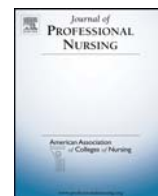




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African American nurses describe pre-licensure education experiences: A qualitative study

Barbara J. White

2425 S Twyckenham Dr., South Bend, IN 46614, 574-287-7278, Indiana University South Bend, 1700 Mishawaka Ave, South Bend, IN 46615, United States

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ABSTRACT

Greater diversity in the healthcare workforce enhances cross-cultural communication, diminishes bias and stereotyping, thereby improving health outcomes for African Americans. Diversifying the nursing profession has been a persistent challenge and the experiences of African American nursing students in not yet well understood. The aims of this study were to describe the experiences of pre-licensure nursing school, and the meaning of those experiences, retrospectively for African American nurses. The sample for this qualitative descriptive study included 14 African American nurses who reflected on their nursing school experiences. A salient theme of *standing out* emerged from the data with subthemes of *being watched* and *being ignored*. *Laying low* and *being noticed* emerged as success strategies for nursing school. African American student experiences are complex and at times appear dichotomous. Improving African American nursing student success necessitates the creation of a more hospitable learning environment to mitigate the effects of standing out.

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Introduction

Nursing is a trusted profession held in high regard by the public that provides meaningful work, a middle class wage, lifelong career opportunities, and is relatively recession proof. Yet, increasing the diversity of the nursing workforce has been a long-standing challenge for the discipline. Despite years of research, focus, and government financial support (AACN, 2014; ANA, 1986; Lowe & Archibald, 2009) the nursing profession still needs to attract and retain a more diverse workforce to mirror the population it serves.

While 12.4% of the U.S. population is African American¹ (Humes, Jones, & Ramirez, 2011), only 5.5% of RNs are African American (Budden, Moulton, Harper, Brunell, & Smiley, 2016). Though the number of African American students attending college has steadily risen over the past 40 years to over 14% of all college students (U.S. Department of Education, 2014), the attendance in nursing schools is less than 10% of all nursing students (AACN, 2016). Importantly, African American enrollment has declined slightly over the past ten years (AACN, 2016) and African American students are the least likely of all ethnic groups to graduate (AACN, 2013).

Ethnic diversity in nursing is important since African Americans are more likely to be mistrustful of healthcare providers such as nurses,

nurse practitioners, nursing assistants, and physicians, and are more likely to perceive discrimination in healthcare compared to other ethnicities (Kennedy, Mathis, & Woods, 2007; Nelson & Hackman, 2012). Nurses use verbal and nonverbal communication skills to assess clients, determine health goals, and develop care plans with clients (Hall & Fields, 2013). The cultural influences on client/provider communication contributes to health disparities (Institute of Medicine [IOM], 2010, 2015; Sullivan, 2004) especially when there is provider bias and stereotyping (IOM, 2002). More African American Registered Nurses are needed to improve health outcomes through enhanced communication for this population, and diversifying the profession begins in pre-licensure nursing schools.

The aims of this study were to describe the experiences of African American pre-licensure nursing students, and the meaning those experiences had, for recently graduated nurses who attended predominately European American² schools of nursing. The findings of this study informs faculty members and administrators to more fully understand the complexities of African American student experiences to create learning environments in which African American students can thrive.

Literature review

African American students in higher education continue to endure the effects of historical oppression and inferior stereotyping (Mutegi,

¹ E-mail address: whitebj@iusb.edu.

¹ The term African American is used in this paper to most accurately depict Americans who are of African descent, it is the term the study participants used to describe themselves.

² The term European American is used in this paper to most accurately depict American who are from a variety of European descents. It is a parallel designation to the term that the participants used to describe themselves.

2013). Race is a social construct rather than a biological construct in the US culture (McGee, Alvarez, & Milnar IV, 2016) where the inferiority of darker skinned people is systemic and comprehensive (Mutegei, 2013). While many overt expressions of racism such as slavery and lynching no longer occur, subtle forms of oppression continue through negative media images, degrading job roles, ridicule, poor living conditions and microaggressions (Sue, 2015). Implicit bias, unconscious and automatic stereotyping, contribute to ongoing racism for African Americans (Banaji & Greenwald, 2016).

Race and racism shape the educational experiences for African Americans when attending predominately European American schools (Mutegei, 2013). African American students report experiences of isolation, alienation and stigmatization (Borum & Walker, 2012; Chao, Mallinckrodt, & Wei, 2012; Charleston, Adserias, Lang, & Jackson, 2014; Johnson-Ahorlu, 2013). Though the rate of African American student enrollment in public colleges and universities has improved significantly and now accurately represents the U.S. African American population, there remains a 19.3% graduation gap between African American and European American students in Predominately White colleges and universities (PWIs) (Nichols & Evans-Bell, 2017).

