Enhancing Cultural Competence of Student Nurses through Immersion Program: A Systematic Thematic Synthesis

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Abstract: *Multiculturalism is becoming more complex affecting the delivery of health care services. With this, the educational system should find ways to deliver quality culturally competent care. This systematic thematic synthesis aims to investigate the effectiveness of immersion program in enhancing the cultural competence of the student nurses using the approach developed by Thomas and Harden 2008. There were ten peer-reviewed primary studies that were included in the review. The study resulted in three themes including different worlds, difficulties and adaptation, and varied learning. It is found out that immersion programs indeed enhance the different attributes of cultural competence including cultural awareness, cultural skill, cultural sensitivity and dynamic process except for cultural knowledge. This shows the need to improve the plans and implementation processes of immersion programs to holistically enhance the cultural competence of the student nurses.*

I. Introduction

Individually, countries have been multicultural with different ethnic groups having varied beliefs and practices. With migration, the population became more diverse so with the health care needs and this should be addressed by the education system. And one way to do this is to develop cultural competence through an immersion program.

Cultural competence is defined as the gradually developed capacity of nurses to provide safe and quality care to a culturally diverse population (Cai, 2016). It has five attributes including cultural awareness, cultural knowledge, cultural skill, cultural sensitivity, and dynamic process. Madeleine Leininger is the first theorist who coined the word culturally congruent care which is the original term for culturally congruent care (Leininger, 1970, as cited in Cai, 2016).

Strategies on how to produce culturally competent nursing graduates were discussed, used and studied by nurse educators, leaders and researchers. Among the strategies, immersion opportunities, clinical experience, and standardized patients produced positive results in increasing students' awareness, knowledge and confidence in dealing with diverse patients(Long, 2014).

Since immersion is considered as one of the richest experiences for learning cultural competence (Brunn, 2017), the author considered studies on immersion and related terms including international clinical placement, academic service learning, community-academic partnership and study abroad in this systematic review.

Immersion is described as a means to engage the students with another culture or diverse population (Brunn, 2017). It is done internationally or locally and provides an opportunity for personal and professional growth and a greater understanding of culture. The international clinical placement has the same purpose as the immersion program (Thompson, Boore, & Deeny, 2000).

Academic service-learning (ASL) is one of the most popular types of community immersions which involves active learning and teaching where the students serve the community-based need through hands-on activities. It is a combination of concepts, reflection, and hands-on experiential learning (Kaddoura, Puri, & Dominick, 2014). It provides opportunities for students to address the needs of the clients, clarify the meaning of their experience through critical thinking and analysis and incorporate student, clients, communities and academics outcomes (Juniarti, Zannettino, Fuller, & Grant, 2016). Community–Academic partnerships are developed to engage nursing students in service–learning experiences with an emphasis on student outcomes (Voss, Mathews, Fossen, Scott, & Schaefer, 2015).

Additionally, study abroad is described as unparalleled opportunity to experience nursing practice and health care system in a different country, to be immersed in a different culture and to gain a more global view of health and health care(Kent-Wilkinson, Dietrich Leurer, Luimes, Ferguson, & Murray, 2015; Edmonds, 2012).

It also gives opportunities for students to gain knowledge and personal awareness of the culture of another country, develop ability to discern and appreciate culture differences and embrace different customs, traditions and history other than their own (CG, 2016) and increase personal and professional growth, competence and cognitive development (Kelleher, 2013). This means that study abroad is within the concept of immersion.Lived immersion and study abroad were used interchangeably in a study by Long (2014).

It is believed that domestic and international partnerships help students develop cultural competence ("Enhancing Nursing Education Through Effective Academic-Service Partnerships - ProQuest," n.d.). These multicultural experiences have increased student's openness to the different beliefs and practices of diverse communities (Koskinen & Tossavainen, 2003;Levine, 2009).With this, the present study aims to investigate the effectiveness of immersion program in enhancing the cultural competence of student nurses. Furthermore, it seeks to determine the benefits, challenges and coping mechanisms employed during the immersion.

