human science begins in lived experience and eventually turns back to lived experience (van Manen 1990). Recalling and reflecting on personal experiences represents that beginning. Through that process, personal experiences were transformed into textual expression. Such experiences thus begin to gather hermeneutic significance as memory is reflectively assigned to them. The uniqueness, wholeness, and significance that began to emerge about the phenomenon provided both an additional impetus for the study and an orientation from which to approach the study.

Next, the etymological tracings of the words nurse, foreign, dream, obligation, and student were done. This revealed the lived experiences from which the words originally sprang, thereby enriching the meaning of the words and broadening the scope for reflecting on them, particularly in the context of the African nursing students’ experiences. It also opens up possibilities for further questioning of the phenomenon being studied.
In a hermeneutic phenomenological study, explicating one’s own biases and assumptions provides a starting point from which to orient to the phenomenon. It also reveals the pre-understanding that needs to be recognized as the participants’ experiences are being reflected on. As van Manen (1990) says, such pre-knowledge might even have to be turned against itself, as it were, thereby exposing its shallow or concealing character.

Literature reveals that very few studies address the essence and meaning of being an African nursing student in the US. Turning to the phenomenon thus reveals the scope of and gaps in current understanding about the phenomenon. It also reinforces the significance of the study and helps to focus it so that the gaps in understanding can be addressed. Finally, in this stage, entering and contributory questions were formulated to guide the study. The entering question for the study was: what is it like to be an African nursing student in the US? In other words, what is the nature of the phenomenon of being an African nursing student in the US? Based on participants’ preceding responses, additional questions emerged that helped give direction to the interviews and their dialogues.

Investigating the Experience as Lived

A total of eleven African students from the baccalaureate, master’s, and doctoral programs of an urban school of nursing affiliated with a teaching hospital participated in the study. Each was engaged in at least two audiotaped interviews. Subsequent conversations built on previous ones. Each interview ended when no new themes emerged. The number of dialogues with each participant was deemed sufficient when there was no further need to clarify themes and meanings. Adding more participants stopped when saturation was reached; i.e., no new information emerged from interviewing additional participants.

Data collection and analysis were done through a systemic and rigorous process to ensure trustworthiness and its components of credibility, dependability, conformability, transferability, and authenticity. This involved the keeping of a journal, triangulation of the journal entries with audiotaped interview data, participants' descriptions of epiphanies and exemplars, and both ongoing and final member checking of interpretations, so as to enhance credibility.

The researcher kept a journal for the purpose of capturing contextual text such as the setting, nonverbal behaviors of participants, and distractions and interruptions. By nature, journals can be very helpful for keeping a record of insights gained, discerning patterns of the work in progress, reflecting on previous reflections, and making the activities of research themselves topics for study (van Manen 1990).

Identifying and Reflecting on the Emerging Themes

Reflection on emerging themes took place from the beginning of the study to the end. However, much of it was done after the initial entering question had been posed. Further questions that emerged from the ongoing dialogues were crystallized around themes that recurred or that were emphasized by the students in their responses.

During the interviews, participants were prompted to describe epiphanies and exemplars in their lived experiences of being African nursing students in the US. Epiphanies are those interactional moments that leave marks on people’s lives and have the potential to create transformational experiences for the person. In them, personal character is manifested and made apparent. These experiences are often interpreted as turning points after which the person is never again quite the same (Denzin 1989). Exemplars, on the other hand, are stories or vignettes that capture the meaning of a situation in a way that can be recognized in another situation that might have very different objective circumstances (Leonard 1989).

The purpose of phenomenological reflection is to try to grasp the meaning of an experience (van Manen 1990). The starting point of this is to uncover the themes. Themes are the structures of the experience. They are the sense we are able to make of the text. As the text is read several
times, it is reflected on with a questioning mind, asking what is its meaning, focus, and point? To do so, van Manen’s (1997) three approaches were combined: The holistic approach, in which a story or section of a text is read and the question asked: what phrase may capture the fundamental meaning or significance of this text as a whole? The selective approach, in which the text is read several times and the question asked: what statements or phrases in this text are particularly essential or revealing about the phenomenon? The detailed line-by-line approach, in which every single line, sentence, or sentence cluster is examined and the question asked: what did that sentence or cluster reveal about the phenomenon?

