Korean Nurses’ Experience of Preparing for and Taking the National Council Licensure Examination for Registered Nurses

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Purpose This study explores the Korean nurses’ experience of preparing for and taking the National Council Licensure Examination for Registered Nurses (NCLEX-RN) in order to provide a deeper understanding of their experiences.

Method The study utilizes the qualitative research method, Colaizzi’s phenomenological methodology. Twenty-six Korean nurses were interviewed using semi-structured research questions and their interviews were analyzed.

Results Seven clusters of themes emerged: (a) motivation; (b) flow in studying, (c) expansion of nursing knowledge for nursing practice; (d) reflections of nursing practice and attitude toward themselves; (e) time management struggles; (f) increased self-confidence and self-esteem; (g) setting a new life direction and new challenges. In general, our analyses demonstrated that the nurses’ experiences of preparing for and taking the NCLEX-RN showed positive impacts on the nurses, psychologically, intellectually and interpersonally.

Conclusion The results suggest that developing NCLEX-RN preparation programs is needed to promote global capabilities for nurses and nursing students. Further studies on the effect of exposure to the NCLEX-RN exam while nursing school for nurses is recommended. [Asian Nursing Research 2009; 3(4):177–185]

Key Words licence, Korea, nurses

INTRODUCTION

The number of National Council Licensure Examination for Registered Nurses (NCLEX-RN) test-takers among Korean nurses has increased dramatically (Joong-Ang Daily, 2009). In the age of globalization, NCLEX-RN has become the licensing procedure that provides more opportunities for Korean nurses to work overseas. However, this increase in Korean nurses’ overseas employment might result in an aggravation of the shortage of domestic nurses while also draining Korea of nurses. Yet overseas nurse employment is not only an inevitable consequence of globalization, but also a project of the Korean government.
In short, this problem within nursing should be addressed promptly.

The three-year and four-year nursing programs in Korea encourage students to be competitive by exposing them to the NCLEX-RN as early as possible and encourage them to take the exam soon after obtaining the Korean nurse license (Lee, Ro, Park, & Lee, 2004). Meanwhile, more and more nursing graduates with higher expectations for their working environments want to work in overseas hospitals (Bang & Cho, 2008). In Korea, over 2,000 Koreans each year have taken the test since 2006, while between 70% and 80% of them passed (Joong-Ang Daily, 2009). Korean nurses take the test in order to have more job opportunities and refine their knowledge in nursing. As a result of the recent worldwide financial crisis, more Korean nurses between the ages of 30 and 50 took the NCLEX-RN since they were eager to have jobs in the U.S. so that they could support their children who studied abroad. This resulted in a significant increase in the number of test-takers (Dong-A Weekly, 2009). In comparison with that of Korea, nurses' social status and income were higher in the U.S. In conjunction with the boom of sending children abroad for education, the increased chances of getting U.S. citizenship also made Korean nurses to more interested in obtaining the NCLEX-RN license (Yang, 2006).

The number of NCLEX-RN test-takers reflects the increasing popularity of this test among Korean nurses. There has been a gradual increase in the number of test-takers each year since 2003: 1341 in 2003, 1444 in 2004, 1724 in 2005, and 2145 in 2006 (Joong-Ang Daily, 2007). At present, NCLEX-RN preparatory courses are offered at private institutes or nursing colleges so that the test-takers can familiarize themselves with the exam and its procedures before the actual exam. Some nursing colleges also offer preparatory programs; these include: Christian Nursing College, Ewha Womans University, Keimyung University, Jesus University, Seoul Women’s University and Sungshin Womans University. For test-takers, there are many processes to go through before they can sit in the test center and take the test. First, they must submit applications to three different places within a state. For instance, within New York, they must submit to Commission on Graduates of Foreign Nursing Schools, the New York State Board of Nursing (this is one of states that accept the NCLEX-RN license), and National Computer Systems Pearson. The whole process takes anywhere from 6 to 12 months to complete and there has been instances where the process had taken two years. The application fee is US$685. The test center in Korea has been closed since June 2007 due to unproven allegations that test information was leaked. The closure of the Korean test center is troublesome for Korean nurses in many ways. Unfortunately, test-takers now have to pay for going to the test centers that are located in other countries such as Taiwan, Japan and Hong Kong (e.g., US$659 extra for Taiwan). The total fee for the test-takers will thus be US$1335 if they take it in Taiwan. Unless they pass on first try, another US$150 will be spent on scheduling the exam and travel fees will have to be paid again. This could become a financial burden for the test-taker. The Korean Nurses Association is making great effort to re-open the Korean test center so that nurses can take the NCLEX-RN without having to go overseas.

