

Challenges in Acculturation of Internationally Educated Nurses

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INTRODUCTION:

Canada is in the midst of an alarming nursing shortage that will continue to worsen unless practical and sustainable long term solutions are instituted. Increasing the nursing schools' intake of students will not be enough to overcome the increasing demand and rising number of retiring nurses. The hiring of internationally educated nurses (IENs) is emerging to be a major practical and realistic solution to the current nursing shortage. Most nursing regulatory bodies in various provinces are warming up to the idea of allowing entries of IENs, who will increasingly play an integral role in the delivery of health care services and contribute to the diversity of healthcare workers in Canada.

It is important to assist IENs to successfully and properly acculturate to the Canadian health care system and mainstream society so as to improve their life satisfaction and job perception that could lead to increased retention of the immigrant nursing staff, better nursing care, and improved patient and health-related outcomes.

UNDERSTANDING ACCULTURATION:

Acculturation is a multidimensional process that involves the adopting and relinquishing of the behaviors and attitudes of both the host and original cultures. The underpinnings used in this article were taken from Alba & Nee, Berry, and DiSicco & Bloom, [see references on last page], and the unpublished doctoral thesis of Ea was also used as framework of this article.

Berry views acculturation as a three-phase process that includes initial contact, conflict, and adaptation. The first phase, initial contact, begins when an individual is exposed to and had to live in a different culture. The next phase, conflict, occurs when immigrants and host culture residents attempt to accept or reject each other. The final phase of acculturation, adaptation, occurs when immigrants either positively or negatively adapt to host cultures. Positive adaptation occurs when immigrants and host culture residents mutually accept one another, and immigrants become integrated and assimilated into the host country's culture; negative adaptation implies rejection and alienation of the immigrants by the host culture residents or vice versa.

Acculturation is an inevitable process that immigrants undergo before they assimilate to the host culture. An assimilated or acculturated immigrant is someone who has assumed the traits, behaviors, and attitudes of the host culture. Some immigrants who do not fully assimilate to their host cultures become what are called "transmigrants" or those who settle and live productive lives in their host countries of residence, but continue to keep and maintain some parts of their original cultures. Acculturation is a complex process made up of several dynamic and interrelated phases and factors that could be fluid in nature.

EXPERIENCE OF EASY MOVE CANADA:

EMC continuously deals with acculturation issues as an important part of the services it provides its clients in its deployment of IENs. EMC currently handles only IENs from the Philippines and the people behind EMC are not only from the Philippines but immigrants to Canada themselves, making the acculturation issues easier to understand and handle. Successful acculturation equates to job satisfaction for IENs, and well-pleased employers – two ingredients in EMC's retention strategy.

Similar to the observed acculturation stages by Berry, EMC's deployed IENs undergo the same basic phases of acculturation and personal experiences, as follows.

Euphoric Start and Mixed Emotions: When EMC's IENs initially land in Canada, they all exhibit feelings of excitement, a sense of gladness and positive disbelief. Mixed emotions are common among newly-landed IENs. Most IENs become fascinated by the change of environment, the people, the climate, and the different way of life. However, these feelings of excitement and euphoria are quickly replaced by feelings of panic and anxiety when IENs realize that they are expected to learn unfamiliar nursing roles and work-related tasks within a short time frame. Also during this phase, IENs are challenged to navigate the complexities associated with living in an unfamiliar environment and performing outside work's day-to-day routines.

EMC addresses this stage by having structured post-landing briefings to its deployed IENs covering diverse topics like what to expect, what to do and not to do, experiences of other IENs before them, etc. It is important at this stage that the expectations of both of the IENs and their employers are managed and properly reconciled. Having unsettled discrepancies between expectations and realities could lead to the IENs' job dissatisfaction and frustrations, as well as disappointed employers.

Adaptation Struggle: When our IENs get their bearings inside and outside their work routines, they move into the adaptation struggle stage. As they become aware and learn the differences in culture, language and practices of their new surroundings, IENs struggle to reconcile these differences and seek for ways to adapt. This ambivalent feeling and anxiety brings restlessness and distress. IENs readily accept that they have to deal with these differences to successfully function in and outside the workplace. IENs learn the skills, behaviors, attitudes, and demeanor of their new surroundings and adopt them. IENs who delay to deal with this behavioral and attitudinal adaptation and do it slowly are normally the ones who have greater difficulties.

