

## Research papers

# Learning intercultural competence in a transatlantic nurse education project

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### ABSTRACT

The global shortage of nurses has increased overseas recruitment of registered nurses, and the increasingly multicultural healthcare workforce has become a challenge for professional nurse training in both the European Community and the US. The aim of this study was to describe the factors considered important in learning intercultural competence, by Finnish and American exchange students who participated in a transatlantic education project. The three-year project focused on the challenge of the increasingly global nature of the nursing workforce. Altogether 16 students from both countries participated in the exchange project. The data were collected by analysing essays written by the students in the host country before returning home. Miles and Huberman's method for qualitative data

was applied. The foundation for learning intercultural competence consisted of four components: students' preparation for the exchange, students' personal resiliency, students' previous experiences and the curricular status of intercultural studies. The process of learning intercultural competence included three components: students' maturation process, students' reflection process and important relationships during the intercultural experience. As a conclusion, it can be stated that an international education project in nursing offers a good opportunity for multicultural healthcare workforces to gain intercultural competence.

**Keywords:** intercultural competence, nursing shortage, overseas recruitment

### Introduction

The International Council of Nurses (ICN) has repeatedly expressed grave concern regarding the worldwide shortage of nurses and the lack of progress in addressing the supply and utilisation of nurses. The factors contributing to the nursing shortage seem to be very similar worldwide, including the ageing workforce, the reduction in student intake, poor workforce

planning, the changing work climate, the poor image of nursing, the ageing population and other population trends (Janiszewski Goodin, 2003; Mullen, 2003; Wickett *et al*, 2003).

In Finland, the crisis in healthcare staffing is not as grave as in many other European Union (EU) member states. However, it has been estimated that, by 2010,

the available recruitment pool of potential healthcare staff will significantly diminish at a time when large numbers of the ageing workforce are due to retire, and the demands from the growing ageing population will hence increase (Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, 2001). The chief negotiator Marjut Sassi from the Association for Health Professions argues that the nursing shortage is already a crisis in the capital region of Southern Finland (Pesonen, 2004).

There is a similar situation in the US. Buresh and Gordon (2000) note that, like all around the western world, cost cutting in healthcare is pervasive in the market-driven system of the US. 'Silent nurses' are devalued and become an easy target for the budget axe, and they exacerbate unintentionally the global nursing shortage by entering professions that are dynamic, challenging, and rewarding. In 2002, the Bureau of Health Professions estimated that the national supply was 6% short of the demand (=110 000 nurses) in the US and predicted that the nursing shortage will grow to 29% by 2020 if the current trends continue (Tanner, 2002).

Overseas recruitment has become an initiative to solve the shortage of registered nurses in both the EU and the US. De Raeve (2003) underlines the ethical responsibility of the western world not to exploit migrant nurses or their own health services by uncontrolled recruitment. Another challenge is the smooth collaboration of a healthcare team consisting of professionals from all over the world. There is research evidence to indicate that educational improvements are still needed in nursing to provide client care that responds to the needs of a multicultural society (Taavela, 1999; Eliason and Raheim, 2000). Less research evidence exists about multicultural workforces and their implications for nursing education. The study reported in this article describes the experiences of Finnish and American students who participated in a transatlantic project, which aimed to develop their intercultural competence to work in the increasingly multicultural healthcare workforce.

## Intercultural competence

The ability to work and interact with culturally different others has become a highly valued competence across professions throughout the western world. Duffy (2001) expands intercultural competence in nursing beyond sensitivity towards cultural differences to the human similarity of feelings and thinking across diverse cultural backgrounds. She encourages nurses to avoid stereotypical thinking and ways of action in intercultural encounters. Meleis (1999), in turn, extends cultural competence beyond nurses' ability to face ethnic and racial differences to their societal awareness of the complex marginality prob-

lem. Culturally competent nurses are able to respond to the needs of those who deviate from the norms of the cultural majority because of race, language, education, clothing, or sexual orientation.

According to Bennet (1993), intercultural sensitivity is a gradual journey through stages from ethnocentrism towards ethnorelativism. Bennet's model consists of three ethnocentric stages: denial, defence, and minimisation, and three ethnorelative stages: acceptance, adaptation, and integration, which characterise the learner's growing recognition of, and adjustment to, intercultural differences. In this research, intercultural competence was defined as a learning process from lower to higher levels of self-awareness and personal maturation through cognitive, affective, and behavioural dimensions, which leads to increasing sensitivity towards other people.