To date, two quantitative studies examining what the test-takers went through and the kind of help they required have been done. One looked at the relationship among NCLEX-RN test-takers, their English competency, level of anxiety, burdens and social support (Seo, Kang, & Lee, 2004). The other study examined the educational programs developed for nursing students who wanted to look for job opportunities abroad (Lee, et al., 2004). More research is certainly needed in order to provide more substantial support for the nurses and development for NCLEX-RN preparation programs. The current study addresses that issue by providing an in depth exploration of the experiences of Korean nurses who have prepared for and taken then NCLEX-RN. Few studies to date have examined this subject. Furthermore, the current study utilizes a phenomenological approach to examine the experiences of nurses who got the license while working. The current study aims to provide the background for an overall understanding of Korean nurses’ experiences in
preparing for and taking the exam. It also aims to provide information on the obstacles that the nurses experienced, so as to facilitate exam-related organizations in providing help for test-takers and more importantly promoting support from the test-takers’ co-workers, family and others around them.

**METHOD**

*Colaizzi's phenomenological methodology*

The current study utilized a qualitative method, Colaizzi’s method (1978) to approach the subject. According to this method, the researcher must first write a presupposition based on his/her own experiences in the area of interest, because “it was seen that the phenomenologist must initiate his [or her] inquiry by an examination of his approach in order to uncover his [or her] presuppositions about the investigated topic” (Colaizzi, p. 58). Then, the researcher asks a few people about the phenomenon and adds new ideas to the original presupposition. Research questions are formulated based on this presupposition; the researcher interviews participants who have abundant experiences regarding the topic. The content of the interview is written down, and these interviews are analyzed in depth. Lastly, the researcher formulates a statement of identification of the fundamental structure of the investigated phenomenon.

Our study had the following presupposition: Korean nurses preparing themselves for NCLEX-RN have great expectations for the opportunities and better work environments in other developed countries. Meanwhile, they examine the level of their own professional knowledge and work-related English competency. This would result in significant improvements in their professional knowledge and English competency. After passing the exam successfully, the nurses’ self-confidence would be enhanced. The spectrum of their expectations would broaden. They would be able to think about working in the U.S., immigrating to the U.S so as to have better education for their children and achieving a more advanced level of education for themselves. They would be more satisfied at the thought of all the potential they have.

**Participants**

The participants in this study were 26 Korean nurses working in medical-related institutes who had passed the NCLEX-RN or were taking a preparation course for it. All of them were or had been enrolled in an NCLEX-RN course managed by Dr. B.S. Yang at the Life-Long Study Department of Jesus University (established in 2002). Participants were selected by convenience sampling. They were all employed in medical institutions and female. The age of participants ranged from 23 to 46 years ($M=31.6$ years). Years of employment ranged from 1 to 20 years ($M=6.5$ years). The length of preparation for NCLEX-RN ranged from 1 to 2 years, with the exception of one who took 3 years. This participant was the oldest among all and had the most years of clinical experience. Eighty percent of participants obtained the license on their first try.

**Data collection**

Researchers obtained permission from the Ethics Committee at Jesus University. Verbal consent was obtained from each participant. Assurance of participant anonymity was given. The researcher (Dr. Yang) provided them with support and help during the course, and with guidance in filling out the test application and checking the application process. In doing so, Dr. Yang built a good rapport with all participants. Individual interviews were conducted after the purpose and procedure of the study were explained. Participants were interviewed in random order.