II. Material and Methods
A search of the published literature was done in December 2018using Saudi Digital Library including all English databases

Study Design: Thematic Synthesis approach developed by Thomas & Harden, (2008b)
Study Duration: January 2001 and November 2018
Sample size: 10 primary studies
Subjects & selection method:The sample in the study is purposive rather than exhaustive as the purpose is an interpretative explanation (Doyle, 2003). This means that it is not necessary to locate all available study as the result of the conceptual synthesis depends on the range of the concepts and context found in the studies and whether they are in agreement or not.

The search included the terms immersion program, study abroad, service learning, cultural immersion, clinical placement, exchange program, nursing education and student nurses which yielded a total of 485 primary studies. The researcher screened the articles by reading the titles and abstracts narrowing it to 10 studies. Another researcher independently reviewed the abstracts of the final list of articles to make sure that they are aligned with the objectives of the study. Any differences in the review were discussed and the final decision was made by the researcher.

Inclusion criteria:
1.   English peer-reviewed studies utilizing immersion to improve the cultural competence of student nurses.
2.   Qualitative and mixed method studies
3.   Articles included were those published between January 2001 and November 2018

Procedure methodology
A thematic synthesis approach developed by Thomas & Harden, (2008b) was used to organized the articles in the study. The synthesis includes three stages: line-by-line coding of the findings of the primary studies; organization of these free codes into descriptive themes and development of analytical themes.

The researcher initially took hold of the results and discussions of each article and coded them according to its meaning and content. This process of translating the concepts between studies starts the process of synthesis. Consistencies in the use of the codes among the studies were checked and were later on grouped into a hierarchical tree structure. This leads to the organization of the descriptive themes which are close to the original findings of the included studies. To 'go beyond' the findings of the primary studies, the researcher used the descriptive themes to answer the review questions. Benefits and challenges, as well as coping strategies, were inferred from the view of the students who were captured in the themes. This process was repeated until new themes emerged which are abstract enough to explain all the initial descriptive themes.
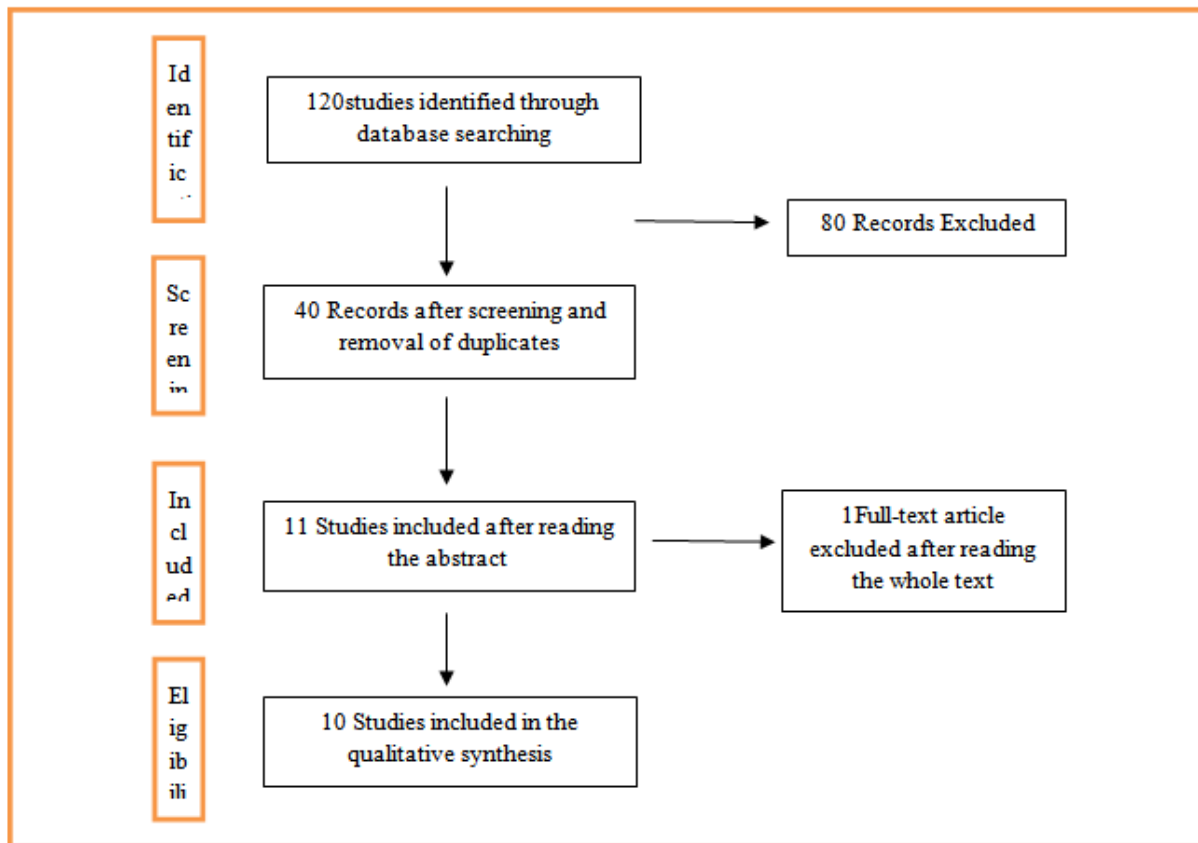
Figure 1: PRISMA Flow Chart

