

Chapter 25

Becoming a Canadian Nurse With International Experience: Workplace Integration of Internationally Educated Nurses in the Global North

Zubeida Ramji

Z. Ramji Associates Inc., Canada

Josephine Etowa

University of Ottawa, Canada

ABSTRACT

The inequitable distribution of nurses globally compels high-income countries like Canada to ensure that internationally educated nurses gain professional satisfaction and stay in nursing. To fill a critical gap in nursing literature, the authors conducted a qualitative case study of an inner-city teaching hospital in Canada, to examine workplace integration of IENs beyond the transition phase. They found that workplace integration is a “two-way” process, which has implications for interventions at both the individual IEN and organizational levels. The workplace organizational context requires deliberate “policies promoting equity principles” and when an IEN is integrated, s/he has worked hard to go beyond the transition phase and get recognized as “a Canadian nurse with international experience”. Understanding these individual and organizational factors is essential for how nurses educated in another country especially in the global south, can be successfully integrated in healthcare settings in the global north.

INTRODUCTION

As the largest occupational group in the health sector, nurses are critical in achieving national and global targets related to several health priorities. The World Health Organization recently reported that based on 2018 data, there is a global shortage of 5.9 million nurses, of which 89% of the shortage is concentrated in lower and middle-income countries (WHO, 2020). With increased global trends of mobility and heavy reliance on an immigrant labour force by high-income countries, 80% of the world's nurses

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are found in places where only 50% of the population resides (WHO, 2020). This results in one out of every eight nurses practicing in a country other than the one where they were born or trained (WHO, 2020). WHO (2020) states that “while patterns are still evolving, equitable distribution and retention of nurses is a near-universal challenge” (p. 6).

In Canada’s high-income country context, internationally educated nurses (IENs) have been part of the solution for addressing nursing shortages as well as a way of ensuring that the nursing workforce is reflective of its increasingly diverse patient population. In 2018, about 8.5%, or 36,189 of the nurses in the Canadian workforce had graduated from an international nursing program (CIHI, 2019). For quite some time now, the top three source countries for IENs have been the Philippines, India, and China. IENs enter Canada primarily as permanent residents with the objective of settling with their families and making Canada their new home (CIC, 2012). Like other high-income countries, Canada has the ethical challenge of ‘brain waste’ or the waste that comes about when IENs, as newcomers, are unable to have their knowledge and skills recognized or because of difficulties in workplace integration (Kolawole, 2009). The global shortage and inequitable distribution of nurses makes it critical for Canada to ensure that IENs integrate effectively, that they gain professional satisfaction and stay in nursing.

While workplace integration of IENs has been an important issue for some time, there has been a dearth of nursing research on this topic (Adams & Kennedy, 2006; Kolawole, 2009). The lack of attention paid to IENs’ progress over the long term, the role of the employer, as well as the effects of the organizational environment provided rationale for a qualitative case study of St. Michael’s Hospital, an inner-city teaching hospital in Toronto, Canada. The major findings from this organizational case study on workplace integration highlight the notion of a “two-way” process and that effective integration of IENs in the global north involves efforts on the part of the IEN as well as the workplace organization.

The objectives of this chapter are to discuss two major themes selected from this research on workplace integration of IENs: “Becoming a Canadian nurse with international experience” and “Policies promoting equity principles”. At the level of the individual IEN, the process of “becoming a Canadian nurse with international experience” is a major sign of integration and entails: proficiency in English communication skills and cultural familiarity; having a grasp on requirements of Canadian nursing practice; ‘fitting in’ and being valued by the team and pride in the IEN identity. The employer organization’s “policies promoting equity principles” are key enablers for this process and of particular relevance are its: organizational values and culture, senior leaders as champions of a strategic management approach, and application of an equity lens to all policies. Basic concepts of newcomer integration found in the immigrant and refugee studies literature are also summarized as they serve to help understand workplace integration of IENs.

BACKGROUND

Until recently, the nursing research focus on IENs appeared one-sided – that is, the emphasis was primarily on how IENs can be made to adapt to the host country’s nursing and healthcare context (Ramji & Etowa, 2014). Specific attention to the responsibility of workplaces or employers was negligible. While there was a plethora of references to the term ‘integration’ in the context of IENs, a clear definition was not available (Ramji & Etowa, 2014). Furthermore, the references to ‘integration’ seemed to describe adjustment and transition experiences that are reflective of the early post-migration phase (Ramji & Etowa, 2014).

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