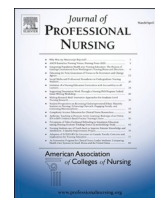




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Being an ethnic minority nursing student – A meta synthesis

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ABSTRACT

Background: Our society is characterized by a general globalization and has become more culturally diverse. This diversity is mirrored in nursing education.**Purpose:** The purpose of the meta-synthesis is to identify and synthesize data from primary, qualitative studies of ethnic minority nursing students' experiences in a nursing program.**Method:** Electronic databases, Medline, Embase, and CINAHL, were searched for studies published in English or Nordic languages from 1980 to February 2020.**Results:** The search generated 1070 unique citations, of which 19 articles met the inclusion criteria. The included studies had a total sample size of 255 students, age range 19–50 years. The participants originated from Asia (65), Africa (53), South America (45), and Eastern Europe (17). Seventy-five students' origins were unknown. The meta-synthesis revealed that participants' experiences were characterized by four main themes: to understand and be understood; the importance of supportive relations; motivated but emotionally distressed; and conflicting cultural expectations.**Conclusion:** Ethnic minority nursing students experienced challenges related to language, socialization, cultural awareness, and relations with educators and other students. To meet the students' needs and increase their graduation rates, educational institutions and supervisors should work to promote and facilitate their integration and provide a good learning environment.

Introduction

The present society is characterized by a general globalization, which has enabled Western countries to become more culturally diverse. This diversity is also mirrored in nursing education. As the number of ethnic minority students enrolling for nursing programs continues to increase, meeting their needs and ultimately increasing their success rate is crucial. Moreover, a culturally diverse population requires that health-care personnel are culturally competent.

To be able to meet the needs of ethnic minority nursing students, and to ensure a successful trajectory into the nursing profession, educators must be aware that ethnicity can have an impact on being a nursing student, and that the students may experience negative impacts in the educational setting (Graham et al., 2016). Previous studies have shown that nursing students with an ethnic minority background face multiple barriers to success (Loftin et al., 2012), and that they have a high risk of failure in nursing programs. Ethnic minority nursing students may face challenges due to differences in both language and culture. Studies have

shown that they often feel isolated and experience inadequate university support (Amaro et al., 2006; Jeong et al., 2011; Olson, 2012; Starr & Wallace, 2009). Moreover, misunderstandings, inability to communicate, and problems in writing professional texts are common challenges faced by ethnic minority nursing students (Havery et al., 2019; Jon-smoen & Greek, 2018). Acquiring both linguistic and communicative competence takes time and makes students' situations challenging (Skisland, Flateland, et al., 2018). Practical and clinical training is an important part of nursing studies, and ethnic minority nursing students may also experience challenges in simulation practices and clinical studies (Graham et al., 2016; Skisland, Flateland, et al., 2018). Because of this, these students may be at risk of failure (Havery et al., 2019; Loftin et al., 2012; Skisland, Tonsberg, and Soderhamn, 2018).

Furthermore, earlier studies have shown that ethnic minority nursing students experience prejudice and stereotyping based on cultural diversity, and they are unfamiliar with cultural boundaries (Henderson, 2016). These issues can have a significant impact on their social, academic, and clinical performance. Moreover, overt and

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institutionalized racism still permeates the fields of nursing and nursing education (Iheduru-Anderson & Wahi, 2021). Studies have also shown that whiteness has been normalized and influential in the manifestation of racism in nursing practice. Scammell and Olumide (2012) claim that the pervasiveness of whiteness has resulted in nursing education being seen through a white lens (Bonini & Matias, 2021).

To be able to assist ethnic minority nursing students to cope with challenges and to promote their success as students, it is important to improve our understanding of how ethnic minority nursing students experience their situation as students. Several smaller studies have explored the experiences of ethnic minority nursing students, but there is a lack of synthesized knowledge in this regard. The purpose of this study is therefore to identify and synthesize evidence from primary qualitative studies of ethnic minority nursing students' experiences as students in a nursing program.

In this meta-synthesis, we define ethnic minority students as underrepresented students, because of racial and/or ethnic minority backgrounds. Racial differences are included in the concept of ethnicity. Ethnic minority students have their home address where they study, but their mother tongue is other than the majority population (they are first- or second-generation immigrants). Students who are native to the country but are part of a minority population, and exchange students are not included in this study.

Methods

Design

We used a meta-synthesis method for systematically interpreting and integrating findings in the qualitative research, to focus the aim of the study. The meta-synthesis was based on the guidelines for synthesizing

qualitative research (Sandelowski, 2007). The process comprised five steps: (1) formulating the purpose and rationale of the study; (2) searching for and retrieving relevant qualitative research studies; (3) critically appraising the included studies; (4) classifying the findings; and (5) finally synthesizing the findings (Sandelowski, 2007).

Search methods

With assistance from a resource librarian, we conducted a pre-planned comprehensive literature search to retrieve all relevant qualitative studies recorded in the databases, Medline, Embase, and CINAHL, during the period January 1980–February 2020. These searches were last conducted on February 8, 2020.

The inclusion criteria were: studies including ethnic minority students in nursing programs; experiences as students; qualitative studies; and Scandinavian or English language studies. We excluded studies focusing on exchange students. We used specific search terms to identify ethnic minority nursing students' experiences, in the different electronic databases. The specific search terms for each of the databases can be seen in the Supplementary materials section.