## Study abroad as an educational strategy

During the last few decades, nursing education worldwide has adopted study abroad programmes as an educational strategy to promote students' intercultural competence as part of professional training. The major justification for intercultural exchange programmes has been that they contribute to students' personal maturation, professional growth, intellectual development, and international perspective (Zorn, 1996; Thompson *et al*, 2000). However, the study abroad experience may be extremely disconcerting, even a cultural shock (Taylor, 1994), for a number of personal and situational reasons. Paige (1993) states that communication and interaction with culturally different others are psychologically demanding and require students to be emotionally resilient in responding to the frustrations of cultural immersion. Students often suffer from language problems, loneliness, isolation, and homesickness in the host culture (Morales-Mann and Smith Higuchi, 1995; Koskinen and Tossavainen, 2003, 2004), and an intercultural experience does not automatically lead to learning and professional growth (Nojonen 1997; Koskinen, 2003).

Kauffmann *et al* (1992) state that students' maturity, and the extent to which they are immersed into the host culture are the two key variables that determine the degree to which students are affected by their intercultural experience. Research results also indicate that the length of the international experience is significantly associated with its long-term impact. Longer visits allow for longer immersion into the host culture, resulting in a more lasting influence (Zorn, 1996; Ollikainen and Pajala, 2000). The critics of study abroad programmes have also pointed out the

lack of properly planned and conducted orientation and debriefing programmes (La Brack, 1993). Koskinen (2003) classified the challenges of study abroad into operational and personal challenges.

While the primary purpose of the study abroad was initially conceptualised to provide an educational strategy within the project and offer an opportunity for nursing students to gain healthcare experiences in another country, secondary gains were the rich descriptions supplied through written student essays.

## The research

### Project

In 2001, three European and three American universities (see Table 1) jointly launched a three-year project in the 'EC/US Cooperation Program in Higher Education and Vocational Education and Training' financed by the European Commission and the United States Department of Education. This project focused on the development of a transatlantic educational framework that would promote the intercultural competence of students during undergraduate or post-graduate professional training. The purpose was to reduce the barriers in professional interactions generated by a lack of capacity to deal with culturally

different others, and to address the consequences and practical implications for the education of professionals able to function in a multicultural workforce.

The educational framework thereby developed was compatible with Howell's (1982) theory of four stages of cultural learning, where the learner is supposed to move from unconscious to conscious incompetence and finally to conscious competence. The parallel educational strategies (see Table 2) included experiential learning through the cultural simulation games *Barnga*® and *Bafa Bafa*® at the stage of cultural awareness. The games created a situation, which allowed players to profitably explore the idea of culture and to gain experiences in observing and interacting with a different culture. The interactive web-based learning material motivated the students to search for relevant information about the host culture at the stage of cultural knowledge. Cultural learning experiences were provided through intercultural encounters with ethnic minority groups in the students' own country at the stage of cultural competence. During the two final years of the project, a total of 48 students from both continents travelled overseas between England, Sweden, or Finland and the US for an international placement addressing the stage of intercultural competence. The study abroad period varied from 3 to 12 weeks, depending on the curricular status of the project in each school.

**Table 1** Participating educational institutions

EU partners	US partners
Bournemouth University, Bournemouth, England (EU co-ordinator)	Vanderbilt University, Nashville, Tennessee (US co-ordinator)
Savonia Polytechnic, Kuopio, Finland	Queens University, Charlotte, North Carolina
Uppsala University, Uppsala, Sweden	Western Kentucky University, Bowling Green, Kentucky

**Table 2** Educational framework of the project (Adapted from Howell, 1982)

Learning stages	Educational activities
Stage 1: cultural awareness	Experiential learning through simulation games
Stage 2: cultural knowledge	Learning through interactive web material
Stage 3: cultural competence	Learning through encounters with ethnic minority groups in the home country
Stage 4: intercultural competence	Learning through international placement in the host country

## Aim

The aim of this study was to describe the factors considered important in learning intercultural competence by the Finnish and American exchange students who participated in the project.