**Describing the Phenomenon**

The phenomenon of being an African nursing student is described in this study by comparing and contrasting the shared meanings from different participants and identifying patterns across themes. Van Manen (1997) says this process entails writing and rewriting. Writing draws one close with what one knows, brings one in contact with the life world, returns one’s thought to praxis, and concretizes one’s understanding of the world.

**Maintaining a Strong and Oriented Relation**

As the themes were analyzed and meanings generated, conscious efforts were made to keep the process pedagogically thoughtful. This called for the keeping in mind that the central abiding concern of this study was to illuminate understanding about the world and lived experience of the participants. Focus was kept constantly on that central purpose.

**Balancing the Research Context and Working the Text**

Approaches for presenting the text of a phenomenological study include the thematic, the analytic, the explicative, the exegetic, and the existential (van Manen 1997). Because researchers can combine approaches or invent their own, the approaches enumerated above are neither exhaustive nor mutually exclusive. In this study, a combination of the thematic and the existential approaches were used. The thematic analysis was done using the holistic, selective, and detailed thematic approaches described earlier. The existential analysis was done around the existential life themes of temporality (lived time), spatiality (lived space), sociality (lived relationship to others), and corporeality (lived body) as explicated by van Manen (1997).

“Lived space” is felt space. The space in which we find ourselves affects the way we feel. For African nursing students, home is a place they miss and often where they wish they were. “Lived body” is the existential, implying we are always bodily in the world. African nursing students’ lived experiences include modes of dressing and manners of speaking in their new cultural environment. “Lived time” is our temporal way of being in the world. African nursing students’ lived-time experiences include how they perceive who they once were, who they now are, and what future they see taking shape for them. “Lived other” is the lived relation we maintain with others in the interpersonal space that we share with them. African nursing students experience lived other differently, being now in a culture with more emphasis on independence, individualism, and autonomy.

**Data Collection and Analysis**

Eleven students were interviewed, five from Nigeria, one from South Africa, one from Malawi, one from Swaziland, one from Ghana, one from Uganda, and one from the Cameroons. Their ages ranged from twenty-four to forty-five. Eight were in BS programs, two in master’s programs, and one in a PhD program. Through systematic analysis of data gathered during the
interviews, four major themes emerged that help illuminate the phenomenon under study: being detached from home, becoming a stranger, being opportune, and being in a foreign place.

“Being detached from home” speaks to the fact that being a student in the US actually begins with having to leave home. With the exception of one participant who worked and studied in Europe and came to the US from there, all of the students came directly to the US from their home countries. There is, therefore, no way of fully understanding the students’ experience without being called to ponder and reflect on what both home and leaving home means for the students.

The students described detachment from home and family as a painful experience. It meant the breaking of that family tie, at least temporarily, in terms of physical separation. “Being” then becomes a kind of detachment, a detachment from home laden with mixed emotions for both the students and their families. The detachment experienced is not only in the sense of separation from family members but from everything that constitutes home and the students’ relation to it. The students, however, are willing to bear the pain of the detachment in exchange for the opportunities that lay ahead.

While the students narrated their experiences of being detached from home, they talked about their countries in ways that go beyond nostalgia and border more on grieving, grieving the loss of part of their being. The detachment being grieved is not only the physical separation from home but their gradual departure from a familiar culture and way of being. When the students talked about “being lonely” or “missing my family,” or “missing my parents,” it was much more in the sense of missing the ones who listened and helped.

“Becoming a stranger” is the theme that summarizes the fact that once the students come to the US and enter nursing school, their experience is in a way like becoming a stranger. Participants described situations that they felt were odd, or in which they felt like the odd person out. They described experiences they were not accustomed to and narrated personal stories that depict wonder and astonishment.

“Being opportune” is the theme that captures the students’ description of their being in the US as a great opportunity. The students described the experience as an opportunity to pursue further education, learn from experts, and pursue a good career. The students experienced more experts and a larger variety of educational opportunities in the US compared to what was available in their respective countries. The opportunity made life and career dreams that they once thought were unrealizable in the unfavorable socioeconomic circumstances of their home countries suddenly come back within reach. They therefore hold tenaciously to the newly available opportunity and, with all determination, try to make the best of it.