EMC has learned from experience that its IENs generally do not totally adapt to the new Canadian culture and surroundings and would tend to cling to some of their own cultural traits and practices. EMC supports these transmigrant tendencies by helping IENs sort out areas where they can or cannot do this and link them with our previously deployed IENs to provide emotional and psychological support as well as social network to overcome the internal and external stresses that characterize this phase.

Assimilation and Adaptation: IENs who have successfully understood the differences between their original and host cultures move into the cultural adaptation phase. During this phase, IENs embrace their adopted culture and consider themselves as part of their work and outside work communities. They undergo transformations in their personalities, behaviors, and attitudes similar to the changes when immigrants fully assimilate to their host cultures. A common change, IENs who have successfully acculturated develop assertiveness and independent demeanor common in Canadian workplace. IENs also show a sense of belongingness at work and their communities and express a sense of personal and work satisfaction.

The process by which IENs acculturate to host cultures is complex, and multidimensional. However, successful acculturation among IENs leads to positive personal and work-related outcomes. EMC encourages its clients to ensure that they implement effective acculturation programs that will assist IENs to transition smoothly to the Canadian health care system. EMC undertakes post-deployment meetings with its client employers and IENs as well, and intervenes with issues related to mismatched expectations, frustrations, and difficulties when called for assistance.

ACTUAL ISSUES AND CHALLENGES ON ACCULTURATION

EMC's strategies on ensuring proper acculturation of its deployed IENs have always been a work in progress. Over the years, EMC has learned and adapted itself to new challenges, discoveries and concerns related to its deployment of IENs. This section discusses what EMC does to assist IENs in the challenges they face in their acculturation process.

Communication Challenges: Difficulty in communicating is one of the major challenges that IENs face right after landing. Although EMC's deployed IENs have higher than average English language proficiency, they can become intimidated by the pronunciations, accents, idiomatic expressions, and speed of speech of

Canadian native speakers. As a result, most IENs become very conscious of how they sound and remain silent during interactions with coworkers and patients for fear of committing mistakes or being ridiculed. Most IENs are also unaware of the accepted, culture-specific behaviors that accompany verbal communication.

EMC encourages its deployed IENs to further develop effective communication skills by encouraging them to take communication and language courses. EMC's clients are likewise encouraged to provide volunteer language mentors to their IENs. To learn the proper use of common idioms, colloquial, jargons, accents and manner of pronunciation of native speakers, EMC encourages its IENs to watch news programs on television, listen to radio programs, and constantly practice speaking English. IENs are encouraged not to talk to their co-IENs in their native language and interact more with their English speaking coworkers and patients. IENs also need to be educated regarding common non-verbal, specific behaviors that accompany normal Canadian verbal communication. IENs learn that looking directly at someone while speaking is acceptable and does not imply being rude, or that it is acceptable to request someone to speak slowly and to repeat what was said if the message was not clear.

Change in Professional Roles and Responsibilities: IENs are often confused and unclear about their professional roles and responsibilities in their new work environment. Newly-landed IENs are typically unaware of the proper protocols, their general rights and responsibilities and how the nursing profession is federally and provincially regulated in Canada. Because of this, some may become insecure and fearful at work, especially when taking care of their patients. This lack of knowledge and understanding can affect how IENs adjust to their new work environment.

EMC stresses to its IENs the importance of properly understanding and adjusting quickly to their new roles and responsibilities, as well as knowing the protocols and regulations of nursing profession in Canada. EMC encourages its IENs to take all the available interprofessional programs and modules offered by the Registered Nurses Professional Development Center (RNPDC) to help them learn their new roles and responsibilities. EMC's clients are also asked to provide proper orientation to ensure that IENs are clearly taught about their new roles and responsibilities and also be informed about their employer's organizational structure, policies, and systems and procedures.

Difficult Work-Related Routines: Adjusting to their new work schedule and routines is a major challenge facing most IENs. Many of EMC's IENs express initial difficulty in learning the pace, organizing their work, finishing on time with discomfort in handing over unfinished nursing tasks to incoming shifts, coping up with unfamiliar medical terminologies, becoming scared and overwhelmed by unfamiliar medical equipment or technology, and amount of paperwork and documentation. IENs' smooth adjustments to their work routines have a major impact in their successful acculturation.