Selecting studies for the meta-synthesis

The search generated 1070 unique citations after removal of duplicates. Two or three of the authors (two groups) screened titles and abstracts, 67 papers were read in full text against the inclusion criteria, and 19 of the articles met the inclusion criteria (Fig. 1). A final consensus regarding the eligible articles was obtained as part of a group discussion between the authors. All authors read the full text of the eligible articles and extracted data from the included studies. The process is illustrated in Fig. 1. We obtained consensus for data extraction as part of a group

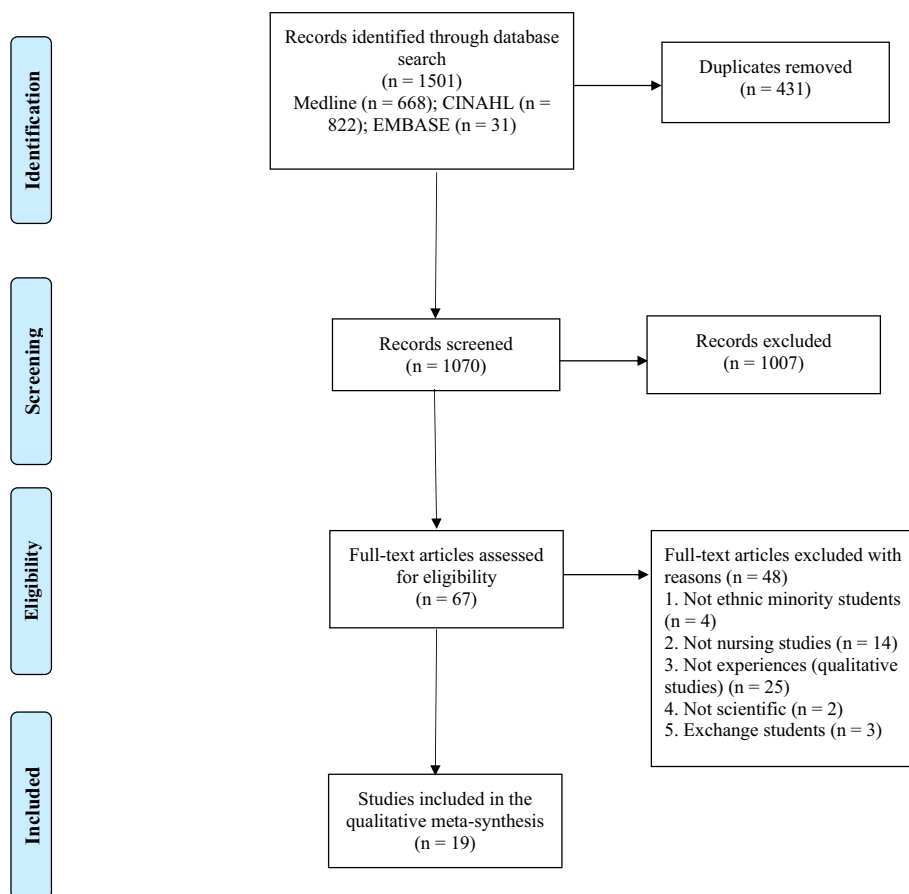


Fig. 1. Flow chart of the inclusion process.

discussion between the authors. In [Table 1](#), all studies are presented including title, author(s), country of study, year of publication, aim, results, philosophical or theoretical background where available, analysis, and study participants. Thirteen studies originated from the USA with one study each from Canada, England, Italy, Norway, Australia, and North Korea.

Critical appraisal

The included studies were independently critically appraised by the authors using the methodological quality criteria outlined in the Critical Appraisal Skill Programme (CASP) ([Programme, 2022](#)). This tool was selected because it was designed to evaluate qualitative studies. The authors mutually agreed on a final quality evaluation, using the criteria in CASP for independent assessment (see [Table 2](#)). The aims of the studies and the qualitative methodologies were considered appropriate. The most poorly addressed issue in the majority of studies was the influence of the researcher on the research and vice versa. Moreover, although some of the included papers had limitations and the discussion sections were poor, findings from all studies were considered valuable for inclusion in the results. For details see [Table 2](#).

Analyses

In line with [Sandelowski's \(2007\)](#) handbook, two approaches to qualitative research synthesis were used, qualitative meta-summaries and qualitative meta-synthesis ([Sandelowski, 2007](#)). Meta-summaries use frequency effect (how often a finding occurs) and intensity effect (how strong the finding is) to synthesize qualitative data, and include presenting and interpreting study findings. Meta-synthesis is an intentional and coherent approach to analyze data across qualitative studies. Meta-synthesis enables researchers to identify specific research questions, search for, select, appraise, summarize, and combine qualitative evidence to address a research question. Qualitative meta-synthesis provides new interpretations of target findings from primary studies ([Sandelowski, 2007](#)).

Our quantitative aggregations of the qualitative findings from the included studies are presented in [Table 1](#). The aggregation of qualitative findings includes information about authors, year of publication, country of origin, philosophical or theoretical background, aim, study methods and analyses, participants, and main results ([Sandelowski, 2007](#)).

After extraction, the target findings were imported into MS-Word files for further analysis. A phenomenological–hermeneutic analysis was performed by all authors. The analysis was inspired by [Lindseth and Norberg \(2004\)](#). The text was first read line-by-line to identify meaning units. These were further condensed and abstracted to form main themes and subthemes ([Lindseth & Norberg, 2004](#)). The authors discussed the analysis until consensus, and finally a comprehensive understanding of the experiences of ethnic minority students in nursing programs was achieved. The process of deriving the themes was inductive. The contribution of targeted findings from each of the included papers was outlined, and quotations used to illustrate and support the findings, which increased the trustworthiness of the study. The authors of this meta-synthesis have extensive experience as nurses, professors of nursing, and researchers of difficulties confronted by minority nursing students, which further ensures the trustworthiness of the study ([Lindseth & Norberg, 2004](#)). To validate the findings, all authors participated in discussions of the empirical analysis and in writing up the findings.