## Informants

The informants of the study consisted of the 16 exchange students (12 females and four males) who traveled either from the US to Finland or from Finland to the US between January 2003 and July 2004 (see Table 3). The study focused on the Finnish–US exchange context and therefore the eight Finnish and eight American students were selected from the entire group of 48 students who took part in the project.

## Data

The data consisted of essays written by the students before returning home from the host country. The students were asked to consider the following aspects in their essays: assessment of the benefits and problems of the exchange programme; evaluation of their own intercultural sensitivity before and after the exchange by using Bennet's model (1993); suggestions on how to improve the programme; documentation of one critical incident related to intercultural experience. The instructions allowed the informants freedom to write about their experiences in a personal style appropriate to themselves. As reflective essay writing was part of the final papers of the student exchange, this was chosen as the data collection method. The Finnish students were given the instructions for

the essay before their departure to the US and the Americans after their arrival in Finland. The students wrote in their native language, with the exception of three Finnish students, who used both English and Finnish.

## Ethical concerns

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the participating schools. During the preparation process the exchange students were told about the research, the data collection method, and issues of confidentiality and consent to involvement. Written informed consent was obtained from all students.

## Data analysis

Miles and Huberman's (1994) method for analysing qualitative data was used to analyse the students' essays. The method is suitable when a task is to explicate the ways people in particular settings come to understand, account for, and otherwise manage their day-to-day situations (Miles and Huberman, 1994). The focus of analysis was on the components that had an impact on the development of intercultural competence as expressed by the students themselves. The analysis consisted of three simultaneously occurring steps: data reduction, data display, conclusion, and verification. At the reduction step, key words and phrases related to the focus of the research question were highlighted and coded inductively. Data display included comparison of the codes with one another, clustering of similar codes into categories, and labelling of the categories according to their content and

**Table 3** Realised student exchanges between Finland and the USA

Home institution	Number of going students	Undergraduates/postgraduates	Age (years)	Length of exchange (weeks)	Type of host placement (number of students)
Savonia Polytechnic, Finland	8	8/0	23–37	12	Medical (3) Emergency (2) Community (3)
Queens University, USA	4	2/2	23–57	4	Community (4)
Vanderbilt University, USA	2	0/2	24–25	3	Paediatric (2)
Western Kentucky University, USA	2	2/0	21	4	Paediatric (2)
Total	16	12/4			

meaning. Finally, at the conclusion and verification step, two main categories were formed to describe the results: the foundation for learning intercultural competence and the process of learning intercultural competence.

## Results

### Foundation for learning intercultural competence

#### *Preparation*

Preparation for the exchange included the means by which the students made themselves ready for the exchange and tried to get some idea of the way of life in the host culture by searching information from the web, playing simulation games, encountering cultural minority clients at home, contacting people from the host culture, and learning the host language.

The greatest benefits for preparation were gained from the experiences of others: participating in the discussion panel of the project, listening to and reading stories of those who had visited or lived in the host culture, and discussing with exchange students from the host culture. Most of the students who had the simulation game experience said that the games were useful and helped them to imagine what it might be like to live surrounded by unknown cultural codes. Some students thought that the games did not have any great impact on their transition from the familiar to the unknown culture. There were also students who changed their opinion on the impact of the games during the exchange: right after the games the students considered the experience useless, but during the exchange the same students discovered the importance of the games for their intercultural awareness.

All students felt that language was a barrier in intercultural interaction. The Finnish students spoke English at a moderate level, but new and unexpected events caused problems. The American students did not know Finnish beforehand, but they felt that it was important to learn at least some words or phrases to be involved in interaction with locals. Consequently, the students prepared themselves for the host language: the Finnish students increased their collaboration with English speakers and read English texts; some American students listened to a Finnish language tape for foreign students.

#### *Resiliency*

Students' personal resiliency towards the unknown was an important foundation for intercultural competence and consisted of openness toward differences in life, faith in surviving in the host culture, a desire to

learn about cultures overall, and a sense of humour. An open attitude toward differences and a desire to learn about different cultures may even have been the students' primary stimulus for taking part in the exchange programme. Their earlier experiences of unknown situations, and confidence in their own ability to manage in life in general were the factors that gave them a deep faith in surviving in the host culture. The students were certain that humour would help them to manage with difficulties and trusted in its helpfulness in unexpected intercultural situations.

