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TAKING PART IN NORDIC COLLABORATION; NURSING STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES AND PERCEPTIONS FROM A LEARNING PERSPECTIVE: A QUALITATIVE STUDY

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Contributions

Study design: ÅK, MW, AKS, OJH, ME, G-BL, I-LN, JD, TE, IP; data collections: ÅK, MW, AKS, OJH, ME, JD, G-BL, I-LN, IP, TE; data analysis: ÅK, MW; manuscript preparation: MW, ÅK, AKS, ME; manuscript review: MW, AKS, ÅK, OJH, ME, G-BL, I-LN.

Conflict of interest

None declared.

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Ethical approval

Not required

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SUMMARY

Background: Nordic networking of different kinds has a long tradition aiming to increase collaboration and understanding between citizens in the different countries. Cultural competence in relation to health care and nursing is important for clinical nurses and is a central issue in nurse education.

Objective: To gain an understanding of what nurse students experienced and learned during an intensive course in diabetes together with students and nurse educators from Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden and the Faroe Islands.

Methods: In 2012, an intensive course within the Nordic network, Nordkvist, was conducted in Faroe Islands with the theme "Nursing - to live a good life with diabetes". To answer the objective of the study, 26 students conducted written reflections based on two questions. The data was analysed using qualitative content analysis.

Results: Through meetings with nurse students and educators from the Nordic countries the intensive course strengthened the students' identification with the nursing profession. The students gained new perspectives on diabetes, such as how complex it can be to live with a chronic illness. Through difficulties in understanding one another, because of different mother tongues, the students gained a better understanding of patients' vulnerability in relation to hospital jargon and how it felt to be in an unfamiliar place.

Conclusions: The intensive course increased the students' personal and professional growth, cross-cultural competence, and their identification with nursing. Students' understanding of health care in the Nordic countries improved as similarities and differences were recognized.

Key words: Cultural competence, Diabetes, Exchange students, Intensive course, Nordic collaboration, Nurse education

Introduction

New and different demands will be experienced by nurse practitioners in the future as a result of an aging population and increased numbers of people living with chronic illnesses such as diabetes (IDF, 2013). Globalization of the world economy and society has also encouraged nurse educators to become more internationally focused (Heller et al., 2000). Several studies propound that opportunities for students and educators mobility should be improved, as it enhances knowledge about different societies and cross-cultural activities (Jackson et al., 2009; Salminen et al., 2010). International exchange may assist the nurse students in developing a global perspective so that they may become competent caregivers within a global society. Furthermore, international exchange gives both students and nurse educators opportunities to share good practices in patient care and evidence-based nursing (Pitkajarvi et al., 2013).

Background

Students who participate in an exchange programme develop cultural competence, a skill generally considered important and desirable (Kokko, 2011). Cultural competence is the ability of the practitioner to think and behave in ways that support effective interactions with members of other cultures (Campinha-Bacote, 2008). Nurse educators play an important role in developing students' cultural competence (Green et al., 2008). Traditionally, nurse students learned cultural competence by reading textbooks, participating in classroom lectures, discussions, and caring for diverse patients in clinical settings (Coffman et al., 2013). Today, cultural competence is also developed through exchange programmes between educational institutions. Such programmes yield best results if well prepared (Greatrex-White, 2008; Koskinen and Tossavainen, 2004; Kulbok et al., 2012). Generally, exchange collaboration focuses on students and nurse educators (Sandin et al., 2009). Participation in an exchange programme aims to engage students in learning and interaction within a multicultural environment (Cowan, 2007), which often is demanding for them (Kokko, 2011). Studies have shown that international experience of nurse students and nurse educators enhances their intercultural competence, as well as personal and professional growth (Duffy et al., 2005; Green et al., 2008). Although exchange programmes provide an unique cultural experience, only few students are able to participate, and participation is voluntary (Coffman et al., 2013; Kokko, 2011).