III. Result

The systematic review included ten studies about enhancing cultural competence of nursing students through immersion programs in low middle income countries such as Guatemala (Larson, Ott, & Miles, 2010; Johns & Thompson, 2010; Smith-miller et al., 2010), Nicaragua(Kirsti & Hans, 2018), Honduras(Green, Comer, Elliot & Neubrander, 2008), and (IndiaGreen, Comer, Elliot & Neubrander, 2008); in low income country such as Tanzania(Booth & Graves, 2018); in upper-income country such as Thailand(Reid-searl et al., 2011) and England and Dominica(Edmonds, 2010). Immersion program varied from 10 days(Green, Comer, Elliot & Neubrander, 2008; Edmonds, 2010) to 5 weeks(Charles et al. 2014). The articles include 8 qualitative studies and 2 mix method studies which are summarized in Table 1. Different methods were also used to collect data from the students which took place at different points of the programs.

The qualitative studies have small sample sizes which made it difficult to generalize the findings. However, consistent themes were discovered. The themes include Different worlds, Difficulties and adaptation, and Varied learning.

Table 1. Article Summary

Authors	Aim	Sample	Location	Research Design Method	Data Analysis	Research Limitations	Key Findings
Edmonds (2010)	To explore the lived experience of nursing students who study abroad and to identify benefits and impediments that may be used to spawn future research and shape existing and future study abroad programs.	18 students	Either England or Dominica	Phenomenology Interview and field notes	All transcripts are read many times to acquire a general sense of the data. Meaning units were identified, the psychological meaning is discovered, and the general essence of the lived experience is achieved. Finally, textural-structural composite is developed.	The researcher was a novice. Sample originated from one university and were previous students of the researcher. Responses could have been consciously or subconsciously altered in an effort to curry favor or help the researcher. The researcher also accompanied the participants which could have made them less descriptive in the interviews regarding the actual experiences.	Four themes were identified: recognizing, encountering, adapting, and mastering. Findings suggest that there are vast benefits of study abroad programs for nursing students including, but not limited to, increased personal growth, awareness of diverse cultures, adapting despite an unfamiliar environment, and increased self-efficacy
Reid-Searl et al. (2011)	To present the findings of a research which examined the experiences of undergraduate nursing students when undertaking a clinical placement in Thailand	Eight undergraduate nursing students	Surin, Thailand a four week	Qualitative, exploratory research project Individual semi-structured interviews before, during and at the conclusion of clinical placement	Data analysis was based on the approach developed by Ritchie and Spencer (1994).	As a qualitative exploratory study involving only a small number of students, the findings from this study cannot be generalized to a wider population. The participants were from one Australian university and attended a clinical placement in one area only	Major themes: first interview - anticipation; second interview - making a difference; contrasting worlds; and part of the group; third interview - reality check and group dynamics. These findings suggest that international clinical experience has potential benefits beyond the development of cultural competence.
Smith-Miller et al. (2010)(Edmonds, 2010)	To explore the changes that occurred from a short-term global immersion health experience and how participants may translate this experience into the workplace.	15 reflection papers written by baccalaureate or master's degree nursing students, male and female, aged 22–50 years old, and of varied ethnic backgrounds	Guatemala	Qualitative methods, student reflection papers	Reviewers read each paper independently to identify themes by comparing across and between case responses (Miles & Huberman, 1994). New understandings and interpretations were conceptualized through dialog, group discussion, and continued analysis. A clear, common taxonomy emerged through reviewer consensus.	Not mentioned	A short-term global immersion experience informs student nurses' cultural awareness, education, and future clinical practice.

