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What characterizes Norwegian nursing students' reflective journals during clinical placement in an African country?



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ABSTRACT

Introduction: An increasing number of Norwegian nursing students take part in exchange programmes in African countries. Reflective journals are often used to enhance clinical placements learning outcomes. **Aim:** To identify the features that characterized students' experiences reported in their reflective journals during clinical placements in an African country in light of cultural competence. **Methods:** Qualitative text analysis of 350 reflective journals written by 197 students taking part in an exchange programme in one of three African countries.

Results: The reflective journals were characterized by the students' personal emotions, judgements of others and comparisons between what they had learned in Norway and what they experienced in the African country in which they interned.

Discussion: The students experienced cultural shock, and in most cases, their journals expressed ethnocentrism. They had several challenges, including being in another culture without the necessary skills and language to interact or intervene in the situations described in the reflective journals. The reflective journals were characterized by critical judgements with a low degree of reflection based on cultural knowledge and understanding. To demonstrate cultural competence, the practitioner must understand both his or her own cultural values and those of other cultures.

Conclusion: The students predominantly expressed strong personal emotions and described their hosts in a judgemental and, in many cases, critical manner, often in comparison with Norwegian conditions. A stronger focus on cultural competence in preparing students for exchange programmes may decrease their level of criticism and negative judgement, and affect the level of reflection in their journals.

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1. Introduction

Each year, Norwegian universities and university colleges send large numbers of nursing students to several different African countries for clinical placement as a part of their three-year bachelor's degree programmes. The students presented in this article attended clinical placements in Botswana, South Africa or Tanzania for a period of 8–12 weeks during their fifth term. The clinical placements were in hospitals, outpatient clinics or home-based care.

The students went through an application process, including an individual interview, and accepted applicants participated in a two-day preparation programme before departing for the host country. The preparation programme is focused on culture and global/international health. Throughout the placement period, local

staff facilitated the students in the clinical area. In addition, a Norwegian supervisor followed up with the students from Norway via text message, email, telephone and Skype. This supervisor also worked closely with the local staff members to attain the required learning outcomes for the students. The students lived together with national or other international students.

As part of the clinical placement, students were required to write reflective journals. The intention was to enhance learning by improving critical and systematic thinking about the clinical experiences. Reflection is a well-known learning method in nursing education and practice, with many educators observing the potential for combining reflective thinking and writing as a learning method. Reflection itself is a dynamic process that links an experience with relevant knowledge and is triggered by feelings evoked by the situation (Duke & Appleton, 2000). Incorporating reflective journaling in nursing education has therefore been widely introduced in nursing curricula as a means of developing critical thinking skills, documenting professional practice experiences and fostering students' self-understanding as a way of

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coping with critical incidents in practice (Craft, 2005; Schuessler, Wilder, & Byrd, 2012). Reflective journaling can also be an opportunity to reflect consciously about clinical events, to evaluate past choices and to identify learning needs (Williams, Gerardi, Gill, Soucy, & Taliaferro, 2009). These are only possible if students are given opportunities to think critically about their practical experiences in a context that opens up new perspectives, understandings and knowledge (Forneris & Peden-McAlpine, 2007; Williams et al., 2009).

For students in exchange programmes, reflective journaling can be a useful tool for developing critical thinking skills, cultural sensitivity and cultural competence (Larson, Ott, & Miles, 2010; Schuessler et al., 2012). “Cultural sensitivity serves as a foundation for the development of cultural competence and focuses on the affective elements necessary to appreciating differences” (Hughes & Hood, 2007, p. 57). Campinha-Bacote’s (2002) model for understanding cultural competence includes a five-construct process including cultural awareness, knowledge, skills, encounters and desire. 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). In addition, Dudas (2012) identified three dimensions of cultural competence: awareness, attitudes and behavior.