Results

The findings are presented as meta-summaries supported by [Tables 1–3](#), and a Figure, and as meta-synthesis presented in four main themes.

Meta-summaries

The included studies had a total sample size of 255 students, with a median sample size of 13 (range 1–42) per study. Student's age was in the range of 19–50 years. The studies that reported gender of their participants indicated 114 female and 14 male students. Gender was not reported in eleven studies (127 students). The participants originated from Asia (65), Africa (53), South America (45), and Eastern Europe (17). The origins of 75 students were unknown ([Table 1](#)).

Meta-synthesis

The ethnic minority nursing students' experiences as students in a nursing program were synthesized into four main themes and two to four subthemes that are connected. The four main themes characterizing the experiences of ethnic minority nursing students were: (1) to understand and be understood; (2) the importance of relations; (3) motivated but emotionally distressed; and (4) conflicting cultural expectations. These and related subthemes will be elaborated upon in the following text. See [Table 3](#).

To understand and be understood

To understand and be understood was a common theme. Thirteen of the included studies provided data for this theme ([Table 3](#)) ([Alicea-Planas, 2017](#); [Dapremont, 2011](#); [Donnelly et al., 2009](#); [Dudas, 2018](#); [Flateland et al., 2019](#); [James, 2018](#); [Junious et al., 2010](#); [Kong et al., 2018](#); [Randon et al., 2019](#); [Rogan et al., 2006](#); [Sanner & Wilson, 2008](#); [Sedgwick et al., 2014](#); [Young-Brice et al., 2018](#)). This theme comprised two subthemes: obstacles and challenges.

Limited vocabulary and understanding of the language were major obstacles during students' entire education ([Alicea-Planas, 2017](#); [Dapremont, 2011](#); [Dudas, 2018](#); [Flateland et al., 2019](#); [Gardner, 2005a, 2005b](#); [James, 2018](#); [Junious et al., 2010](#); [Kong et al., 2018](#); [Randon et al., 2019](#); [Rogan et al., 2006](#); [Sanner & Wilson, 2008](#); [Sedgwick et al., 2014](#); [Young-Brice et al., 2018](#)). *"I would say that my English is ok, but definitely having Spanish as your first language, especially with all these terms in nursing, makes it harder, because I really do not know the roots like most people do"* ([Alicea-Planas, 2017](#)).

Everyday language was understandable, but written works were often suspended and had to be written several times before they were accepted. Some of the students' experiences were that they often had to work twice as hard as other students ([Dapremont, 2011](#); [Donnelly et al., 2009](#); [Flateland et al., 2019](#); [Gardner, 2005a, 2005b](#); [James, 2018](#); [Junious et al., 2010](#); [Young-Brice et al., 2018](#)). The language challenges and workload were overwhelming and exhausting ([Randon et al., 2019](#)). *"I possessed the knowledge, but needed time to process, extract and translate the received information and then put my thoughts into proper English"* ([Donnelly et al., 2009](#)).

Different dialects could present challenging situations because of small nuances in the language pronunciation, which could lead to misunderstandings and a feeling of being left out ([Donnelly et al., 2009](#); [Flateland et al., 2019](#); [Randon et al., 2019](#); [Rogan et al., 2006](#)). *"There is some translation in my mind when I talk to people internally, I have to translate it ... some slang or some way of expression is not quite the way I learned it ... so you want to say something but you may not be able to express"* ([Donnelly et al., 2009](#)). However, it would help to gain more confidence if supervisors focused more on strengths and not always on language skills ([Donnelly et al., 2009](#); [Flateland et al., 2019](#); [Junious et al., 2010](#); [Randon et al., 2019](#); [Rogan et al., 2006](#); [Sanner & Wilson, 2008](#)).

The importance of relations

Fourteen of the included studies provided data for this theme ([Table 3](#)) ([Alicea-Planas, 2017](#); [Dapremont, 2011](#); [Diefenbeck et al., 2016](#); [Donnelly et al., 2009](#); [Dudas, 2018](#); [Dyson et al., 2008](#); [Ferrell &](#)

Table 1
Characteristics of the included studies.