“Being in a foreign place” is the theme that captures the strangeness of their new environment, now being in the US. The theme spoke to the discomfort and challenges the students experienced in the process of adapting to an unfamiliar sociocultural environment. Students described experiences ranging from shock to excitement. One of the participant said it was both exciting and strange at the same time. For example, you try to order food and you do not know what to call it; you do not know whether to call a “taxi” a “cab” or vice-versa; you do not know whether to wear red on Sunday or purple; and should you call a “restroom” a “bathroom” or the other way around?

The students also experienced that people were slow to warm up to them. One student said she would sit in class and nobody would talk to her. She felt so alone, so lonely. She would go back to the dormitory and the same thing would happen: nobody would talk to her. She said people “were so near, yet so distant.” She concluded her story by saying it was one of the worst feelings that one could have, and it was terrible. However, the students said that as soon as people got to know them better, they slowly warmed up to them.

One other early challenge African students struggle with is finding the information that they need to facilitate their experiences. A participant observed that even though there were a lot of opportunities in the US, the problem is knowing where to find the right information. There were
many times reality did not meet the students’ expectations, causing disappointment. These included finding that the students would have to take so many pre-degree credits in order to start the degree itself, or having multiple degrees in Africa and yet being unable to find employment in the US.

Encountering prejudice emerges in most of the students’ descriptions of their lived experience. Both within and outside of the school, they sometimes experienced people’s negative attitudes and actions they considered to be based on their race, color, or accent. The students used different words to describe their experiences, including, “bias,” “prejudice,” “being stereotyped,” “being underestimated,” and “being discriminated against.”

Encountering unfamiliar language expressions, norms, and values was common to all the participants. Their language difficulty related not only to difficulty with their African accents but also with American expressions. A participant said she attended classes where the teachers would say they did not hear what she was saying because she spoke with an accent. On the other hand, she would be in class for two or three hours and not know what the teachers were talking about simply because of the American expressions and the use of metaphors she was not familiar with.

Another experience of unfamiliar social norms and values relates to touching and personal space. Students narrated experiences in which they were instructed about how and when to touch others, including patients. They found such norms rather different from African settings whose social norms are not as strict. Similarly, the students discovered a difference in meaning of social respect. The students believed that American students did not “respect” their teachers enough, or at least not as much as one would find in an African school setting. They thought the American students laid claim to too much freedom, which the participants thought sometimes bordered on disrespect of their teachers. Some of the examples they described include murmuring when teachers are talking, looking them in the eyes when talking with them, arguing with them, interrupting teachers when they are talking, and calling them by their first names. The participants said all of those would be considered disrespectful within the African context.

Participants described various aspects of the American educational system that were not only foreign to them but were also of significant meaning in their educational experience. These include the frustration suffered in the process of getting admitted to school, the shocking rapidity with which the first year begins and goes by, the difficulty experienced in tackling objective testing, and the challenges encountered in using the computer for schoolwork. The students said admission requirements made it feel like starting all over again and the rapidity with which the first semester took off “felt like thunderstorm.”

**Discussion, Implications, and Recommendation**

The major themes that emerge from the study include: being detached from home, becoming a stranger, being opportune, and being in a foreign place. The themes help provide an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon of being an African nursing student in the US. For some it is an opportunity for further education or to learn from experts; for others, it is an opportunity for building a good career; and for yet others, it is an opportunity for realizing a combination of those dreams.

A dream is an idea or image present in the sleeping mind, something greatly desired. To dream is to imagine, fancy, think, or believe a thing is possible and picture it to oneself. As something greatly desired and tremendously powerful, the students’ individual dreams become a tremendous source of energy and motivation for them to go through their experiences despite the difficulties and challenges they encounter. However, as the students became increasingly aware of unfamiliar, challenging, or difficult aspects of American social life and the American education system, the subjectivity of their dreams comes in contact with the stark reality of the process of the dreams’ realization. Constantly remembering that the opportunities that render the dreams realizable are not available to many in their home countries, the students sustain their determination to endure any hardship to realize their dreams.
As the students leave their respective home countries, they take the first major steps in realizing their dreams. The leaving implies breaking strong family and extended-family ties. It is a detachment from everything that constitutes home, a detachment laden with the mixed emotions of pain, excitement, joy, and anxiety. The pain is related to the loss of close relationality to home. This home becomes a significant part of the student’s being as a place that had provided unconditional love and acceptance. It is a loss of one’s comfort zone. Thus, as the students gradually let go of some of their emotional attachments to home, they free up energy for new growth and open new ways of being in the world for themselves. The students soon start to discover new cultural ways of being, new ways of communicating, new meanings of time, and new ways of looking at life.