#### *Previous experiences*

Important previous experiences consisted of early family life education, travelling in foreign cultures, living in a multicultural society, a religious view of life, and the universal nature of nursing. The students thought that the basis of personal pluralism is created in childhood. They believed that cultural values are transferred from one generation to the other, and that the parents' and teachers' attitudes toward upbringing had triggered their intercultural interest.

The chance to travel in foreign countries was considered an important step toward intercultural understanding. The students found that experiencing other cultures implied intercultural comparison, which helped one to learn about one's cultural roots. Critical examination of one's own culture, in turn, triggered intercultural awareness. Living in a multicultural society was seen as a natural way to encounter cultural and ethnic minority groups. The students believed that caring for diverse clients in their own society was a valuable source of cultural learning. The students who had a strong religious conviction believed that this assisted their progress toward intercultural competence in the form of a mission of humanity and caring for the underprivileged. They found foreign health-care to be a relevant arena for learning about culture: they thought that, despite the intercultural differences, the universal nature of nursing care was the factor that made them feel safe in their foreign placements.

#### *Curriculum*

The curricular arrangements included three aspects: the status of intercultural studies in the home curriculum, the length of preparation, and the length of intercultural experience. Integration of the project as a credited part of the curriculum varied between the schools. If the project was not an integral part of the curriculum, the students felt that the preparation and the exchange were additional work loads besides their regular education. According to the students, the length of preparation varied from a couple of weeks to one-and-a-half years. Sufficiently long preparation allowed the students to prepare themselves both mentally and practically for the exchange. The students found that unsatisfactory preparation and a short period

of study abroad hindered their progress through the stages of intercultural competence.

## Process of learning intercultural competence

### *Maturation*

The students' maturation process manifested itself as three types of emotions: survival of hardships, experience of one's own otherness as a minority within the main culture and recognition of one's own intercultural sensitivity.

The daily life in the foreign culture included numerous puzzles due to the language barrier and differences in habits and behaviours. The students were involved in a constant problem-solving process, and their ability to manage hardships that at first seemed insurmountable increased their self-confidence. They also believed that the experiences of their own otherness and minority remarkably changed their way of thinking, increased their ability to step into another person's situation, and helped them to grow up towards cultural competence. The students estimated that the reorganisation of their own stage of intercultural sensitivity was essential in this development, including developing awareness of their personal stereotypes and prejudices. They found that their intercultural self-awareness, made them more sensitive towards other people, i.e. capable of noticing the feelings of newcomers in their working community, respecting other cultures, and considering the differences between patients in general.

### *Reflection*

Reflection was based on the intercultural encounters the students searched for in the host culture and the analysis of these experiences. Searching for intercultural encounters meant that the students made contacts with local people, tasted local food, and took part in cultural events. There were four targets to search for and analyse intercultural encounters: to learn more about the features of the host culture; to learn more about intercultural interaction in general; to try to make sense of the behaviours and manners of local people; and to try to understand the unfamiliar situations.

The manners that the student could not accept or the situations that were frustrating were most often the stimulus for reflection and led to deeper analysis. In the reflection process, the students used peer group debriefing, reading additional literature, comparing their experiences with their earlier knowledge, writing a journal and discussing with their tutors or mentors.

### *Important relationships*

Individuals involved in important relationships consisted of a member of the tutorial staff, key office staff,

student tutors, nurse mentors and a few local friends. During their foreign stay, the students had named intercultural tutors, and reflections with them were regarded as an important learning opportunity. Availability of and easy communication with the key office staff, in turn, assisted the students to solve the problems that were often caused by the differences in daily life and the misunderstandings due to the language barrier. The students also regarded their contacts with the student tutors as essential, particularly during the first days of their placement.

The main target of the project was to get a chance to be part of a healthcare team in another country (see Table 3) and to learn about its nursing culture. The students experienced this as a unique opportunity. The degree of student participation in nursing care and the depth of analysis about the nursing culture varied and were dependent on two issues: the length of the stay in the host culture and the familiarity of the nursing area of the placement. The participation of the American students in direct nursing care was limited by the language barrier and their short stay in the placements. The Finnish students learned English relatively well in 4–6 weeks and felt themselves to be members of the American nursing teams. All students regarded communication with the foreign nurse mentors and observing their work as a real source of learning about healthcare culture.

