



## Collaborative learning in gerontological clinical settings: The students' perspective



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### ABSTRACT

This study deals with student nurses' experiences of collaborative learning in gerontological clinical settings where aged people are involved as age-experts in students' learning processes. The data were collected in 2012 using the contents of students' reflective writing assignments concerning elderly persons' life history interviews and the students' own assessments of their learning experiences in authentic elder care settings. The results, analyzed using qualitative content analysis, revealed mostly positive learning experiences. Interaction and collaborative learning activities in genuine gerontological clinical settings contributed to the students' understanding of the multiple age-related and disease-specific challenges as well as the issues of functional decline that aged patients face. Three types of factors influenced the students' collaborative learning experiences in gerontological clinical settings: student-related, patient-related and learning environment-related factors. According to the results, theoretical studies in combination with collaboration, in an authentic clinical environment, by student nurses, elderly patients, representatives of the elder care staff and nurse educators provide a feasible method for helping students transform their experiences with patients into actual skills. Their awareness of and sensitivity to the needs of the elderly increase as they learn.

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### Introduction

The population in the EU is growing progressively older. According to demographic statistics, in 2014, 19.4 percent of Finland's population were over 65; seniors above that age are expected to account for 24.4 percent of the population of Finland by 2040 (Eurostat, 2014). Due to these demographic changes, an increasing number of aged people with multiple chronic conditions will require new treatments and care delivery models. We may expect a shift from primary care in hospitals to primary care closer to home. Simultaneously, the health care sector will experience significant reductions in workforce through retirement, and the number of young recruits is not sufficient to replace those who leave. The elder care sector is compelled to compete with other health care sectors as well as with employers in other fields to entice the younger generations who are making their career choices (European Commission, 2012).

To meet these upcoming challenges in elder care, we call for nursing education and practice to develop educational collaboratives so that we may make gerontological nursing more popular

among student nurses. Such collaborative partnerships can decrease the gap between theoretical education and practical work: they provide opportunities to share ideas and create supportive environments for the sharing of knowledge, leading to mutual benefits that could not be obtained by any party alone. This means a shift from traditional education methods to broader learning communities that engage students, clinical staff, educators, clients and patients. These parties become members of teaching teams that enable both students and professionals to develop a greater understanding of the real lives of their clients and patients (Nabavi et al., 2012; Towle et al., 2010). These kinds of collaborative partnerships also mean that, instead of merely being passive recipients of health care upon whom students practice their technical skills, clients and patients become involved in nursing education as active participants so that they may support the students' positive learning outcomes (Koskinen et al., 2012; Suikkala, 2007).

This study was conducted in one of the 23 polytechnics in Finland, in which nursing education is provided under European Union directives 2005/36/EC and 2013/55/EC (European Commission, 2005, 2013). Each polytechnic is allowed a high degree of independence in designing and implementing nursing curricula; therefore, gerontological nursing is taught either as an independent course or integrated into other courses. Clinical placement in gerontological nursing is, however, obligatory for all student nurses and they are

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required to take at least one practical training period in this demanding and complex setting during their studies.

The aim of this study is to describe the participating student nurses' experiences of collaborative learning in gerontological clinical settings where older people are involved as age-experts participating in the students' learning processes. The research questions were:

1. What are student nurses' experiences of collaborative learning in gerontological clinical settings?
2. What factors are associated with students' collaborative learning experiences in gerontological clinical settings?

This study adopts the view of collaborative learning that learning takes place in mutual, collaborative relationships among students, aged patients, staff nurses and educators. Such learning is based on respect of one another's experiences and expertise, and it is likely to lead to benefits for all parties involved (Suikkala, 2007). The ultimate goal of collaborative learning is to improve the students' skills so that they meet elderly patients' health needs better. Another goal of collaborative learning is to interest students in working collaboratively with patients in the context of elder care in the future.

## Background

The demands of health care in the 21st century call for nurses who are prepared to meet the needs of the increasing number of people disabled due to age and the prevalence of chronic illnesses (World Health Organization, 2011). However, elder care has been perceived to have a low status within the field of nursing. The reasons that students give for not preferring careers in elder care bring out stereotypes of old people, ageism and paternalistic attitudes. In addition, students express the view that elder care would require limited skills and that the field would offer only few opportunities for professional development (Clendon, 2011; Hayes et al., 2006; Henderson et al., 2008; Kloster et al., 2007; Koh, 2012). Nevertheless, many graduating students do not exclude the possibility of working in the field later in their careers (Koskinen et al., 2012; Rogan and Wyllie, 2003).