Authors	Aim	Sample	Location	Research Method	Research Design	Data Analysis	Research Limitations	Key Findings
Carpenter and Garcia (2012)	To assess the impact of a study abroad program on developing cultural competence, including cultural awareness, sensitivity, knowledge, and skills.	Thirty-five students participated in the evaluation of the study abroad course. Most were female (85.7 %), white (63 %) undergraduate nursing students (age range 19 to 35 years)	Mexico	The descriptive study used quantitative (survey) and qualitative (interviews, journals, and written responses to open-ended questions)		Data from students' reflective journals, written answers to open-ended questions, and field notes from the group and individual interviews were categorized based on the four components of cultural competence	A small convenience sample from a single school was used, and there were small variations in the learning experiences from one year to the next that could not be controlled.	This study showed that a study abroad experience provided deeply personal learning opportunities resulting in enhanced awareness, sensitivity, knowledge, and skills important for addressing cultural differences in nursing practice.
Johns and Thompson (2010)(Edmonds, 2010)	To be developing cultural sensitivity through immersion in two different cultural groups within the country; to be able to meet the community health course clinical objectives.	Not mentioned	Guatemala	Students' written reflections		Not mentioned	Not mentioned	Students' written reflections included descriptions of how the trip was "life-changing" and altered their view of the health care system, their understanding of the relationship between health and poverty, and their awareness of their own cultural behavior norms that reflect materialism and waste.
Booth and Graves (2018)	To gain information about the impact of student experiences regarding international service learning, rural health, and cultural perspectives and awareness.	Eleven nursing students, ten females and one male. All participants were Caucasian and between the ages of 20 and 22 years old	Tanzania, The 10-day onsite experience	Qualitative method of reflective journaling		Content analysis and thematic identification.	Not mentioned	Revealed themes of increased awareness in global cultural differences, interprofessional relationships, compassionate care, and health disparities in a variety of rural settings. Students who participated in service-learning initiatives within these international medical trips stated they were more globally aware and were now more likely to provide services to rural communities in their future nursing careers.
Larson, Ott, and Miles (2010)	To explore the impact of cultural immersion experience on student nurse's cultural competency.	13 junior and senior nursing students	Guatemala, 2 weeks immersion	Qualitative descriptive study through in-depth interviews and en Vivo reflective journals		Matrices were developed from the transcripts and journal data and then analyzed by the major course concepts of culture, communication, immigration, health, and community.	Not mentioned	Revealed three themes: Navigating daily life, Broadening the lens, Making a difference