Author, year, country	Philosophical or theoretical background	Aim	Methods/analyses	Participants	Main results
1. Gardner, 2005a, USA	Theory of multi-contextuality and student retention theory.	To gain a better understanding of factors leading to minority students' success in nursing school.	Qualitative case study research/thematic analysis.	3 female East Indian nursing students who had lived in the United States for at least 5 years.	Perceived barriers to success: family obligations, homesickness, cultural conflict, respect for authorities, and lack of social relationships and loneliness. Positive influences are other foreign-born students and their own personal qualities.
2. Gardner, 2005b, USA		To document racial and ethnic minority student nurses' perspectives of their experiences in predominantly white nursing programs.	In-depth interviews/thematic analysis.	15 racial and ethnic minority students (13 females and two males), age range 22–47 years.	Loneliness and isolation, differentness and absence of acknowledgment from teachers and peers. Lack of understanding and knowledge about cultural differences. Lack of support from teachers, coping with insensitivity and discrimination to build a better future and overcoming obstacles.
3. Rogan et al., 2006, Australia		The perception of students from NESB regarding their clinical experiences and the effectiveness of strategies to assist their learning is poorly understood. This study aimed to contribute to this understanding.	Focus group interview. Descriptive interpretive approach.	15 undergraduate nursing students from NESB.	Wanting to belong but feeling excluded. Wanting to learn 'how to', and 'you find yourself'.
4. Sanner & Wilson, 2008, USA		To understand how students with ESL describe their experiences in a nursing program.	In-depth interviews. Inductive approach.	3 nursing students with ESL.	Walking the straight and narrow, an outsider looking in, and doing whatever it takes to be successful.
5. Dyson et al., 2008, England	Phenomenological approach.	To understand the phenomenon of being a South Asian minority student within a large student population at a nursing school and what affects educational progress.	Mixed methods. In-depth interviews. Content and thematic analysis.	17 female students, age range 19–42 years (average age 23.4 years) South Asian.	Experienced pressure from their families and felt stressed in fulfilling their obligations, relationships with fellow students, and need for a personal tutor.
6. Donnelly et al., 2009, Canada		To identify factors that influence students' academic performance from the perspective of the students and their instructors.	Mini-ethnography and in-depth interviews/thematic analysis.	14 students with English as an additional language from Mainland China (6), Korea (2), Romania (2), Ukraine (2), Hong Kong (1) and Japan (1). Of the 14 students, 11 females and 3 males. Age range 21–35 years and had been living in Canada 2.5–10 years. English was the second language for 9 students and the third for 5.	Challenges, motivators and students' recommendations. Challenges: limited language skills, cultural differences and discrimination and lack of support. Motivators: existing resources such as family, supportive peers, and instructors.
7. Junious et al., 2010, USA	Phenomenological approach.	To describe the essence of stress and perceived faculty support as identified by foreign-born students enrolled in a generic baccalaureate degree nursing program.	Mixed methods. Focus group discussion and individual interviews. 5-step hermeneutic interpretive analysis process.	10 foreign-born baccalaureate senior-level nursing students (9 females and 1 male; 7 African/Black and 3 Asian). Having lived in the USA for <10 years.	Desire to be valued and accepted. Subthemes: personal relationships, financial issues, having no life, lack of accommodation, language issues, stereotyping and discrimination, and cultural incompetence.
8. Dapremont, 2011, USA		To examine the lived experience of black undergraduates who attended baccalaureate and associate degree nursing programs with a predominantly white student population.	In-depth interviews using a semi-structured questionnaire guide. Thematic analysis and a deductive a priori template of codes.	16 female and 2 male black participants.	It takes a community to create a nurse. Peer support, interaction with white students, study group, family support and faculty encouragement and support are important.
9. Nadeau, 2014, USA	Phenomenological approach.	To describe how successful Latina pre-nursing students, experience and respond to academic challenges.	Semi-structured interviews. Data analysis followed an inductive and iterative cycle.	12 students of Mexican or Puerto Rican heritage (Latino).	Facing academic challenges, recognizing emotional response, seeking help, transcending academic challenges, owning knowledge and persevering and following values and beliefs.
		To identify factors that influence minority nursing students' sense	Mixed-methods approach. Survey and individual	42 self-identified minority students (2 black Americans,	Minority students' sense of belonging depends on their

(continued on next page)

Table 1 (continued)

Author, year, country	Philosophical or theoretical background	Aim	Methods/analyses	Participants	Main results
10. Sedgwick et al., 2014, Canada		of belonging during clinical experiences.	qualitative interviews/ thematic analysis.	3 Latino, 9 First Nations/ Aboriginal, 16 Asian and 11 others).	interactions with registered nurses with whom they work, clinical instructors, and student peers. Positive experiences enhance, but negative experiences decrease, students' sense of belonging.
11. Diefenbeck et al., 2016, USA		To explore the lived experiences of traditionally age- underrepresented minority BSN students at a predominantly white university.	In-depth interviews. Multistep coding process.	Women ages 19–22 years (7 African American and 5 Latina; 3 born outside the USA).	Family-oriented factors, school- based factors and other sustaining/promotive factors.
12. Ferrell & DeCrane, 2016, USA	Tinto Model of Academic Integration.	To examine thematic concepts of academic success as perceived by current nursing students in two entry-level nursing programs and to propose a theoretical model to maximize the success of minority students.	Mixed-methods study. Interviews. Thematic analysis.	24 African American or black, 4 American Indian, 3 Asian, 2 Hispanic/Latino, 2 native Hawaiian and 6 others.	Institutional commitment, feedback, communication about expectations, involvement and support.
13. Alicea-Planas, 2017, USA	Phenomenological approach.	To explore the lived experiences of Hispanic nursing students currently enrolled in a baccalaureate program at a private liberal arts college in north-eastern USA.	Systematic reflection interviews. Thematic analysis.	10 Hispanic nursing students at a Jesuit university in the north-eastern USA.	Journey into the unknown, creating a culture of exploration and acceptance, and staying on course in uncharted territory.
14. James, 2018, USA		To explore the lived experience of one ethnically diverse ESL nursing student with particular attention to experiences that involve language and how they are embedded in the student's narrative.	Narrative inquiry approach.	One Indian immigrant.	Family, language and persistence.
15. Young-Brice et al., 2018, USA	Phenomenological approach.	To identify and describe the experiences and implications of stereotype threat among a group of ethnic minority nursing students at a large urban university.	Qualitative phenomenological study. Semi-structured in-depth interviews/thematic analysis.	20 undergraduate nursing students who self-identified as ethnic minority (5 self- identified as African/African American/Black, 5 as Asian/ Asian American/Southeast Asian, 9 as Latino/Hispanic, 1 as Arabic).	Uncertainty about academic abilities, feeling of isolation because of being black in a program with mainly white students and vigilance for signs of failure.
16. Dudas, 2018, USA	Phenomenological approach.	To explore experiences of ABSN graduates with EAL.	Individual semi-structured interview. Thematic coding.	12 participants (8 females and 4 males) self-identified as EAL.	Bridging cultures, needing more time, myriad of emotions, network of support and finding my way.
17. Kong et al., 2019, Korea	Phenomenological approach	To explore and describe North Korean defector students' educational barriers and needs in South Korean nursing schools.	Qualitative descriptive study design. Content analysis.	14 female North Korean nursing students aged 21–32 years.	Lack of preparation for higher education, multiple language barriers, differences in education and culture, lack of support and resources, and lack of information and understanding.
18. Flateland et al., 2019, Norway		To explore the lived experience of students, from various cultural and ethnic backgrounds undertaking an undergraduate nursing degree course.	Individual semi-structured interviews. Manifest content analysis.	5 female and 3 male students from Asia and Africa who had been living in Norway for 6–25 years.	Feelings of isolation and lack of opportunities to integrate with native students. Need for personal support and challenges related to language and culture.
19. Randon et al., 2019, Italy		To explore the lived experience of CALD nursing students in Italian nursing programs.	Individual semi-structured interviews.	17 female and 4 male students (13 Europeans, 4 South Americans, 3 Africans and 1 Asian) who had been living in Italy for 3–27 years (average 11 years).	Living in the middle between belonging and detachment, passing from one protective island to another, living ambivalences in the relationship with educators, experiencing multiple academic difficulties, dealing with an unexpected nursing practice, following the path of integration, going beyond one's own diversity and acquiring cultural awareness and cultural sensitivity.