Nordic collaboration on health and education is based on joint values that underpin the Nordic

welfare model (Nordic Council of Ministers, 2009). The Nordic network Nordkvist, which is part of the Nordic Council of Ministers' NordPlus programme, is a network for future registered nurses (RNs) in Northern Europe. The purpose of a Nordic students' exchange collaboration is to promote the development of Nordic languages and cultures among students (Nordic Council of Ministers, 2009). The first collaboration agreement was established in 1994, and has since been revised and updated periodically, the latest revision taking place in autumn 2012. The agreement aims to promote collaboration between universities or departments providing nurse education in the northern countries: Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden, the Faroe Islands and Greenland. In 2007, the network was highlighted by the International Programme Office in Sweden as a praiseworthy example of collaboration in the Nordic region (FIVU.dk, 2011).

Within Nordkvist, a one-week intensive course on a given topic is held every three years. An intensive course was organized in the Faroe Islands with the theme "Nursing - to live a good life with diabetes". The aim of the course was to highlight certain areas relevant to nursing students in the Nordic countries, as an increase in diabetes is a common trend in the population in the Nordic countries (IDF, 2013).

Although Nordic exchange projects have existed for a while, the outcome from the intensive courses have been scantily studied. More research in the field of nurse education, and particularly in cross-cultural projects, is needed (Salminen et al., 2010). Therefore, the aim of the study was to gain an understanding of what nurse students experienced and learned during an intensive course in diabetes in the Nordkvist network.

Methods

Study design

A descriptive qualitative design was used.

Participants

The sample consisted of 26 students in nursing science in semester 4-6 from Norway (n=4), Sweden (n=5), Finland (n=2), the Faeroe Islands (n=4), Iceland (n=2), and Denmark (n=9).

Context

The programme for the one-week intensive course was both subject-oriented and social. The course was organized as lectures on diabetes and living with chronic illness, and specific goals stated what students should achieve during the week. During the afternoons students worked in groups of 5-7 consisting of students from each country and based on patient cases they had encountered in their own clinical training. Group discussions promoted exchange of personal experiences and learning. The social programme took place in the late afternoons and evenings and consisted of different excursions such as sailing, a bus tour, traditional food tasting, as well as visiting a local hospital. It was designed to allow the students and nurse educators to experience Faroe Island culture and nature in September 2012. The students spend almost 24 hour together as they shared rooms in a hostel. During collective meals and excursions students were encouraged to engage with students and nurse educators from other countries.

Data collection

All students received oral information about the planned study on day three of the course. As a final moment in the intensive course, all students (n=27) were asked to give a written reflection over two research questions; “What has the course week given you?” and “What will you take with you from this course week?” Before writing the reflections, the students signed written informed consents, and after writing the reflections, they had the opportunity to decide if they would like to participate in the study by returning their reflections to one of the nurse educators (ÅK). All but one student chose to participate (n = 26).

Data analysis and rigour

Data were analysed using a qualitative inductive content analysis (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004). Anonymised reflection sheets were distributed randomly by ÅK, who had a master list over the participating students. Nurse educators did not analyse reflections written by students from their own university but mainly received text written in their own language. Every nurse educator read through one to three written reflections separately and performed the first two steps in the analysis process. In the first step, meaning units (e.g. a word, sentence or a whole paragraph) with the same meaning were identified. In the second step, meaning units were condensed into a description of their content. Then the nurse educators sent their analysis to ÅK. Next, the entire data, including meaning units and condensed meaning units from all nurse educators, were read through by MW and ÅK separately from each other as important

insights can emerge from different ways two people look at the same data (Sandelowski, 1998). Thereafter, MW and ÅK coordinated their separate analysis to obtain an understanding of the entire data, based on the aim of the study. Subsequently, the condensed meaning units were analyzed and organised into categories based on similarities and differences. The main theme, as an expression of the latent content of the text, was understood to be a common core through the categories (Graneheim & Lundman 2004) (Table 1). An example of the analysis process is shown in Table 2. At last, all nurse educators reviewed the analysis, aiming to reach a consensus of the findings regarding categories and themes reflecting the nurse students' experiences of the intensive course. When disagreements emerged, they were discussed until consensus was reached as a way of achieving trustworthiness.