Interviews were conducted with questions designed for the purpose of the study to explore the experiences of Korean nurses who prepared or were preparing for NCLEX-RN. Participants were asked the following questions: (a) What led you to take the NCLEX-RN exam? (b) Please tell us about the experiences that you went through while you were preparing for the exam; (c) What kind of problems did you face while you were working and taking the preparation class? (d) What kind of advantages did you have after you acquired the license? (e) What
effects did the NCLEX-RN preparatory course have on you in terms of nursing knowledge and English competency? (f) What kind of changes did you experience after you successfully passed the test?

Interviews were conducted in one of Dr. Yang’s research rooms, and lasted from 30 minutes to an hour. Interviews were audiotaped only with participants’ permission. While the interviews took place, significant anecdotes were recorded by the researcher. Audiotaped interviews were transcribed right away. Anecdotes and the transcription were subsequently analyzed.

Data analysis procedures
Data analysis was done in accordance with the seven-step data analysis process suggested by Colaizzi (1978): (a) all subject descriptions (protocols) were read to acquire a feeling for and to make sense of them; all transcriptions were read thoroughly by the researchers; (b) each protocol was read and from them phrases or sentences that directly pertained to the investigated phenomenon were extracted (extracting significant statements), for example, “Obtaining the NCLEX-RN license was an opportunity to be acknowledged as someone who had great stores knowledge in nursing”; (c) the meaning of each significant statement was spelled out (formulating meanings) with creative insight, for example, “Obtaining the NCLEX-RN license fulfilled the need of being recognized”; (d) steps were repeated for each protocol, and all the formulated meanings were organized into clusters of themes, for instance, “increased self-confidence and self-esteem”; (e) results were then integrated into an exhaustive description of the investigated topic; (f) an effort was then made to formulate the description of the investigated phenomenon into a statement of identification of the fundamental structure; (g) subjects were asked about the findings thus far in a single interview session.

Trustworthiness criteria
To judge the rigor of the phenomenological research, positivist-based criteria including internal validity, external validity, reliability, and objectivity were considered inappropriate (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). Thus, findings of the current study were assessed using the following four criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Guba & Lincoln). Credibility was confirmed by having the participants review the descriptions of the interview so as to verify that what was written down was what was intended to be communicated. Transferability was established through thorough descriptions that describe the context extensively and carefully until saturation of concepts occurred. Dependability and confirmability were supported by documenting the logic of the research process so that reviewers could track the data and its source, and understand the data interpretations. The procedures of the data analysis for the current study were reviewed by two nursing professors who have had experiences in phenomenological studies, to see the analyses were logical and resulting descriptions were understandable.

RESULTS
Seven clusters of themes were identified. They were as follows: (a) motivation, (b) flow in studying, (c) expansion of nursing knowledge for nursing practice, (d) reflections of nursing practice and attitude toward themselves, (e) time management struggles, (f) increased self-confidence and self-esteem, and (g) setting a new life direction and new challenges. After exhaustive descriptions on the seven clusters of themes were done, statements of identification were made regarding the NCLEX-RN preparation experience.

Motivation
The biggest motivation for participants to prepare for the NCLEX-RN was to “increase job opportunities”: hoping to work in a hospital in the United States or prepare for employment in American hospitals that will be built in Korea in near future. In particular, for nurses desiring to work in a hospital in the United States, they had goals such as accompanying their children and providing for their education abroad, or studying in graduate programs in the
United States, while working as a nurse. The second motivation was to distinguish themselves from other general nurses, as preparing for the exam would enhance their knowledge in nursing. Participants took the NCLEX-RN preparation class as a knowledge refresher course.

For older participants, lack of confidence in studying was a big obstacle and the major reason for putting off the decision to begin the NCLEX-RN preparation. Sometimes, they would consider giving it up because they were too busy to study. Being tired physically and mentally from work also contributed to decreased motivation for studying.

Participants who were hesitant to start studying for the NCLEX-RN due to lack of confidence were motivated by the encouragement of their family and those around them. Older participants could be highly motivated, but their motivation would fluctuate from time to time. This was when participants had doubts about whether they could recall recently learned material and most of the nursing knowledge learned while in school, “I had a hard time memorizing the materials, and I envied the younger nurses. I used to be good at recalling what I learned when I was young.” In addition, the fact that all NCLEX-RN-related textbooks and questions are in English also discouraged them from studying. In spite of the hesitations, once these nurses made up their mind, they would persevere by reminding themselves of their goals and motivating themselves from the encouragement of family and friends.