Authors	Aim	Sample	Location	Research Method	Research Design Method	Data Analysis	Research Limitations	Key Findings
Charles et al. (2014)	To describe the immersion experience of a group of senior Australian nursing students who participated in a cultural immersion programme	Eight students	India, 5 weeks		Qualitative descriptive design as described by Sandelowski (2000) guided reflective questioning prompts, but also include student free-writing.	Colaizzi's (1978) steps guided this descriptive study The journals were read several times to get a general sense of each, then re-read to extract significant statements of their experiences. After the significant statements were extracted, meanings were formulated and organized into clusters of themes.	Small and relatively homogenous sample size The students were encouraged to engage in both free journal writing and guided reflection. The journals were being evaluated, and thus the journal content may not reflect their true experience given that they may have been writing what the evaluators wanted to read. There is also a question of how accurately their journaling reflects their actions	Five themes: Focus on self, focus on difference, recognition of the validity of the different system, working within the cultural infrastructure, and application and transferability.
Green et al. (2011)	To determine the effect of international service-learning experience in Honduras on the cultural competence of the participants.	Four students, convenience sampling 22 to 53;	Honduras, 10 days		Quantitative and qualitative	Not mentioned	The sample for the study was a very culturally sensitive group; participants had already been exposed to cultural competence content in one form at least. It is a significant, but unavoidable, limitation of the sample that a service-learning experience in a resource-poor area such as Honduras attracts students who are more culturally aware and more interested in diverse cultural experiences than students who have no previous experience with cultural diversity or cultural training of any kind.	The qualitative portion resulted in four themes that emerged from the interviews: a) stepping outside my world, b) connecting with culturally different people, c) awe of community, and d) learning innovation. These results indicate that the international service-learning experience was successful in increasing the participants' ability to provide culturally congruent care.
Grudt and Hadders (2018)	To gain an understanding of Norwegian students' practical experience of "culture sensitivity	Seven third-year bachelor nursing students	Nicaragua		Foucauldian-inspired approach, focus-group interviews and individual written assignments	Content analysis was used to identify major themes and patterns (Kvale, 2009).	Data material was collected from a limited number of students. The study did not include interviews with Nicaraguan nurses and detailed data about the broader context of the nurses working conditions.	Students expressed gradually increased awareness about the nursing discourses and power relations shaping clinical encounters throughout their learning trajectory in clinical placement. They became more aware of the politics of nursing practices through their experiences of clashes between different nursing discourses.

Different Worlds

The theme includes the differences between the student's and the host's culture. The students compared the physical aspects of the community, their way of life and how healthcare is being delivered with their own.

As the students went through with their immersion programs, they described the different things that they saw and experienced. Some mentioned a change in their activities of daily living like sleeping better, shorter shower and eating more fresh fruits (Larson et al., 2010). On the other hand, they observed how the people are not exercising (Smith-miller et al., 2010) and are very poor having no choice on food and type of work and how they get by (Larson et al., 2010; Green, Comer, Elliot & Neubrander, 2008;Smith-miller et al., 2010;Johns & Thompson, 2010).

In terms of culture, some students narrated how Tanzanians care for the older population as compared to the Americans(Booth & Graves, n.d.). They also mentioned how Guatemalans are staying together despite the ages of the children (Smith-miller et al., 2010)and how the people are grateful to the students in helping them(Booth & Graves, 2018).

The students also compared health care systems. They mentioned some risk factors which contributed to increased heart problems, their need for health teachings (Booth & Graves, 2018),hospital structures(Larson et al., 2010)and the standards.The delivery of healthcare is described as outdated with less medical resources for the people (Reid-searl et al., 2011; Booth & Graves, n.d.;Smith-miller et al., 2010). This, however, did not stop the healthcare providers in giving care to the patients. They are flexible in the delivery of health care services.They noted also that healthcare providers are not interested in how others do things but are proud of their health system (Charles et al., 2014). The students observed some issues and concerns such as privacy and confidentiality (Grudt & Hadders, 2018;Smith-miller et al., 2010) and lack of emotional support to the patients(Grudt & Hadders, 2018) which for them are not of standard.

Though they know that these issues are disturbing, the students understand that it could not be blamed solely to the nurses. The amount of workload that the nurses have and low salaries could also play a role why nurses are not supportive of the patients (Grudt & Hadders, 2018;Smith-miller et al., 2010;Johns & Thompson, 2010). The students also know that despite these things, they cannot just intrude and tell them how to do things and that they have to respect their culture (Charles et al., 2014). As one student wrote, "I have learned about the nursing role in Nicaragua, for better or worse. Burnout can be one of the explanations of why the nurses are not very friendly to the patients. … If you must live with constant anxiety every, it is clear that you don't have the energy to take care of others. Nevertheless, this does not justify their behavior, but it gives me a better understanding of why things are the way they are. To appear cold and with little empathy can never be justified … the patients were often passive recipients, many of them cannot write or read, so they do not have another choice than to do what the doctors and nurses tell them to do"(Grudt and Hadders, 2018).