Once detached from home, the students experience being a stranger, according to Omotosho (1998). People, beliefs, values, and relationships become strange to the students as the students are strange to the people they meet within the bounds of their new place of being. They are now known by various identities that include “foreign students,” “international students,” “African nursing students,” and “foreign nurses.” Eposito (1997), talking about foreign nurses, says they have to contend with different ways of practicing, unfamiliar customs, and unaccustomed slang. Being a stranger, says Shabatay (1991), means entering an interpersonal realm in which we experience ourselves as being apart from others. Being a stranger has been a primary concern of many educators, writers, and social scientists. It is like living on the edge between one’s unique world and a world of others that one just entered. Great insight, learning, and understanding can take place at that edge. Gadamer (1975, 330) refers to this as a “fusion of horizons,” the same way a teacher and students stand on the ledge between their two unique worlds and generate mutual insight and understanding for one another. Shabatay (1991) profiles the world of the stranger as being always on the alert, struggling to learn the different ways of living, idioms of language, idioms of emotion, and the meanings of unspoken glances. The stranger’s antennae are always out, asking, who may expel me? Who may be threatened by me? Who may be suspicious of my loyalty? Did I commit a faux pas? Whom did I insult? The stranger must learn how to blend, belong, and be beyond mistrust.

Differences in accents make it difficult for African students to understand and to be understood by others. The students also find it difficult to understand American metaphorical expressions. The difficulty leads to frustration, embarrassment, and feelings of inadequacy. Some of the students consequently lose their voices by becoming silent. In contrast, others rediscover their voices by requesting clarification of speech, including metaphors they do not understand. Students discover differences between African and American cultural practices that they need to learn and to which they must adjust. The experiences described by the student participants in this study called them to a new cultural sensitivity with regards to touching, personal space, time, and a life of strict scheduling. In addition, the students discovered that behaviors did not necessarily hold the same meaning in American cultural practice as they do in the African context. For example, to look American teachers in the face or call them by their first names might not necessarily signify disrespect. It took time for many of the participants to recognize and adjust to those cultural differences. Some students had interpreted some of their earlier encounters as discrimination.

Participants experienced their first year at school as the most confusing and stressful, describing it as being like a thunderstorm. It was faster in pace and broader in content than they had expected. On top of that, the students discovered that school was pretty much an independent affair. The experience, however, had some growth-promoting potential. It awakened the students to the need to modify their reading styles and exercise their capacity for patience. They made more friends and walked more closely together with others who had just survived the thunderstorm.

Objective testing and use of the computer were challenging to the participants. Most of the students were familiar with the essay mode of testing. For the purpose of testing, therefore, the
students had to transition from a mindset of description and explanation to that of making discriminating judgements between options.

Participants talked about various experiences during which they thought they were being judged by race, accent, or color. They described the experiences as frustrating and embarrassing. They used the words “bias,” “prejudice,” “being stereotyped,” “being underestimated,” and “being discriminated against” to describe their experiences. The exchanges narrated by the students cut across student-to-student, teacher-to-student, black student group-to-white student group, and African American-to-African student relationships. Many of the experiences were emotionally laden. Some were so intense that one student considered changing her name to sound American. Being different thus became a threat to self-identity, leading the student to consider sacrificing self-identity on the altar of self-protection. Parillo (1990) emphasizes the need for fostering cultural sensitivity in schools, most especially because of its effect on self-identity; negative self-image is a common consequence of prejudice and discrimination.