Flow in studying
Upon enrolling in the exam preparation course, the nurses faced some difficulties in studying. The materials were dense. On the other hand, they also experienced fulfillment and joy: “Daily life was happy because I had a definite goal”, “While studying, I was happy because I was working toward my goals.” For some participants, they became interested in subjects that they had disliked while in nursing school; pursuing a new goal became energizing. For participants who have had children, a studious atmosphere was created at home so that they no longer had to tell their children to study.

Those who started studying for the NCLEX-RN ahead of other coworkers set an example for broadening their knowledge in nursing and preparing themselves for further career development. This was especially true of a head nurse who influenced her staff nurses to study so that a studious atmosphere was created in the ward, “As a head nurse, it was very challenging but also informative especially because I work in the intensive care unit. I encouraged my staff to join the studying.”

Expansion of nursing knowledge for nursing practice
While taking the NCLEX-RN preparation course, participants came to realize that nursing is a professional occupation. Nurses gained abundant knowledge in nursing through the preparation course. In particular, taking the course resulted in improvement in English medical terminology, better sense of setting nursing priorities and professional knowledge in nursing. While working, the study participants were able to provide more knowledge-based nursing care and were able to apply critical thinking skills in clinical settings. They also became more proactive on their jobs. The more knowledge in nursing was consolidated and added, the more confident they became in carrying out their duties. Participants were able to think rationally and critically about medical orders, the actions of their coworkers, and medical situations; they were also able to express their professional opinions regarding nursing care. When their opinions were accepted at work, the pride of being a nurse increased, “After studying for the exam, I came to understand the theory behind the implementation of nursing actions better. The work of a nurse became clearer to me”, “Knowledge from the NCLEX-RN preparatory course helped me review the orders I get, whether they are right for the medical situation or not, and what results could come of this order”, “What the goal of this order is”, “For me as an emergency nurse, the course helped me set nursing action priorities”, “My colleagues acknowledged my knowledge in nursing, and would come to me to ask questions if there were doubts about certain tasks.”
Reflections of nursing practice and attitude toward themselves

Some participants felt regret for the way they had studied while they were nursing students: “I only studied for exams. All the knowledge was wiped from my mind after the exam.” While in nursing schools, participants had studied and memorized everything in order to get good exam scores. Once the exams were over, they remembered little of what they had learned.

Participants also expressed regret for not having studied harder while in nursing school. In addition, they also reflected with regret on the past nursing practices that were done without much critical thinking. Some felt ashamed that they had practiced even when they lacked confidence as a professional nurse, “I just did what was ordered without thinking”, “After 6 years of clinical practice, nursing had become very strenuous and boring. I was a machine doing what was told”, “I practiced care as how senior nurses taught me without much thinking.” Participants realized that through preparation for the NCLEX-RN, that the more they assessed patients based on knowledge, the more developed and professional their practice would become.

Time management struggles

Participants needed time to learn the huge amount of information required for NCLEX-RN. However, participants had very limited study time due to shift work and other job-related duties. They became very stressed out about finding time for studying. In addition, attending the preparation class while working was also stressful, “Attending job-related meetings, ward conferences and mandatory refresher courses consumed much of my off-duty time. It was very hard to find spare time for studying.” They tried prioritizing so as to find more studying time. Some participants had to give up hobbies, leisure time and social meetings. Participants who were married experienced conflicts when family members (especially husbands) asked for time for family activities, “My husband requested that we do things together”, “My 5-year-old son was after me to play with him. Sometimes, he took away my textbooks.” Some participants reduced their sleeping hours in order to study, “Fighting against sleep was another difficulty that I had to deal with”, “After the night shift, I forced myself to attend the class. But as soon as I sat in the chair, my head began nodding back and forth. Although I dozed off, attending the class was worthwhile. I developed new strategies to fulfill both needs. If it was too hard to expel sleepiness, I would take a brief nap. Otherwise, it would be very hard to keep myself awake.”