Abbreviations: ABSN, accelerated second-degree baccalaureate nursing; BSN, baccalaureate nursing; EAL, English as an additional language; ESL, English as a second language; CALD, culturally and linguistically diverse; NESB, non-English speaking background.

Table 2
Critical Appraisal Skill Programme (CASP) rating of the included studies

Criteria	Gardner, 2005a	Gardner, 2005b	Rogan et al., 2006	Sanner & Wilson, 2008	Dyson et al., 2008	Donelly et al., 2009	Junious et al., 2010	Dapremont, 2011	Nadeau, 2014	Sedgwick et al., 2014	Alicea-Planas, 2017	Diefenbeck et al., 2016	Ferrell & DeCrane, 2016	James, 2018	Young-Brice et al., 2018	Dudas, 2018	Kong et al., 2018	Flateland et al., 2019	Randon et al., 2019
Y = Yes N = No U = Unclear V = Valuable																			
1. Was there a clear statement of the aims of the research?	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
2. Is a qualitative methodology appropriate?	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
3. Was the research design appropriate to address the aims of the research?	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	U	Y	Y	Y	U	Y	Y
4. Was the recruitment strategy appropriate to the aims of the research?	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	U	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
5. Was the data collected in a way that addressed the research issue?	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	U	Y	U	Y	Y	Y	Y
6. Has the relationship between researcher and participants been adequately considered?	U	U	U	U	U	Y	U	Y	Y	U	N	U	U	Y	Y	Y	N	U	U
7. Have ethical issues been taken into consideration?	U	U	Y	Y	Y	Y	U	U	N	Y	N	N	N	Y	N	Y	U	Y	Y
8. Was the data analysis sufficiently rigorous?	U	U	Y	Y	Y	Y	U	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	U	Y	U	Y	Y
9. Is there a clear state of findings?	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	U	Y	Y	U	U	U	U	U	Y	Y	Y	Y
10. How valuable is the research?	V	V	V	V	V	V	V	V	V	V	V	V	V	V	V	V	V	V	V

Table 3
Papers whose data contributed to the themes and subthemes

Paper	To understand and be understood		Importance of supportive relationship			Motivated but emotional distressed				Conflicting cultural expectations	
	Obstacle	Challenges	Professors	Peers	Clinical supervisors	Motivation	Loneliness/isolation	Discrimination	Stress	Family obligations/expectations	Cultural priorities
1. Gardner, 2005a	x	x	x	x			x			x	
2. Gardner, 2005b	x			x			x		x	x	x
3. Rogan et al., 2006	x			x	x		x	x			x
4. Sanner & Wilson, 2008	x		x			x		x		x	x
5. Dyson et al., 2008			x	x	x	x			x	x	
6. Donnelly et al., 2009	x	x	x	x	x	x	x		x		x
7. Junious et al., 2010	x	x		x					x	x	x
8. Dapremont, 2011	x			x					x		
9. Nadeau, 2014			x	x		x	x		x	x	
10. Sedgwick et al., 2014				x	x		x	x	x		
11. Diefenbeck et al., 2016			x			x				x	
12. Ferrell & DeCrane, 2016			x			x					
13. Alicea-Planas, 2017	x		x	x			x				x
14. James, 2018		x	x			x			x		
15. Young-Brice et al., 2018			x	x		x			x		
16. Dudas, 2018	x	x	x				x	x	x	x	x
17. Kong et al., 2018	x		x								x
18. Flateland et al., 2019	x			x	x		x	x		x	x
19. Randon et al., 2019	x	x	x		x	x		x		x	x

x = Papers whose data contributed to the themes and subthemes.

DeCrane, 2016; Flateland et al., 2019; Gardner, 2005a, 2005b; Junious et al., 2010; Kong et al., 2018; Nadeau, 2014; Randon et al., 2019). The theme comprises three subthemes: relations with professors; relations with peers; and relations with clinical supervisors.