According to Kloster et al. (2007) a greater desire to work with older people seems to be associated with students considering it meaningful to work with older people and enjoying the company of older people. Such students are aware of the challenges in elder care and wish to take responsibility and meet these challenges. Exposures to gerontological nursing settings have been found to be important as they present opportunities for positive learning experiences and reciprocal collaborative relationships. Authentic encounters such as discussions about the lives and caring experiences of elderly people increase students' knowledge, skills and sensitivity. Students will need all these when they encounter aged patients who have a range of biopsychosocial needs (Celik et al., 2010; Rejeh et al., 2011). It is also worth noting that elderly patients have been interested in participating in students' learning. Aged patients have been pleased with enhanced opportunities to interact socially with students and have been happy to receive the help and assistance from students to increase their level of comfort (Mossop and Wilkinson, 2006).

Gerontological nursing education, when taught through dedicated courses, has a positive impact on students' interest in elder care (Koskinen et al., 2012; Rogan and Wyllie, 2003). Furthermore, clinical training plays an enormous role in the development of students' perception of elder care. It is a common practice in nursing education to place first-year student nurses in aged-care institutions that provide long-term care for individuals of the

ages of 65 and over. In these placements, students may begin to develop their basic nursing skills at a relatively slow pace, benefitting from an environment that is more stable and less threatening than acute care settings. However, the students may not yet possess the knowledge and skills they would need to meet successfully the challenges of elder care (Banning et al., 2006; Hayes et al., 2006). These early encounters with aged patients together with students' limited supervised experiences of the person-centered approach threaten students' idealism; in addition, these early experiences are incongruent with the values of care as such and, more specifically, patient-centered care, which are put forth in theoretical studies (Alabaster, 2007). These experiences can cause feelings of frustration and powerlessness among students (Kloster et al., 2007) and direct them from planned person-centered encounters with patients to routine tasks instead (Clendon, 2011; Skaalvik et al., 2010).

The perceived poor image of elder care and the lack of excitement associated with non-acute nursing will continue to impact students' career preferences unless attitudes are changed and the competence requirements of elder care are highlighted in nursing education (Hayes et al., 2006; Koh, 2012). Students' interest in working in the field of gerontological nursing is enhanced by high quality gerontological nursing by enthusiastic nurses who act as role models and facilitators as well as by the good team spirit often found in clinical environments (Banning et al., 2006; Koskinen et al., 2012). Furthermore, nursing education should place greater emphasis on educational content and learning activities that guide students from task-orientation toward a deeper understanding of their patients, facilitating the development of their conceptualization of nursing care as responsive to the individual needs of elderly people (Henderson et al., 2008). It is possible to put aged patients' voices at the core of the education of student nurses by using collaborative partnerships between the educational and elder care sectors. Such partnerships provide opportunities for students to use their interactive skills and to collaborate to meet the actual wishes and needs expressed by their aged patients (Suikkala, 2007; Xiao et al., 2008).

## Methods

### *Study setting and participants*

The educational trial in our study focused on the practical, collaborative partnerships entered by a polytechnic as a key strategy for creating shared learning opportunities for participants. The educational trial was implemented in spring and autumn 2012 as part of a 10-ECTS theoretical course on gerontological nursing in a polytechnic in Finland. The curriculum specified person-centered care of elderly patients, highlighting the meaning and significance of knowing one's aged patients and connecting with aged people, and the promotion of aged patients' participation and functional ability. Theoretical studies were not confined to the classroom or the internet but instead they were organized using a combination of theory and clinical activity, and implemented in genuine gerontological settings. The main objective of this combined solution was to make the content of elder care visible within nursing studies. Students were offered interactive, collaborative learning experiences through their meeting with elderly people. The expertise of staff nurses and nursing teachers contributed to the integration of theory and practice. The goal was to boost students' confidence in order to make them able to encounter unique elderly patients instead of simply carrying out routines. The objective of the trial was to enhance elder care studies to make them more attractive to students.

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