To help EMC's deployed IENs develop a sense of control and familiarity in their new work environment, EMC's employer clients are encouraged to design a properly structured and individualized mentorship program as part of their orientation. EMC encourages its clients to assign willing mentors to facilitate and encourage the IENs to assume their new roles and responsibilities. EMC supports this also by providing post deployment counseling to its IENs.

Unfamiliar Life Outside of Work: IENs' proper adjustment to life outside of work is as important as becoming comfortable at work. Adjusting to after work routines is considered by some IENs to be one of their major hurdles in their acculturation. Right after landing, most of EMC's IENs are overwhelmed by the sudden change of their immediate environment, the climate, the people, and a different way of life. Normal daily activities considered mundane by Canadians, such as shopping for basic needs, going to and from work, and opening a bank account, can cause some stress and anxiety to the new IENs.

To help reduce the stress brought about by an entirely new surrounding, EMC assists its IENs by welcoming them upon arrival at the airport, briefing them lengthily about their new locality, helping them find affordable and convenient housing, introducing them to the local transportation system, helping obtain social security and health cards and temporary licenses, locating the nearest ethnic food stores, banks, and churches, and setting up connections with a network of nurses as well as professional and cultural organizations.

Feelings of Alienation and Being Devalued: New immigrants, IENs included, are vulnerable and prone to feel isolated, unwanted, or alienated. Although EMC's IENs may have some challenges at first in learning their work routine and responsibilities, they are generally highly educated & possess excellent clinical skills. They are thrust into a new surrounding and most often do not know where to turn to for help or who to ask.

To avoid IENs from feeling devalued or underrated at work, EMC's clients are encouraged to learn more about each IENs' experiences, education, and clinical skills at the beginning of employment and use the information to create a custom orientation approach based on IEN's level of nursing skills, experiences, and knowledge. Educational sessions that touch on common behaviors and accepted norms of both cultures can be planned to reduce misunderstandings that could lead to feelings of mutual isolation and alienation between IENs and their Canadian counterparts. EMC recommends planned social events and informal get-togethers among nurses to create an atmosphere of collegiality, acceptance and mutual understanding.

Differences between Personal and Societal Values: Newly landed IENs usually lack the interpersonal skills to interact with their Canadian counterparts mainly because of cultural differences. EMC's deployed IENs come from a culture that value harmony and a deep respect for their elders and persons of authority. Because of this, they may be hesitant to question a physician's order or reason with a supervisor's unrealistic directives. IENs may have initial difficulty accepting the Western style nursing practice that encourages assertiveness, equality, advocacy, and fairness. Many IENs may also exhibit difficulties in delegating tasks to subordinate health care workers due to fear of possible conflict, and would rather complete the task themselves than approach someone who might refuse or argue.

EMC's clients are encouraged to introduce its IENs to the individualistic values that define Canadian health care and mainstream society, encourage assertiveness, and create future continuing education sessions for IENs that focus on effective coping strategies, management and leadership training.

ACCULTURATION STRATEGIES, RECOMMENDATION AND CONCLUSION

The hiring of IENs is anticipated to continue and grow in Canada because it is emerging to be the major practical and realistic solution to the chronic nursing shortage. Nursing regulatory bodies have been prudent in ensuring that the IEN entry requirements, criteria and qualifications are maintained to a certain level so as not to affect the standards of nursing practice in Canada. Stakeholders and support institutions are lining up bridging programs and courses, orientation modules, and competence assessments designed to ensure that IENs are at par with their Canadian counterparts.

The growing number of IENs entering Canada necessitates that all of the above issues, including challenges in acculturation, be appropriately addressed. There are obvious linkages between proper or successful acculturation, job performance and retention. IENs who are properly acculturated to the Canadian health care system and mainstream society experience improved life satisfaction and positive job perception, bringing about better nursing care results, and improved patient and health-related outcomes. Life and work satisfaction lead to increased retention of these IENs as they will then prefer to stay in their current jobs.

EMC treats acculturation issues with utmost importance and is proactive in ensuring that its deployed IENs are successfully acculturated since retention is a major part of its service and commitment to clients.

References:

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