A relation based on individual support from professors during the program was important to complete the program (Diefenbeck et al., 2016; Donnelly et al., 2009; Dudas, 2018; Dyson et al., 2008; Flateland et al., 2019; Gardner, 2005a; Nadeau, 2014; Randon et al., 2019). "... professors willing to help ... makes our life much, much easier ... They may say, 'You should do this little bit differently, it can be helpful ... if you have difficulty ... go to this person and this person will be able to answer all your questions'" (Donnelly et al., 2009). Without this support they would have failed or been dismissed from the program (Dudas, 2018; Flateland et al., 2019; Gardner, 2005a). A supportive attitude from the faculty also decreased their feeling of stress (Nadeau, 2014), and the study situation improved.

Obtaining emotional feedback from the beginning of the program made the students feel welcome at the university. Furthermore, a professor's attitude and interest in the student's situation encouraged and motivated them to continue with the program (Nadeau, 2014). In one study, a mental barrier regarding interacting with faculty members was underlined, and as a result, they often failed exams (Alicea-Planas, 2017). In another, one student emphasized the need to be honest and

seek help: "If you are not willing to talk about the problems, you are not going to receive any help ..." (Donnelly et al., 2009).

Relations with peers at the university were also important (Alicea-Planas, 2017; Dapremont, 2011; Donnelly et al., 2009; Dudas, 2018; Dyson et al., 2008; Flateland et al., 2019; Gardner, 2005a, 2005b; Junious et al., 2010; Nadeau, 2014; Sedgwick et al., 2014). Both relationships and support from other students were factors that improved their situation. However, peer students lacked understanding of the issues faced by an ethnic minority nursing student (Alicea-Planas, 2017; Dapremont, 2011; Donnelly et al., 2009; Dyson et al., 2008; Flateland et al., 2019; Gardner, 2005a, 2005b; Junious et al., 2010; Rogan et al., 2006). "There's just some people that come to this university and aren't really exposed to minorities, so they don't really try to interact with you because they don't know ..." (Alicea-Planas, 2017).

Peer study groups assisted with understanding of nursing content, helped students make progress in their education, and enabled building of positive interactive relationships with peers (Dapremont, 2011; Flateland et al., 2019; Gardner, 2005a; Rogan et al., 2006). Feeling connected and being a part of the student group were important for both the learning and socialization processes (Alicea-Planas, 2017; Dapremont, 2011; Donnelly et al., 2009; Flateland et al., 2019). Even so, some socialized mostly with other minority students. "I tended, not on purpose, to associate mostly with the other minority students in the school of nursing

program ... I've just connected really easily with the students who are Hispanic ...” (Alicea-Planas, 2017).

In clinical studies, a good relationship with supervisors is crucial (Donnelly et al., 2009; Dyson et al., 2008; Flateland et al., 2019; Randon et al., 2019; Rogan et al., 2006; Sedgwick et al., 2014). Students preferred supervisors who were patient and offered help. They needed to be encouraged. Some students felt excluded by the nurses' terminology, abbreviations, and speed. “Nurses don't want to teach us because we cannot catch quickly so they just make us make beds” (Rogan et al., 2006). Other students felt accepted, acknowledged, and involved through their relations with the clinical supervisors (Donnelly et al., 2009; Dyson et al., 2008; Flateland et al., 2019).

Motivated but emotionally distressed

All of the included studies provided data for this main theme (Table 3) (Alicea-Planas, 2017; Dapremont, 2011; Diefenbeck et al., 2016; Donnelly et al., 2009; Dudas, 2018; Dyson et al., 2008; Ferrell & DeCrane, 2016; Flateland et al., 2019; Gardner, 2005a, 2005b; James, 2018; Junious et al., 2010; Kong et al., 2018; Nadeau, 2014; Randon et al., 2019; Rogan et al., 2006; Sanner & Wilson, 2008; Sedgwick et al., 2014; Young-Brice et al., 2018). This theme comprises four subthemes: motivation; loneliness and isolation; discrimination; and stress.

A desire and drive to be a nurse was a motivation to continue the demanding work, despite hard work and challenges (Dyson et al., 2008; Randon et al., 2019; Sanner & Wilson, 2008). Support from family, teacher, and peers was important (Dyson et al., 2008; Flateland et al., 2019; Nadeau, 2014; Randon et al., 2019; Sanner & Wilson, 2008) and decreased the feeling of stress. Moreover, support was regarded as a critical factor to enable students to persist and complete the studies (Flateland et al., 2019; James, 2018; Sanner & Wilson, 2008).

Loneliness and isolation were a common feeling. “I don't have bad feelings in the classroom, but when we work in groups, I feel isolated” (Flateland et al., 2019). Some students described being homesick and missing their family, and some described a feeling of being an outsider (Gardner, 2005a). “When I was in the first semester of the nursing program, I felt like I had to stick with my color and other cultures that I could relate to. They (white peers) kind of separated themselves from us” (Gardner, 2005a).

The students felt stressed, and the amount of classwork, high responsibility, and lack of free time were frequently mentioned as causes of stress (Donnelly et al., 2009; Dyson et al., 2008; James, 2018; Junious et al., 2010; Nadeau, 2014; Sedgwick et al., 2014), along with the clinical setting, especially when they had to communicate in demanding clinical situations (Rogan et al., 2006). The feelings of stress were related to situations where they felt left out and inferior (Dudas, 2018; Flateland et al., 2019; James, 2018; Kong et al., 2018; Young-Brice et al., 2018) “People don't realize that being international is not just having name that others can't pronounce ... It's a trail of stress” (Junious et al., 2010). Some ethnic minority nursing students described a pressure to be perfect and were afraid of failing. Furthermore, factors such as financial issues and maintaining a household, increased the stress (Dyson et al., 2008; Ferrell & DeCrane, 2016; James, 2018; Nadeau, 2014).