Insert Table 1 and 2 about here

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were rigorously applied to every step of the procedure in accordance with Ethical Principles for Medical Research Involving Human Subjects (WMA Declaration of Helsinki, 2013). All the students were given a full oral description of the study and that participation was voluntary. Thereafter they had two days to decide if they would like to participate in the study or not. Sending a reflection sheet was considered as acceptance to participate in the study. All names were removed from the reflections sheets, which were thereafter coded with a number to ensure anonymity and confidentiality. Only one educator (ÅK) knew which student wrote a particular reflection sheet and which educator analysed each of the written reflections.

Results

Strengthening the nursing profession's identity by meeting with others

The week was consistently experienced as something positive, including new experiences that participating students expressed as "a memory for life". Students felt grateful to have been able to participate in the intensive course and particularly appreciated the interaction with other students and the opportunity to make valuable contacts. Both personal and professional development were expressed as well as extended knowledge about diabetes.

"I am taking home with me a lot of experiences and good lessons for life that I want to keep from this time."

Fruitful meetings promote learning

This theme consists of two categories: *Learning through others* and *Social activities promote learning*. The students expressed that the course structure and the social programme promoted interactions with other students in the course. Living together, collective meals, social activities, and studies carried out as group work promoted learning in different ways. The exchange of personal experiences from meeting patients with diabetes brought to life the course content in the group discussions. Having reached different stages in their education, and with different experiences permitted the students to get a broader view of the role of the RN.

“The task that we got was not itself particularly difficult or demanding, but this was probably not the point either... [rather] it was the five of us, from different countries with five different mother tongues, and from five different universities with five different ways of working and writing, working together and creating something together.”

It was also found that interacting and working in a group was experienced as being worthwhile. The students experienced a positive climate in their working group, in which they helped each other in undertaking challenges. This in turn strengthened the solidarity among the students and contributed to challenging and changing their previous understanding of different customs and habits in different cultures including their own.

“As a nurse, you also work with different people, so it is useful to have the opportunity to work with so many people during this course.”

The boundaries between lessons and free time were erased by discussions that continued through all the waking hours of the day. The social activities were seen as promoting learning, and one student expressed this:

“But it has also been a good way to create an understanding of what it can be like to not have any time for yourself and a room of your own to be left alone in, which is probably the situation for many people during their hospital stay.”

The geographical location, with its opportunities for new cultural experiences and experiences of nature, was appreciated, and was something else that the students shared together. The

programme was felt to be rather intensive, even if this, through reflection, also contributed to learning. Spending time together raised new understandings in relation to each other, effecting their personal education and expectation of the nursing profession and health care in general.

Developing knowledge and understanding

This theme consists of two categories: *Enriching knowledge in the area of diabetes* and *Personal development*. The lectures were appreciated and provided inspiration by presenting new perspectives and current research about diabetes, which contributed to increased interest in the subject. The lectures contributed to a change in understanding of the patients' situation, in which the vulnerability of the patients and difficulties in their daily lives, were given attention. A change in view of the role of the RN also became apparent.

“The course has changed my picture of what it means to be a real nurse. What appears to be correct to me can greatly harm the patient's life, because I might be belittling the patient's problem by having a load of solutions, while the patient, on the other hand, sees the problem as though it were Mount Everest and so sees my solutions as being worthless.”

That both RNs and patients encounter similar problems in the Nordic countries was discussed and these were seen as challenges requiring improved information and approach. Overall, it was found that students felt that this new knowledge was important to take with them as future RNs. At the same time, it was also found that there were unfulfilled expectations. These expectations concerned a lack of concrete methods in interactions with patients.

“I think in fact that one lecture changed my attitude to these people [with diabetes]. I had always thought that most of them have themselves to blame and felt that it is quite reprehensible that we in the richer countries eat and “sit” ourselves sick, while people in other parts of the world starve to death. Even if we cannot completely remove the element of personal responsibility, I now see that there can also be a responsibility on the part of society ... in which healthy eating and exercise have become a choice that can easily be neglected.”

The students also described the week in terms of their own personal development, something that was expressed as being a “personal inner journey”. The students viewed themselves as being less prejudiced now, with more patience in situations where courage was also needed to dare to meet others and to undertake a journey by oneself.