Students who have a clinical placement in a developing country often experience strong emotions (e.g., fear, shock, frustration, powerlessness and sympathy) and engage in an ongoing comparison between the conditions in their host and home countries (Egenes, 2012; Sandin & Grahn, 2004). Their time abroad also contributes to personal and professional development (Green, Johansson, Rosser, Tengnah, & Segrott, 2008; Kelleher, 2013) and an increased interest in global health policy and a desire to “do something” for those who suffer (Callister & Cox, 2006; Greatrex-White, 2008). A study among Swedish exchange students highlighted these differences when describing ethical dilemmas, culture clashes and negative ratings of their experiences (Sandin & Grahn, 2004). A study by Torsvik and Hedlund (2008) comparing Norwegian and Tanzanian nursing students performing clinical placement together over a four-week period in Tanzania revealed major differences. The most significant difference was related to nursing care. Similarly, students from different Western countries (including Norway) on clinical placements in Namibia recognized the differing nursing characteristics and believed that the Namibian nurses provided less psychological care, had less empathy for their patients, were slow in their responses and displayed paternalistic, one-sided communication in the presence of patients (Small & Pretorius, 2010).

Alpers and Hanssen (2014) concluded that adequate cultural knowledge develops through experiences combining formal education, in-service classes, courses, feedback, access to relevant information and reflection on clinical practice. To receive the best learning experience in clinical settings, Edgecombe, Jennings, and Bowden (2013) concluded that there is a need for strategies that strengthen the connections between local and international students and staff, and enhance socialization in different contexts.

The aim of this study was to identify the features that characterized the students’ experiences as reported in their reflecting journals during clinical placements in an African country in light of cultural competence.

2. Methods

Textual analysis was made using 350 reflective journals written by 197 nursing students during their clinical placement in an Africa country between 2003 and 2011. Most students wrote two reflective journals, normally 300–500 words in length and meant

to focus on the student–patient situations experienced by the student. The supervisor collected all the reflective journals electronically and anonymized them. All students participating in an exchange programme from 2003 to 2011 were included in the study. The reflective journals were not identified by country or year. To begin the analysis process, the reflective journals were randomly divided into three piles and assigned to the three researchers.

When we perform textual analysis, we make an educated guess about the most likely interpretations that would be made of the text (McKee, 2003). We used a hermeneutic approach, for which the context of the reflective journals and the researchers’ pre-understanding are considered to be crucial to the analytical process. A four-step content analysis process inspired by Graneheim and Lundman (2004) was used. First, the reflective journals were read through several times to obtain a sense of the whole, and meaning units were identified and condensed into a description close to the text. The condensed meaning units were then abstracted into sub-themes. Next, further discussion between the researchers resulted in agreement on a set of sub-themes. Finally, reflection on the sub-themes and a review of the literature related to the sub-themes provided phenomena that seemed to serve as relevant headings to unify the sub-themes into themes (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004). An example of the analytic process is shown in Table 1. The meaning units often reflected complex meanings; for example, they may reference both comparisons and judgements.

A limitation of the study was that we ignored the detail of which of the three African countries the students were placed in. There are health-care system differences between Botswana, Tanzania and South Africa. However, the aim of the study was not to explore differences between the countries but to obtain broad insight into how students describe their experiences in the clinical placement in an African context in general. The researchers could not determine any pattern specific to country of placement, as all the main findings were consistent across the reflective journals by students in all three host countries.

To achieve trustworthiness, the researchers discussed the sub-themes and themes by sharing excerpts from the reflective journals until they found consensus. In addition, several quotes are presented in the results section.

2.1. Ethical considerations

The students gave voluntary written permission to the researchers to use their reflective journals. They were allowed to withdraw this permission at any time, if they so desired, but no one requested to do so. According to the guidelines of the Norwegian Social Sciences Data Service (NSD), the study did not need ethical approval.

3. Results

The content analysis revealed four main themes, some with several sub-themes: (i) presentation of personal emotions (frustration, sadness, anger, stress, happiness and gratitude), (ii) judgement of others (actions and attitudes), (iii) comparisons between Norwegian and African conditions (professional, economic and organizational) and (iv) descriptions of own practice (actions and attitudes) or lack of practice.

3.1. Presentation of personal emotions

Many students experienced strong emotional reactions during their sojourn. In addition to emotions connected with normal nursing practice, they experienced large numbers of deaths and seriously ill AIDS patients. They experienced death of newborn

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