Students described some form of discrimination in their nursing studies. This feeling was related to clinical studies, faculty members and peers. “I had responsibility for a patient to clarify him for leaving the hospital, but the problem was that the patient didn't want me to do that and I felt it was because of my skin color. My supervisor was whining at me and she felt that I used more time than I should on this work” (Flateland et al., 2019).

There was discrimination in class, through avoidance, negative tone of voice, impatience, racial jokes, distancing, failure to make contact, and reluctance to communicate (Dapremont, 2011; Donnelly et al., 2009; Flateland et al., 2019; James, 2018; Junious et al., 2010; Randon et al., 2019; Sedgwick et al., 2014; Young-Brice et al., 2018).

Conflicting cultural expectations

Fourteen of the included studies provided data for this main theme (Table 3) (Alicea-Planas, 2017; Diefenbeck et al., 2016; Donnelly et al., 2009; Dudas, 2018; Dyson et al., 2008; Flateland et al., 2019; Gardner, 2005a, 2005b; Junious et al., 2010; Kong et al., 2018; Nadeau, 2014; Randon et al., 2019; Rogan et al., 2006; Sanner & Wilson, 2008). The theme comprises two subthemes: family obligations and expectations, and cultural priorities.

Nursing education was important to build a better future for themselves and their families, to achieve more than their previous generations. Some fulfilled their parents' dreams of a university education (Gardner, 2005a, 2005b; Nadeau, 2014; Sanner & Wilson, 2008) “I try to give what I learn to my parents who never attended school, no school at all. My dad cannot write his name” (Gardner, 2005a).

In some studies, the students expressed pressure from their family to select other education and courses that would lead to a well-paid, high-status career such as law, medicine, and pharmacy (Dudas, 2018; Dyson et al., 2008). This was especially prominent among male students (Dudas, 2018). Students undertook much effort in support of their education, and for some female students, husbands and in-laws opposed their wish for an education, claiming that their responsibilities were within the family, which was a common attitude of husbands from a traditional, male-dominated society (Dyson et al., 2008; Flateland et al., 2019; Gardner, 2005a, 2005b; Junious et al., 2010; Randon et al., 2019).

Within some cultures it is desirable to be a nurse, which is considered a duty and a good way to show that you care (Gardner, 2005a). However, difficulties in adapting, different cultural norms, and the studies themselves led students to consider leaving the nursing course (Gardner, 2005a). The horizontal relations between students and professors were unfamiliar. In their home countries, students were used to paying respect to authorities such as professors and older people and not discussing with them (Gardner, 2005a; Sanner & Wilson, 2008). Furthermore, some students were not used to discussions in classes, which is required and desirable in university studies (Gardner, 2005a; Sanner & Wilson, 2008).

The cultural norms were difficult to understand (Donnelly et al., 2009; Dudas, 2018; Flateland et al., 2019; Junious et al., 2010; Kong et al., 2018; Randon et al., 2019; Rogan et al., 2006), and there was limited opportunity for diversity (Alicea-Planas, 2017; Donnelly et al., 2009; Dudas, 2018). The history and organization of the education system in the new homeland or place of study were unfamiliar, especially as back home there was limited access to information via the internet and social media (Kong et al., 2018). “Because I had not lived here and didn't really know what people talked about, so I felt stupid and a little strange ... I need to know something in order to have conversations” (Kong et al., 2018).

In one study there was a different cultural perception of health and illness compared with other studies. In the native country, ill people were often hidden from public view. The different perceptions were especially prominent with regard to people with chronic diseases (Dudas, 2018).

Discussion

The aim of this meta-synthesis was to identify and synthesize evidence on ethnic minority nursing students' experiences as students in a nursing program. Four synthesized themes were identified, covering features of challenges connected to understanding and being understood, the importance of relations, motivated but emotionally distressed, and conflicting cultural expectations. The themes are interwoven and connected. Even if most of the students were motivated to be a nurse, our findings revealed that the students mostly described experiences connected to challenges around, and barriers to being, an ethnic minority nursing student.

Not surprisingly, challenges related to understanding others and

being understood, including cultural barriers that were emphasized. Language and culture are strongly connected, and culture is expressed not only through the words we use, but also through the way we are thinking, acting, and understanding ourselves and other people. The language spoken at home influences the student's fluency rate, information processing, and understanding. Students found it difficult to participate in discussions in class, which is required and desirable in nursing studies. As both verbal and nonverbal communication are crucial in nursing education and practice, good language skills are necessary. While other studies have focused on the responsibility of universities to offer language programs for ethnic minority nursing students (Havery et al., 2019; San Miguel & Rogan, 2009), few studies have highlighted the fact that many students start nursing programs without sufficient language skills. Students should be made aware of the importance of having sufficient language skills before entering an education program. Based on the findings in this meta-synthesis, it is important to determine whether a language test to map students' skills before they begin their studies should be required, and whether it could provide them with a more realistic perception of their own language skills. To understand what you read and hear in the context of the culture you live in, is crucial. Results from the included studies showed that most of the ethnic minority nursing students were motivated when they started the nursing program. However, it was challenging to both participate and complete the program, mostly due to language problems. Hanssen & Helleland (2005) emphasized that listening, talking, and reading as well as writing are challenging for many ethnic minority nursing students, and highlighted that acquiring both linguistic and communicative competence may take several years. Language courses and joining mixed study groups have been found to be supportive (Choi, 2016; Olson, 2012). Using tutorials that are specifically designed for ethnic minority nursing students with low levels of English proficiency were found to be beneficial to their learning (San Miguel et al., 2013). Social connections, good study strategies and persistence are also contributing factors for academic success (Wood et al., 2009).