A wide variety of programs have been used to improve the success of African American students in higher education. For example, Borum and Walker (2012) found that group work, student collaboration, and group study increase African American student success. African American students who attended colleges with affirmative action admission policies reported experiencing less isolation than African American students who attended colleges without race-based admissions (Kidder, 2012; Orfield, 2012). Rutgers University-Newark eliminated the graduation gap for African American students with aggressive advising, workshops, early course registration, and summer bridge programs (Navarro, 2014). Georgia State University initiated learning communities and hybrid courses to blend lecture with staffed group computer lab time which tripled the number of students returning for their sophomore year and improved graduation rates from 41% to 47% (Yeado, Haycock, Johnstone, & Chaplot, 2014). Walton and Cohen (2011) used an essay and speech project for new African American college students to promote a sense of belonging which decreased the gap between African American student grade point averages and European American student GPAs by 79%. Museus (2014) developed a theoretical model of a culturally engaged campus (CECE Model) to assess and measure campus cultural environment and student belonging, but it has yet to be tested for its relationship with academic success for students of color (Museus, Varaxy, & Saelua, 2017).

Nursing schools

Similar to their counterparts across college and university campuses, African American students in predominately European American schools of nursing often report that they feel alone and alienated from the learning environment (Dapremont, 2014; Love, 2010; Payton, Howe, Timmons, & Richardson, 2013; Robinson, 2013). Role stress and conflict occur when African American nursing students feel devalued by their peers, faculty members, and others (Robinson, 2013). Some researchers have suggested that African American nursing students may devalue their own skills and abilities as they internalize long-standing societal racial oppression (France, Fields, & Garth, 2004; Love, 2010; Robinson, 2013).

A variety of programs have been used in schools of nursing to improve African American student success. These plans are similar to those used in other academic units in higher education and include financial assistance, tutoring, mentoring, study skills and socializing with peers (Igbo, Straker, Symes, Bernard, & Hughes, 2011; Payton et al., 2013; Tabi, Thorton, Garno, & Rushing, 2013). Diversity programs commonly place the responsibility for change on the student. However, Robinson (2013) recommends that nursing program faculty members and administrators assess their organizational culture in regards to

diversity, discrimination, and institutional racism and shift the responsibility for diversity from the student to the institution.

Stereotype threat

Stereotype threat contributes to African American student under-performance and the disparate outcomes of African American college students (Steele & Aronson, 1995) and negatively influences student performance with class activities, exams, memory, and skill performance as students struggle to negate the stereotype (Steele, 2010). Ackerman-Barger, Valderama-Wallace, Latimore, and Drake (2016) found that minority healthcare students are threatened by the stereotypes of being less smart and not belonging in the health professions. While it is normal for students to face challenges in higher education, African American healthcare students experience additional challenges related to their race (Ackerman-Barger et al., 2016; Orem, Semalulu, & Underwood, 2013).

Method

Approach

A qualitative descriptive design was used to answer the research questions: How do recent graduates describe the experiences of being African American students in predominately European American, pre-licensure schools of nursing? What meaning did those experiences have for recent African American pre-licensure students?

Qualitative descriptive research describes a phenomenon through the viewpoint of those who have experienced it first-hand (Sandelowski, 2000) to create knowledge through the interaction between researcher and participant (Hennink, 2008). Storytelling allows for the meaning of experiences to be explored by the study participant in order for the researcher to gain an understanding of the meaning of the experiences shared (Hennink, 2008). The interactive communication in qualitative descriptive research develops a mutual understanding of the research phenomenon within the sociocultural context of the study participant (Hennink, 2008). The goal of this study was to describe nursing student experiences in the words of the study participants with minimal interpretation from the researcher.

Participants

Participants in this study were recruited from a population of African American nurses in the U.S. using purposeful and snowball sampling. Electronic and paper study invitations were distributed through professional contacts known to the research team and through professional organization websites to be passed on to recent graduates of a variety of nursing schools throughout the U.S. Professional contacts included hospitals and nursing schools who forwarded the notice to recently graduated nurses. The recruitment notice indicated that the researcher sought African American nurses who had graduated within the last ten years from a predominately European American pre-licensure nursing school and who were born in and residents of the U.S. Study participants signed up for the study via an anonymous and confidential electronic survey which screened for inclusion criteria and requested them to choose a pseudonym for themselves. Minimal demographic information were requested in order to assure participants of their anonymity and the anonymity of their nursing school.

Thirty five nurses responded to recruitment, all were contacted and offered an interview. Interviews were scheduled in the order in which they contacted the researcher until data were saturated and the participants provided enough data to answer the research questions. A total of 14 participants were interviewed from six states (IL, IN, MI, OH, NY, TX), ten from Baccalaureate programs, three from Associate Degree programs, and one from a Diploma program. The programs were African American minority comprising 1% to 18% as reported by the study

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