**Implications for Nursing Education and Administration**

Both teachers and students need to seek to understand one another through the art and posture of unknowing. This becomes even more necessary when teachers relate to African and other students who are transitioning as strangers to American culture. Teachers, being the ones with tremendous power (Kreisberg 1992), need to initiate unknowing. Unknowing is a condition of openness and active genuine listening (Atwood and Stolorow 1984). It is a process of decentering from one’s own organizing principles of the world. It means knowing that one does not know something, that one does not understand the person who stands before one (Munhall 1993). While a knowing stance sometimes leads to a form of confidence that is inherently closed off, unknowing allows others to be. This stance calls for open-mindedness to differences, the cherishing of diversity, and the development of a consciousness for the historicity of being. It makes the teacher’s power a transforming power, the type that “fosters self-worth and self confidence in the student” (Kreisberg 1992, 17).

African and other international students need to reflect carefully on the ir memories of homes, families, and pasts to which they still feel bound and connected. They need to uncover the meanings this binding holds for them and consider which ones are nourishing and which ones are limiting to their present experience. Teachers and peers of international students need to show more understanding of the struggles that may be going on in the minds of the international students who are transitioning in-between cultures.

Teachers and students need to develop an awareness of the increasing cultural diversity in universities. They also need to develop openness to difference along with that awareness. This might call teachers and students to an inward journey to explore their own presumptions and biases regarding sensitive relational issues of difference such as culture, diversity, caring, respect, language, and family relatedness. Furthermore, teachers need to find ways to reach out to students, especially those who seldom consult with faculty, recognizing that mutual insight and understanding could be gained by such meetings. The creation of a speech climate suggested by Lashley et al. (1994) might help reduce some of the problems described by the participants, especially those feeling isolated and having difficulty in finding useful information. Speech climate fosters robust communication and exchange of information between international students and the other students, thus protecting what is vulnerable and unique in both sets of students while healing what is broken and strengthening what is good in them.

Educational administrators need to design extracurricular activities that bring students together more frequently to promote diversity and enhance students’ appreciation of one another’s differences and what they might learn from those differences. They need to support faculty, morally and fiscally, in activities and training that enhance their sensitivity to cultural difference and diversity.
African student participants told stories of how communication became a handicap because of their fear of being mocked or underestimated or the possibility of not being understood. Similarly, Goode and Schnieder (1995) observe in their study that immigrants keep silent or stay away from English-dominant settings because they believe their accents would be mocked, their opinions discounted, or that would simply be taken as stupid because of the way they speak. The established residents, on the other hand, worry that the newcomers intentionally exclude them when they revert to their native languages, which they frequently do. Teachers and other students need to communicate their inability to understand a foreign accent in a caring manner, one that shows genuine desire to understand and value whatever the foreign student is trying to communicate.

African students need to prepare their minds more to encounter different cultural norms, values, and ways of being. Particularly, they need to learn early in their experiences the value placed on timeliness and personal space, and be open to differences in the meaning of respect. They need to be ready for an instant takeoff of the semester, especially in their first year.

Finally, African students should take more advantage of faculty availability for consultation that characterizes the American educational system. They should consult more frequently with their teachers to create the familiarity that enhances growth, promoting a speech climate. They need to take more and early advantage of any special programs instituted by the universities for foreign students to get acquainted with the computer, interpersonal communication, and formal paper writing.

Implications for Nursing Practice

African nursing students must be ready to learn new social norms and values relating to punctuality, respect, care, personal space, and touching. This will facilitate their experiences and success, especially in clinical settings. On the other hand, nurse managers and supervisors of the students need to be alerted through continuing education programs of the variety of cultural and individual differences they may encounter from African and other international students. They need to learn how best to relate to those differences with fairness and caring.

Implications for Nursing Research

As Gadamer (1975) rightly says, the essence of the question is the opening up, and keeping open, of possibilities. This study was opened by a single question: what is it like to be an African nursing student in the US? That question has kept open the possibility of further questions for further research. Questions opened up for further research include: what do the teachers need to know most about strangers, their pasts and their beings, to foster learning? How might dialogues and sharing of family stories be used to facilitate teaching? What is the relationship between international nursing students and American nursing students like? What programs and strategies are being used in universities today that nourish the positive potentials of difference? What do international nursing students find helpful and facilitative to their success? What strategies do culturally sensitive teachers use when working with international students? Finally, how might we foster international students’ adjustment to language and cultural norms, using interdepartmental collaboration?
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