Another major finding of this meta-synthesis is that many students experienced problems with integration and socialization; many felt some form of isolation. The experience of isolation and being together with other foreign students is supported by previous studies. Mattila et al. (2010) and Pitkajarvi et al. (2012) found that language barriers, in addition to cultural differences and unfamiliar ways of living, increase students' risk of isolation. Some of the included studies showed that ethnic minority nursing students had a strong desire to build relationships with native students but found it difficult to build such relationships. This is supported by White and Fulton (2015) who reported similar findings and identified that ethnic minority nursing students need to develop relationships with their peers suggesting educational institutions need to facilitate integration. For example, Choi (2016) demonstrated how ethnic minority nursing students benefitted from support groups that were aimed at improving their socialization and understanding and use of English in an academic environment. Moreover, educational institutions should develop course content related to diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging (DEIB) and this will be key to build relationships for the students.

There is a need for native students, clinical supervisors, and professors to be aware of multiculturalism and its significance by taking responsibility for integrating ethnic minority nursing students. To do this, purposeful dialogue related to dealing with issues of diversity must be addressed in classroom and clinical settings. A previous study suggested the development of peer interactions, support interventions, and formal mentorship programs, among others (Smith et al., 2011). Integration in groups may facilitate peer learning and more diversity. Choi (2016) found that group sessions also helped improve the psychosocial functioning of ethnic minority nursing students. Moreover, building informal relationships into nursing programs, such as those via lunch gatherings, has also been shown to be supportive and to contribute to better integration and peer relationships (Harris et al., 2014).

Some of the included studies show ethnic minority nursing students face significant problems that can be linked to lack of institutional support. Moreover, some studies criticize the education programs for lack of attention to cultural issues and ethnocentrism (Slatyer et al., 2016; Smith et al., 2011). However, in one of the included studies (Randon et al., 2019), the students described that they experienced a development of cultural competence during the study, because they had a desire to know, accept, and respect the culture of others. To succeed in their studies, it is important that ethnic minority nursing students try to adapt to the cultural norms of the country where they live and study. On the other hand, it is also important that educational institutions develop strategies to assist ethnic minority nursing students and facilitate a good learning environment. To promote a good learning environment, diversity and inclusion is important, but ethnic minority nursing students should also be challenged to seek situations outside campus where the native language is spoken.

This meta-synthesis revealed that some students faced discrimination, by both peers and professors and in clinical practice. Other studies have revealed that racism and whiteness is evident in nursing education (Iheduru-Anderson & Wahi, 2021). White and Fulton (2015) reported that ethnic minority nursing students were more likely to face discrimination from nurse supervisors in clinical practice, and Gardner (2005a) found that ethnic minority nursing students were more likely to be excluded or overlooked by supervisors than were native nursing students. As reported by Sedgwick et al. (2014), participants tried to avoid clinical supervisors whom they perceived as being unfriendly. This can be detrimental to the students' morale and performance. It is the responsibility of the university that all students need to feel respected, encouraged, and treated with dignity. Professors should challenge all inappropriate behavior to truly promote a more inclusive working environment for ethnic minority nursing students.

Strengths and limitations

Studies from seven countries across four continents were identified, and the students' experiences seemed to be similar across different countries and continents. The primary studies in this meta-synthesis were methodologically variable in quality. This was especially prominent regarding the lack of information about the relationship between the researchers and participants and the ethical considerations. Furthermore, most studies lacked a philosophical and/or theoretical background for the study and the descriptions of the analytical process were rather imprecise. Definitions of an ethnic minority nursing student were unclear, and the term varied in the included studies. Therefore, our findings should be interpreted with care because this variability cannot be accounted for.

There was a mix of different nursing education organizations and students. Most of the studies were conducted in the USA, which might be considered as a limitation. Although our findings are consistent across studies, it is important to note that the 14 studies from North America had especially focused on black students and Hispanic/Latino students. Furthermore, the included studies focused on nursing education in high- and middle-income countries, and in some countries, education is free of charge while in others, the students pay education fees, which might have also influenced the findings. This limits the applicability of the findings to other settings because nursing education may be vastly different across continents and countries.

Conclusions

This study synthesized qualitative evidence on the experiences of ethnic minority nursing students. The findings show that while students were motivated to study nursing, they experienced several challenges during their study, especially those related to language, socialization, cultural awareness, and relations with educators and students. To meet the needs of the students and increase graduation rates, it is important

that educational institutions and supervisors have knowledge of the cultural aspects and challenges and barriers that ethnic minority nursing students may face. Such knowledge may be useful to plan and facilitate a good learning environment. Diversity among students can contribute to increased cultural understanding and tolerance, which is central to our multicultural society. Completing an education can give ethnic minority nursing students a stable connection to professional life and society. No previous systematic studies have focused on ethnic minority nursing students. As such, this meta-synthesis has filled a gap in the research literature. In the future, more high-quality studies of ethnic minority nursing students' experiences should be carried out.

Abbreviation

DEIB diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging

CRedit authorship contribution statement

BJ and KH were responsible for the Introduction section. GR was responsible for the Review section and the References. All authors were responsible for the Results section. BJ and KH were responsible for the Discussion section. All the authors participated in the screening of the included papers, and all authors contributed to and approved the final version of the manuscript.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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Appendix A. Supplementary data

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