Health care delivery is also culturally related (Grudt & Hadders, 2018). (Smith-miller et al., 2010)(Johns & Thompson, 2010). Timing and how they do things are different as compared to what the students are used to.However, they like the idea of how the people take cares of their sick family members which is lacking in their health system. One student narrated, "the elderly man that we visited who is palliative care now, but he is surrounded by his family and his wife cares for him on a sort of day bed … But he is surrounded by his family, his children and chooks and the dogs and the sounds of his home and the garden with a lovely breeze going through. It is not like anything in Australian palliative care in the pain relief or the beds or the medication…but there is a family warmth in the care that might be lacking in Australia that I find very touching"(Reid-searl et al., 2011).

Difficulties and adaptation
This theme is about the different feelings and difficulties as well as the coping mechanisms employed by the students brought about by the anticipation and the immersion program itself.

Joining the immersion program, students have expectations of what will happen which somehow made them worried and excited (Edmonds, 2010; Reid-searl et al., 2011; Smith-miller et al., 2010). Some students expected big things to happen and special treatment to their dismay. The students are also worried if they would be of help, of the new environment and adapting in a short period of time and of unfamiliar food. One student wrote, "the pressure of trying too hard to absorb everything in the new country in a very brief period of time. There is also a mix of emotions of identifying with the old American culture, yet idealizing or rationalizing of the new one," (Edmonds, 2010). They also had difficulties in communicating with the community people (Reid-searl et al., 2011; Smith-miller et al., 2010; Carpenter & Garcia, 2012).

Despite these worries and difficulties, the students found ways and gave recommendations on how to adapt. Some of them used facial expressions and gestures to communicate (Green, Comer, Elliot & Neubrander, 2008) and called their homes for comfort (Larson et al., 2010).They also used what they have to keep their hygiene standard such as hand gel (Charles et al., 2014). Others recommended qualifications of the clinical instructor who will accompany students in the program (Reid-searl et al., 2011). Their foster family also helped them learn the host's language (Carpenter & Garcia, 2012).

Varied Learning

Varied learning includes the personal and professional growth of the students as an outcome of the immersion program. It also includes an increase in awareness of different cultures and social and global issues.

Some students mentioned that joining immersion programs is enlightening and brings forth personal growth (Edmonds, 2010;Cherie & Christina, 2010). They had an increased self-awareness, self-confidence, and self-worth (Reid-searl et al., 2011;Cherie & Christina, 2010), became more open-minded (Booth & Graves, 2018;Edmonds, 2010)appreciated what they have (Reid-searl et al., 2011)and mindful of what they can do as an individual in their community (Johns & Thompson, 2010).

Professionally, they realized and understood many things. They were able to appreciate the value of nursing in the lives of the people and in their own life as future nurses(Edmonds, 2010). They learned the importance and how to deliver culturally congruent care (Cherie & Christina, 2010; Booth & Graves, 2018;Charles et al., 2014). A student mentioned that a patient is a person, not a patient who needs treatment(Cherie & Christina, 2010)and that sharing information with them should be culturally sensitive (Booth & Graves, 2018;Charles et al., 2014).A student also wrote, "A great lesson that I have learned is that healthcare has to be acceptable within a cultural boundary for all. … It is of no use promoting certain lifestyles which are not acceptable – this is a great lesson to be learned regarding our own Indigenous people,"(Charles et al., 2014).

As the students stay in their host community, they became moreaware of the way of life of another culture (Cherie & Christina, 2010; Carpenter & Garcia, 2012; Charles et al., 2014). They appreciated how people treat them with warmth and appreciation (Johns & Thompson, 2010)(Booth & Graves, 2018). They even had fun living with their foster families(Carpenter & Garcia, 2012). A student narrated, "It has been fun to embrace and love the way the Mexicans live differentlythan me and grow and be changed by their culture" (Carpenter and Garcia (2012).