The American students stayed in Finland for 3–4 weeks, which was a short time to make local student friends other than the Finnish exchange students they had met in the US, who returned to Finland during their stay. They also appreciated discussions with other foreign exchange students or incidental conversations with Finnish people in their free time. The Finnish students stayed in the US for three months and thus had time to make friends with a few local students. These students acquainted the Finnish students with societal awareness and the American way of life. The Finnish students also participated in classroom instruction with their local friends and found this was an excellent opportunity to learn about the education system of the host country. The Finnish students who lived in an American home instead of staying on the campus or in a hotel found the experience of intercultural family life to be of great importance for their intercultural learning.

## Discussion

### Assessment of the results

This study described the factors that were experienced as important in the process of gaining intercultural competence by Finnish and American students who

participated in a transatlantic student exchange programme in nursing. The study was consistent with the previous reports (e.g. Kauffmann *et al*, 1992; Koskinen, 2003) showing that gaining intercultural competence in a student exchange programme is an extensive, intensive, and long-lasting process that requires personal investment from the student, support from other people, and favourable situational circumstances. Ideally, the process started long before the actual student exchange by the implementation of experiential and cognitive learning strategies during the preparation phase in the home culture and continued as a reflective self-maturation process in the host culture during the exchange phase. The students' personal attitudes and resiliency towards differences, along with the length and extensiveness of the preparation and the length of study abroad turned out to be the foundation of the process.

According to the results, the main differences between the two student groups were related to the language skills and previous knowledge concerning the host culture. The Finnish students had learned English both at school and during their nursing education, and most of them used it relatively well during the latter part of their foreign stay. The American students could not understand any Finnish before their arrival and learned only a few words during the stay. Due to the multitude of American TV programmes and films, the Finnish students were even initially more familiar with the US and its culture.

Howell's (1982) theory (see Table 2) offered an ideal for teaching and learning about cultural diversity in this project. According to the results, learning in a project was a process where progress was not made simultaneously by all participants despite collaborative desire. The three-year process included uncertainties, which were strengthened by the cultural differences between the participating schools. Thus, the use of the developed educational framework gradually assisted the partners to identify their common goal and mutual ways of action, and to communicate in the 'same language' with each other. The framework offered the participants structured ways of acting in the frequently unpredictable project work and the findings reveal that there were several benefits from its use to the students.

The project triggered the development of intercultural education for multicultural healthcare workforces in the partner schools, and the developed framework also involved the students who did not go abroad for cultural learning. The framework presumes gradual progress through stages toward intercultural competence, being similar to many other models, e.g. those proposed by Bennet (1993) and Taylor (1993). According to the findings, use of the framework deepened intercultural understanding among the students because learning about diversity

became systematic, supervised, and goal oriented in the partner schools.

## Reliability concerns

The trustworthiness of this study was measured in terms of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Credibility was defined as the extent to which the findings were valid and believable, and it was established in two ways: by simultaneous and crisscross data analysis and by sharing the interpretations and conclusions between the two principal researchers throughout the research process. Transferability was enhanced by detailed description of the research context and methodology, which allows the readers to judge the appropriateness of the findings and their transferability to other situations. Dependability was verified by constant comparison and contrasting of the data throughout the analysis process. Confirmability refers to the maintenance of neutrality and the prevention of personal bias in the research. These aspects were controlled through critical peer and self-reflection by the two principal researchers throughout the 1.5-year process of data collection and analysis.

## Conclusions

International education in nursing can offer a good opportunity to gain intercultural competence, which is essential in today's multicultural working communities. According to the results of this research, the challenges for participating students and schools are multifaceted. First, learning intercultural competence in a project including study abroad requires personal resiliency and desire from the students to understand diversity. Second, a properly planned and conducted preparation programme, including stimulation of intercultural self-awareness by experiential learning methods, provision of intercultural knowledge, and instruction in the host language are required from the participating schools. Third, a long enough intercultural experience is needed to allow the participating students to get over the inevitable culture shock, and progress through the stages of intercultural competence. Finally, a solid social network must be provided to support the participating students in learning about diversity.

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## CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

None.

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