It was particularly difficult for participants to plan in advance since there was no way to estimate the completion time for license verification and graduation from nursing school during the test application process. If participants made an error when filling out their application, they had to wait for approximately 2 years before they were allowed to take the exam. In one case, a participant had to start the process over from the very beginning: “After I received notification that I had made an error in filling out the form, I sent in the corrected form but my patience ran out because the response was delayed for a very long time. I restarted the form and applied to another state instead of New York. In my case, I wrote my lunar birth date in instead of the date on my identity card.”

Increased self-confidence and self-esteem

Study participants who passed the test successfully received more respect from peer groups and medical staff members. Some participants who failed on first try were ashamed of the failure that they wanted to hide themselves at work. On their second try, they would keep everything in secret. Once passed, they would announce it to everyone and receive congratulatory remarks from those around them.

At work, they became a source of reference in cases where evidence-based nursing practice was demanded. By preparing for and passing the NCLEX-RN, participants gained self-confidence and respect form those around them. In addition, taking the preparation course resulted in improvement in participants’ English reading abilities and consolidation of their knowledge. Participants had more confidence in their own professional capabilities. For some participants, the institutions subsequently provided
them with opportunities to study overseas for 2 to 12 months. Coworkers including head nurses and other medical staff also acknowledged their effort and success so that the overall reputation of participants and their evaluations improved. Supervisors entrusted more job-related responsibilities to participants and treated them with more respect. “In the workplace, whenever there were doubts and confusion about nursing duties or whenever questions were raised, I provided knowledge-based answers. I became someone my coworkers could rely on.” At home, family members—husbands, children and relatives—were proud of the participants’ success. “My parents were proud of me and boasted about my success”, “I felt a sense of accomplishment because I heard my husband on the phone praising my success”, “It certainly was rewarding work. It was a chance to test my patience and tenacity because there were so many obstacles to overcome!” On the other hand, the longer the participants had been practicing clinically, they less confidence they had while studying. This was attributed to their decreased ability to memorize test materials, which kept them from committing to studying for the exam.

**Setting a new direction in life and new challenges**

After celebrating their success, participants had to think about and make decisions for their future and set new directions in life. Participants were also happy that they had choices for their future; these included being able to find a job overseas and having the chance to study abroad: “I was happy that I had more choices for my future.” For single participants who were not planning to work abroad, they contemplated new challenges. “After passing the exam, I began to think deeply about my future. Should I stay at my present job or leave for a new challenge?” “After this accomplishment, I am searching for a new goal to achieve”, “I feel hunger for another goal again; may be I am workaholic.” For the participants who made up their mind to study or work abroad, they started preparing themselves for language proficiency exams. Some made specific plans to study abroad and lived thriftier in order to save money for school. They visited employment agencies or the Human Development Service of Korea to seek for ways to work abroad: “I visited many agencies but working abroad was so adventurous that most agencies did not cover the whole process of getting work permissions for the country I wanted to work in.”

Some participants decided to put off working abroad until the Free Trade Agreement within the medical market was completed so that American hospitals will be built in the country. After successfully passing the exam, they expected a wide range of job opportunities to be available: “I don’t want leave my country, but I obtained the license just in case opportunities to work in foreign hospitals built in Korea come up.”

**DISCUSSION**

Studies focusing on the experiences of test-takers preparing for and taking the NCLEX were rare (Seo et al., 2004). The current study is the first of its kind to utilize Colaizzi’s phenomenological approach to explore in detail the experiences of the NCLEX-RN test-takers. In particular, the study did not focus on nurses who were already working overseas after successfully passing the NCLEX-RN, but rather on those who still worked in hospitals in Korea. Results from the current study can be used not only to improve the current process for taking NCLEX-RN, but also to instill a global nursing mindset, that nurses can work anywhere in the world for nursing graduates and students.

