



Complementary knowledge sharing: Experiences of nursing students participating in an educational exchange program between Madagascar and Norway



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ABSTRACT

Aim and Objectives: To describe how Malagasy and Norwegian nursing students experience an educational exchange program in Madagascar.

Background: Previous studies show that nursing students participating in an educational exchange program enhanced their cultural knowledge and experienced personal growth. However, few studies have described two-way exchange programs, including experiences from both the hosts' and the guest students' perspectives.

Design: This study applies a descriptive qualitative design.

Methods: Data were collected in 2015 by means of five semi-structured interviews with Malagasy students and two focus group interview sessions with Norwegian students. They were analysed using qualitative content analysis. The study was conducted in Madagascar.

Findings: The data analyses revealed one main theme and two sub-themes related to the Malagasy and Norwegian nursing students' experiences. Main theme: complementary knowledge sharing; sub-themes: (1) learning from each other and (2) challenges of working together.

Conclusion: The findings indicate that both the Malagasy and Norwegian nursing students experienced the exchange program as valuable and essential in exchanging knowledge. They also highlighted challenges, linked mainly to language barriers and the lack of available resources.

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1. Introduction

The main purpose of the present study is to describe and discuss the Malagasy and Norwegian nursing students' experiences participating in a two-way exchange program in Madagascar.

Exchange programs and cross-cultural clinical experiences offer an exciting opportunity to raise nursing students' cultural and global awareness. Previous studies have revealed that nursing students who have participated in international exchange programs have gained valuable knowledge about cultural competences and various ways of practicing nursing (Button et al. 2004, Ruddock & Turner 2007, Torsvik & Hedlund 2008, Hagen et al. 2009, Kokko 2011, Kulbok et al. 2012). It is also suggested that exchange programs can lead to personal growth, which includes increased levels of self-reliance and self-confidence. Moreover, other studies have reported barriers to such exchange programs such as cultural differences, the perceived stress of living in a

foreign country and language differences (Greatrex-White 2008, Smit and Tremethick, 2014).

As far as can be seen from the literature, only few studies have examined how the host and guest students experience participation in two-way exchange programs, which means that the students' voices need to be heard (Torsvik & Hedlund 2008, Hagen et al. 2009, Kulbok et al. 2012). More knowledge on students' experiences with such exchange programs is therefore needed.

2. The Two-way Exchange Program

Both Madagascar and Norway offer education in nursing. A Norwegian university and a Norwegian university college, together with a three-year diploma program in nursing and a hospital in Madagascar, have signed an agreement to allow nursing students to undertake clinical placement periods of one to three months in hospitals and/or community-care facilities during the nursing program. The intent of the agreement is to enable the exchange of knowledge in a mutually beneficial collaboration based on equality.

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The cultures and socio-economic conditions of Madagascar and Norway differ extensively. Madagascar is the fourth largest island in the world; it is located in the Indian Ocean, 250 miles off the southeast coast of Africa. It has a population of 22,925,000, a gross national income per capita of USD 1 and a life expectancy of 63 years and 66 years for males and females, respectively. Norway is located in the north of Europe, with a total population of 5,043,000, a gross national income per capita of USD 66 and a life expectancy of 80 years and 84 years for males and females, respectively (World Health Organization 2015).

In Madagascar, there are diploma, bachelor and master programs in nursing. Programs run by the Malagasy Lutheran Nursing Schools, the Catholic Church and the government are approved by the Ministry of Health, but there is no national nursing curriculum (Plager & Razaonandrianina 2009). The diploma programs in nursing in both Madagascar and Norway include theoretical and practical studies. In Madagascar, the curriculum is delivered in French, and the nursing students speak French and Malagasy in school; in Norway, the nursing bachelor program is regulated by a national curriculum and is delivered in Norwegian (Rammeplan for sykepleierutdanning 2008).

Nursing students at the participating Norwegian university and university college have, in their third year of studies, the opportunity to participate in two-way exchange programs. This mainly includes three-month clinical hospital and community-care placements in different countries, Madagascar being one of the options. The Malagasy nursing students have different clinical placement periods compared to the Norwegian students, which means they do not always have the opportunity to work together with the Norwegian students in the hospital wards or the community-care facility. During the clinical placement periods, both the Norwegian and Malagasy nursing students have to follow the learning outcomes defined in their respective curriculums.