Gaining an understanding of conditions in the Nordic countries

This theme consists of two categories: *Similarities and differences in health care and nurse education* and *The importance of language*. Meeting other students provided a perspective regarding the different conditions in health care and education between the Nordic countries. It was noted that people in the Nordic countries are different, but still so alike. In order to make comparisons, the students first had to reflect on their own education and on the health care system of their countries. This led the students to appreciate what they have, that is, “to set a price on the unique things we have”, and also helped them towards an insight that there are several ways in which to do the same thing.

Similarities and differences in the nursing profession were discussed, as well as the implications of different theoretical concepts.

“Getting to see the system of health care in another country was useful because I could not have imagined that there could be such differences in health care and what a nurse does. After all, we are all living in Nordic countries and I did not think that there would be such large differences as I now understood there actually are.”

In the students’ accounts, it became apparent that language was a matter of considerable importance. The students found that it was important to express themselves in a precise manner when not everyone spoke the same language. Having lectures in a language that was not one’s mother tongue could be experienced as an obstacle to learning. Even in the working groups, language could be a barrier to understanding each other. This was a reason for frustration for the individual participant, and was also experienced to hamper the group process.

“I have learned how important it is that I express myself precisely, so that people from other countries can also understand what is said.”

Even if the issue of language was a challenge, students also found it stimulating to have to explain themselves in different ways to be understood by the others. Listening was found to be important in understanding others in situations with different languages and experiences.

“...I think that it can be useful for us as future nurses to experience what it feels like to not really understand the language, this is the situation for many patients in health care ... that we in health care should use words that the patients understand. It has been a challenge for us [in the course] to make ourselves understood and a challenge to understand others. I believe that this can provide an understanding of the vulnerable situation that many patients find themselves in.”

Comparison between their own situation as a student, or being a patient, was done in relation to language difficulties. At the same time, during the course, they experienced that it became easier to understand each other.

“Since we speak different languages, you had to think about what you had to say one more time when you were going to explain something, it made you engage the group in a way that you would not have done if all of your course mates spoke the same language.”

Overall, coming from different cultural contexts of health care and nurse education as well as having different expectations on the role of a RN, participants expressed not being so different from each other.

Discussion

The study revealed that the intensive course was a valuable experience for the students. It was valuable in terms of recognising and developing the students' identity as future professional RNs with more cross-cultural competence and understanding. It also broadened the students' view of health care in the Nordic countries. It is demonstrated in other studies, that nurse students benefit from networking and exchange programmes (Enskär et al., 2011; Kokko, 2011), and global nurse exchange programmes have been described as a welcoming environment that connects colleagues in deeper ways (Rantz, 2004).

The students evaluated the intensive course as a positive experience that resulted in personal as well as professional development, concurrent with findings by Enskär and colleagues (2011). Furthermore, the students reported the exchange as a challenging and stressful experience. To overcome the challenges, they had to work on their own values and beliefs. Thinking and talking about values and beliefs increases self-confidence and self-awareness (Lee, 2004; Sandin et al., 2009) and can enhance professional development. In the present

study, students reported increased awareness of differences in healthcare practice and RNs' roles. Meeting individuals from different countries is a powerful way to learn about different cultures and understand different ways of living (Button et al., 2005; Sandin et al., 2009). The students described those meetings and challenges as a "personal inner journey". Cultural knowledge in nursing is important, and lack of this competence may affect RNs' attitudes toward patients in an ethnocentric and stereotyped way (Papadopoulos, 2006; Takeno, 2010). Leininger (2002) emphasizes that lack of cultural competence might hinder RNs from providing quality nursing.

The students expressed that the intensive course had "*changed my picture*" for living with and caring for people with diabetes as it deepened their knowledge regarding the illness. They viewed themselves as being more understanding towards vulnerability of patients. However, some students expressed lack of concrete methods in interactions with patients. While the roles and tasks performed in the different Nordic countries may differ, there is a similarity in the idea of promoting health and care for patients and their relatives. According to Green et al. (2008), nursing shares common beliefs and values that go beyond the boundaries of individual countries.