Our results showed that studying for the exam was not easy, but having the NCLEX-RN license meant more job opportunities and improved self-confidence for the participants. Successfully passing NCLEX-RN increased the participants’ proficiency in providing care to patients, their knowledge in nursing, and also helped participants examine their own nursing practices. This is in line with the idea put forward by Whitehead, Weiss, and Tappen (2007), who concluded that with the constantly changing technology, nurses today would not learn everything in school; they need to be prepared to seek out new development and refresh their nursing skills on
their own. This may require additional hours of preparation and studying.

Our study results demonstrated improved self-confidence in participants who passed the NCLEX-RN. This is consistent with findings from McQueen, Shelton and Zimmerman (2004), who noted that passing the NCLEX-RN increased self-confidence in a population of black nursing students. Glasser (1975) pointed out that self-confidence is necessary for decision-making. However, it is not developed unless the person has experienced success in life. Those who failed would stall at making decisions in a given situation. In line with his remarks, our study results also suggested that increased self-confidence would improve decision-making skills and nursing practices in clinical and medical-related situations.

Another advantage that the participants experienced from studying for the NCLEX-RN was an improvement in their critical thinking skills. Feldman (2002) defined critical thinking in nursing as the careful and deliberate use of reasoned analysis to reach a decision about what to do. Our study showed that improved nursing knowledge not only helped participants reflect on their own nursing practices, but also helped participants examine their nursing practices and consider the reasons behind the implementation of certain practices. To avoid falling prey to assumptions and biases of one’s own, nurses need to ask themselves frequently, “Do I have the information I need? Is this information accurate?” The essence of critical thinking is the willingness to improve nursing knowledge and openness to new ways of doing things (Jackson, Ignatavicius, & Case, 2004). In our study, participants felt regretful and sorry for their previous mechanical nursing behaviors and those performed without critical thinking. This result was consistent with the study of Ma (2009) who found that critical thinking was strongly linked to the improvement of competencies of nursing practices and skills.

The current study found that the participants struggled to juggle the demands of work and studying. They had to deal with sleep deprivation and lack of leisure time. However, most mentioned that preparing for the NCLEX-RN was worthwhile, and were satisfied with the fruit of their sacrifices. They viewed obtaining the NCLEX license as a professional leap that distinguished them from their coworkers. It not only improved their critical thinking skills and consolidated their knowledge in nursing, but also helped to increase their self-confidence and self-esteem.

CONCLUSION

The current study provided a deeper understanding of the experiences of Korean nurses who prepared for and took the NCLEX-RN. The exam was stressful for the participants psychologically, economically and physically. Overall, however, participants found the experience rewarding and positive. Interpersonally, they received positive feedback such as acknowledgement and trust from coworkers. Psychologically, they improved in self-confidence and self-esteem. Intellectually, they were able to refine their critical thinking skills and expand their professional knowledge in nursing. Socially, their efforts were recognized by people in their workplace, and some were rewarded with a short-term placement in an American hospital.

Our study has implications for nursing education and nursing policies. From an educational perspective, it would be ideal to expose nursing students to the NCLEX-RN as early as possible so that they could prepare for it in school; this would improve the global nursing mindset and competency of nursing students. Academic subjects that help nursing students improve their medical terminology and global competency in nursing have already been recommended to be included school curricula. Students need to be encouraged to use textbooks written in English so that they would be accustomed to reading English and would overcome the language barrier more easily if they work overseas. Thus, early exposure to the NCLEX-RN would help nursing graduates to be more prepared for and have more options in the age of globalization.

Clinically, attending NCLEX-RN preparatory classes would assist nursing staff in consolidating
and improving their knowledge in nursing so that nursing practice capabilities and professional pride would also be enhanced. NCLEX-RN preparatory classes would be beneficial for clinical nurses as part of a continuing education program that boosts professional pride and reinforces practical nursing skills.

From a political perspective, in addition to present efforts from the Korean Nurses Association to reopen the NCLEX-RN test center, more proactive involvement on behalf of NCLEX-RN test-takers would encourage more Korean nurses to become members of the association. The association also needs to help Korean nurses by being officially involved in efforts to shorten the application processing time. In addition, the government and the Korean Nurses Association must develop an employment linkage program to assist Korean nurses in establishing themselves overseas.

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REFERENCES