One purpose of the program is to exchange knowledge, meaning that knowledge is developed through interactions, and not only through individual processes. This is emphasised in the socio-cultural perspective on learning, where learning is viewed as a result of an individual's participation in activities with others and in a cultural context. A central element of the activity constitutes determining what is possible to learn, and that communication with others is essential (Dysthe 2001). Learning and cognitive development is thus dependent on the individual's participation in practices where development takes place (Wenger 1998).

3. The Study

3.1. Aim

The aim of this study is to describe how the Malagasy and Norwegian nursing students experienced participating in the two-way exchange program.

3.2. Design

This study follows a qualitative, descriptive design including focus group interviews and semi-structured interviews. The data were collected in Madagascar over the course of two weeks in 2015.

3.3. Participants

The study population comprised eighteen nursing students: eleven from Norway and seven from Madagascar. The recruited Norwegian students underwent a three-month clinical placement in a hospital and a community-care facility in Madagascar. This selection process followed a strategy of convenient sampling (Polit & Beck 2012). Seven students came from a university and four from a university college in Norway. The seven Malagasy nursing students were recruited from a nursing school in Madagascar. This selection process followed a strategy of purposeful sampling (Polit & Beck 2012). The dean of the nursing

school, who was familiar with the project, selected the Malagasy nursing students. All students from both countries agreed to participate in the study.

At the time of data collection, seven of the Norwegian students were halfway through their three-month clinical placement period, and four students were at the end of the exchange program. Since we aimed to explore the guest and host students' experiences of the exchange program, we included participants who had experienced working together during their clinical placement in the hospital ward. The experience from the community-care facility was not included, since the Norwegian and Malagasy students did not work there together during this clinical placement period. Seven of the Norwegian students had worked with Malagasy students for between one and three weeks. Four students did not have this experience, but were included in the focus group interviews to obtain their views about the exchange program. Two of the Malagasy students were excluded from the study since they did not have any experience of working with the foreign students. The remaining five had worked for between one week and one month with different groups of foreign student nurses who conducted their clinical placement in the hospital ward. Moreover, good proficiency in French was considered as an additional selection criteria for the Malagasy students (Gray 2014).

3.4. Ethical Considerations

We obtained permission to conduct the study from the management of the nursing schools in both Madagascar and Norway. Information, in both French and Norwegian, which outlined the purpose, scope, content, confidentiality and practicalities of the study was provided to the participants before the interviews started, both orally and in writing. Participants were informed that their participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw from the study at any time. All participants signed letters of consent.

3.5. Data Collection

The first author collected data through focus group interviews with the Norwegian students and individual interviews with the Malagasy students. As recommended in qualitative research, two qualitative methods were selected to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the students' experiences of the exchange program (Polit & Beck 2012). Due to the culture in Madagascar, individual interviews were considered the best way to collect data from the Malagasy students.

The participants in the focus group interviews were divided into two groups: one group had seven nursing students and the other had four. The first author conducted the interviews and moderated the discussions by means of a semi-structured interview guide. The literature emphasises that focus group interviews should have two people moderating the discussions, but this was not possible since the first author was the only author present in Madagascar at the time of data collection (Polit & Beck 2012).

The interviews, which were based on a semi-structured interview guide, included questions regarding the students' expectations and experiences of participating in the exchange program, and what they considered as the essential contributions of the exchange program. Additional specific follow-up questions were asked to obtain descriptions of possible positive and negative aspects of the program. The first author, by employing the same semi-structured interview guide as used in the focus group interviews, collected data from the Malagasy nursing students through individual interviews. All interviews were conducted in French. One local translator who spoke French, English and Malagasy was present during every interview.

The focus group interviews and the individual interviews opened with an introduction, a presentation by the participants and an oral explanation about the purpose of the study, confidentiality and practicalities. It was emphasised that we wanted to hear their experiences, and

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