Both similarities and differences in health care and nursing education among the different countries were experienced by the students, which have also been reported by Råholm and colleagues (2010). The students were surprised by the fact that RNs and patients encounter comparable problems in the Nordic countries, but differences in practice and education were also observed. For example, students reported impressions of the healthcare system at home and in the other countries. These results are supported by Button et al. (2005) who found that students usually compare differences between the countries, but also identify strengths and weaknesses of the system in their own country.

Most students indicated that they had some communication problems with students and nurse educators from the other countries. The students described this experience in terms of what it felt like not really understanding the language and compared the experience to the situation for many patients in health care. Similar findings have been reported by Green et al. (2008) and Keogh and Russel-Roberts (2009). Exchange students in those studies found ways to bypass language difficulties as the students in the present study did. Moreover, the students mentioned that the intensive course led to new contacts with people from different countries,

and some students stated that they would maintain those contacts. This indicates that the Nordkvist intensive course was successful in stimulating future connections between the students. These connections can be useful in their future work as RNs. Establishing such contacts is one goal of the intensive course (Nordisk Ministerrad, 2013). Another goal of the course is to support learning among participants. The students' written reflections to the research questions gave them the possibility to learn through reflection. Reflection accelerates learning and is the foundation for professional growth (Benner, 2001). If the educators make preparations for, and supervise the students in their reflections, the reflections give a stronger learning outcome (Duke and Appleton, 2000; Epp, 2008; Mann et al., 2009).

The results should be interpreted with a few limitations in mind. Firstly, this is a small-scale study involving few participating nurse students and their written reflections. However, with a qualitative approach such as in present study, the number of participants is not as important as the quality and diversity of data obtained. Secondly, the scene in the Faroe Islands and the presence of the educators may have influenced the students' written reflections. Thirdly, the course lasted only one week, but exchange programmes are often based on a longer stay in a different culture (Green et al., 2008).

Clinical implication

Networking, as participating in an intensive course with students from different Nordic countries, enhances intercultural competence and professional development. Through the opportunity to explore alternative ways of healthcare, a wider understanding of patients' different cultural circumstances needs and expectations is achieved. This is important knowledge for nursing students as well as for RNs in a caregiving positions. New understandings of possible ways of delivering healthcare may also contribute to changes in personal health care contexts. However, there is a further need to research how one-week intensive courses or similar affect cultural competence and professional development among nursing students and the beneficial of them for clinic practice. To our knowledge, it is today neither known what part in a course contributes to cultural competence: collaboration, content, context or social activities, if these different parts interact with each other, or if one part is more essential than another.

Conclusion

The intensive course increased personal and professional growth through meetings with

students and nurse educators from the other Nordic countries. It also enhanced the students' cross-cultural competence and understanding as well as their identities as future professional nurses. All students and nurse educators tried to speak their mother tongue as a form of "Scandinavian". Although the Nordic languages share many similarities there are differences that were demanding for the students. The students' positive attitude in the course assisted them in overcoming difficulties in understanding one another's languages. In that way the students experienced cultural similarities. The students also gained a new perspective on diabetes, such as how threatening the disease will be to the health care systems in the future and how complex it can be to live with a chronic illness. The unique nature, culture, and social activities in the Faroe Islands contributed in stimulating the student's personal networking with one another. The study is also a foundation for further investigations of nurse students exchange programmes in the Nordic countries.

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Table 1. Content analysis of written reflections from nurse students leading to a main theme of students' experience and learning during an intensive course in diabetes.

Categories	Themes	Main theme
Learning through others Social activities promote learning	Fruitful meetings promote learning	Strengthening the nursing profession identity by meetings with others
Enriching knowledge in the area of diabetes Personal development.	Developing knowledge and understanding	
Similarities and differences in health care and education The importance of language	Gaining an understanding of conditions in the Nordic countries	

Table 2. Example of the condensation and analysis process.

Meaning unit	Condensed meaning unit	Categories	Themes	Main theme
My view on diabetes type 2 has changed during this week. Both on how serious and common the disease is and my knowledge became both deeper and broader.	View on diabetes type 2 changed and became deeper regarding seriousness and prevalence	Enriching knowledge in the area of diabetes	Developing knowledge and understanding	Strengthening the nursing profession identity by meetings with others