Joining an immersion program also increased the students' awareness of some social issues includinginequality in terms of resources, well-being, poverty (Cherie & Christina, 2010;Smith-miller et al., 2010;Booth & Graves, 2018) and education (Cherie & Christina, 2010;Smith-miller et al., 2010). Reflecting on this knowledge the students realized the importance of social justice and civic responsibility (Charles et al., 2014). One student wrote, "Is it right that we have such standards of quality care? Does my having 10 pairs of running shoes contribute to others having none"(Smith-miller et al., 2010)?

The students also expressed awareness on political issues such as the effect of America to other countries (Booth & Graves, 2018;Grudt & Hadders, 2018) and global issue such as immigration (Cherie & Christina, 2010; Edmonds, 2010). These lead them also to understand their own vulnerability in a different country.

IV. Discussion

Different worlds covered the differences the students saw and experience in daily living, culture and health care system between their own and the community. At this point, the students are already developing cultural awareness which is defined as the development of consciousness of nurses on the different beliefs, practices, values, and lifeways of the people (Leininger & McFarland, 2006). Similarities and differences were noted and the students also realized the effect of culture in the delivery of services. They saw how different is the hosts'culture from them, including the level of poverty experienced by the people,the lack of resources and some inequalities and injustice in the health care system.

The students experienced culture shock. Culture shock is commonly experienced when someone stays in a new environment ("The 4 stages," 2016). They were struck with what they saw regardless of their knowledge prior to immersion. This means that there is a need to prepare the students before joining an immersion. A structured program should be developed to help them ready to join and accomplish the objectives of the program.

Being exposed to an unfamiliar environment caused students to experience difficulties and adaptation. Experiencing different emotions, language barrier and the pressure of the new environment served as a driving force for them to adapt and develop some coping mechanisms. Adaptation refers to how well students adapt themselves to the new environment as they begin a study program (Rajab, et. al., 2014).

The present study also shows that despite the difficulties of the students, their focus is on how they can be of help to the people, the delivery of health services and the health care system. This means that the students are committed to the objectives of the immersion program.

The theme of varied learning includes the different benefits of the immersion program. Immersion influences changes including compassion, acceptance of differences, recognition of the societal problem and promoting change (Levine, 2009). In the review, the students experienced personal and professional growth and increase awareness of different cultures and political and societal issues. Reflecting on the theme, some attributes of cultural competence are also related, enhanced and explicated.

Cultural sensitivity is defined as appreciation, respect, and comfort to the cultural diversity of the people (Cai, 2016). And this exactly happened as the students adapted with their stay in the community. They appreciated and respected the way of life of the people despite being different from them. They did not force them to follow how they do things. In the end, they also felt comfortable living with them.

Another attribute of cultural competence that is evident in the theme is the cultural skill. Cultural skill is the ability to perform a cultural assessment(Leininger & McFarland, 2006). During the stay of the students, they were able to assess cultural data related to the health problems and develop a plan of implementation however, there is no mention of whether the plan is implemented. Cultural skill is dependent on communication(Campinha-Bacote, 2007)which is one of the difficulties mentioned by the students.

Based on the result of the study, it can be also deduced that cultural competence is a dynamic process as recorded in the literature(Cai, 2016). The dynamic process is becoming rather than being culturally competent (Campinha-Bacote, 2011). The students learned to be culturally competent from their encounters with the people. The said that they are better equipped to deliver culturally congruent care after their immersion program.

V. Conclusion

This review sought to investigate the literature on the effectiveness of immersion in enhancing the cultural competence of student nurses. Furthermore, it investigated the benefits, challenges and coping mechanisms of the participants. The themes of different worlds, difficulties and adaptation, and varied learning support the available literature that immersion enhances cultural competence. All the attributes of cultural competence except cultural knowledge were enhanced based on the review. This shows that the organizers of the immersion programs should consider revising their plans and implementation processes. On the other hand, the facilitator of the immersion and the community people's perspectives will also be of great help to fully understand the experiences of the student nurses and how their cultural competence is enhanced.

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