Home students' experiences of intercultural learning: A qualitative descriptive design

Brid O'Brien[a,*], Dympna Tuohy[b], Anne Fahy[b], Kathleen Markey[b]

[a] Department of Nursing and Midwifery, Health Sciences Building, University of Limerick, Limerick, Ireland
[b] University of Limerick, Ireland

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ABSTRACT

Background: Higher education institutes are witnessing an increase in the cultural and ethnic diversity of their student population. While this adds to the learning experience, there is a dearth of evidence examining how students on nursing programmes, from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds learn with and from each other. There is need for a greater understanding of the factors that both facilitate and inhibit intercultural learning within the classroom.
Objectives: This study explored the perceptions and experiences of home students on a postgraduate nursing programme, of intercultural learning within the classroom.
Design: A qualitative descriptive design was used.
Settings: Home students enrolled on a suite of postgraduate nursing programmes in one region of Ireland who were registered for co-scheduled modules with international students, were recruited to participate on a voluntary basis.
Participants: Fourteen home students (13 females and 1 male) were purposively sampled.
Methods: Data were collected using digitally recorded one to one semi-structured interviews (ten 'face to face' and four telephone). Data were thematically analysed using a modified version of Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework.
Results: This study describes the value of intercultural learning in the classroom and draws attention to some of the challenges experienced by home students. Furthermore, it highlights the importance of exploring similarities, whilst respecting differences in prior educational experiences, learning styles and cultural backgrounds. The overarching theme, *Navigating intercultural learning* describes home students' experiences of *developing awareness*, *connecting* and *sharing cultural knowledge*.
Conclusions: Intercultural learning takes time and requires commitment, emphasising the need for careful consideration of facilitation techniques, preparation, support and planning pedagogies that encourage effective intercultural learning. The findings make a valuable contribution to existing knowledge on internationalising nurse education, specifically with regards to intercultural relations and the perceptions and experiences of teaching and learning in intercultural classrooms.

1. Background

The need for increasing student mobility and internationalising curricula, whilst meeting the quality learning experiences of all students is a key priority for Higher Education Institutions. Universities are witnessing an increasing growth of cultural and ethnic diversity amongst the student population due to the growth of diversity within societies (Vertovec, 2007) and the expansion of international education policy (European Commission, 2013; Department of Education and Skills, 2016). The challenges associated with providing quality education experiences for both home and international students have been reported (Akalu, 2016). Schartner (2015) calls for the examination of learning and teaching approaches that will meet the different learning needs and programme expectations of an increasingly diverse student population. Furthermore, the lack of consistency within the existing evidence on how best this can occur, highlights the need for further research in the area. Although evidence supporting the value of internationalising curricula is growing (Shaw et al., 2015; Garone and Van De Craen, 2017; Chan et al., 2017), there is limited research exploring how students from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds

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* Corresponding author.
E-mail addresses: brid.obrien@ul.ie (B. O'Brien), kathleen.markey@ul.ie (K. Markey).

learn with and relate to each other in the postgraduate nursing class-room.

Intercultural learning is a process whereby students from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds learn with and from each other, developing a greater insight and understanding of different cultures. The essence of intercultural learning is providing space for learning about and understanding one's own and other cultures, whilst providing opportunities for intercultural interaction (Hollinderbaumer et al., 2013; Chan et al., 2017). The benefits of intercultural learning are widely reported (Lee et al., 2014; Ciftci, 2016; Brown et al., 2016; Chan et al., 2017) but the learning experiences of home students in the culturally diverse classroom, has received less attention. Communicating effectively and appropriately with people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds is essential in today's multicultural healthcare setting (McCarthy et al., 2013). The challenges for educators in preparing student nurses to competently practice in culturally appropriate ways are widely reported (Tuohy et al., 2008; Markey et al., 2018a). Unfortunately, there is a dearth of evidence on the effectiveness of teaching and learning strategies in intercultural classrooms as a means of preparing nurses for cross-cultural encounters. Whilborg et al. (2018) argue that internationalisation for all students warrants further attention regarding support, collaboration and learning.

This study explored the perceptions and experiences of students' on postgraduate nursing programmes of learning within an intercultural classroom. Phase 1 of this study explored international students' experiences of learning in the intercultural classroom (Markey et al., 2018b). This paper reports on phase 2 of this study, which explored perceptions of home students co-scheduled on modules with international students. For the purposes of this study and consistent with other studies on intercultural learning, 'home students' is defined based on nationality and as citizens or lawful permanent residents of Ireland.

2. Methods

A qualitative descriptive approach informed by Sandelowski (2010), was utilised to explore home students' descriptions of their experiences of learning with international students. This design is gaining popularity in nurse education and practice research (O'Brien et al., 2016; Chan et al., 2017; Markey et al., 2018b), in providing a straight forward description of phenomena. Its strength is its ability to provide a comprehensive description of individuals' experiences, facilitating a greater understanding of the area being explored (O'Brien et al., 2017). The research question for this study is: What are the experiences of home students on a postgraduate nursing programme, of intercultural learning within the classroom?

2.1. Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was granted by the University Faculty Research Ethics Committee (EHSREC 2013-11-17). The voluntary nature of involvement was emphasised and potential volunteers were informed that they could withdraw at any time without any repercussions. Confidentiality and anonymity was assured; data was anonymised and no identifiers were used in the final report. Only the named researchers had data access. Electronic data (password protected) and hard copy data were stored and managed in accordance with Data Protection Guidelines (Data Protection Commissioner, 2014). Interviews were conducted by researchers who did not teach or assess participants' academic work. Participants' rights were protected and safeguarded against any possible risks arising from their participation in this research. None were envisaged, but it was acknowledged that this topic could be a sensitive area. Therefore, in agreement with the University's Counselling Services, information on these services would be provided should a participant become upset and require further support. This was not required.

Table 1
Interview guide.

Opening question
Tell me about your experience of teaching and learning within an intercultural classroom.
Prompts included
Positive aspects and challenges
Personal and professional development
Advice that you would offer to other learners
Ways of enhancing intercultural learning?
Concluding questions
Is there anything else that you would like to add?

2.2. Data Collection and Analysis

A purposive sample (n-14) of home students studying on a postgraduate nursing programme where modules were co-scheduled with international students was obtained. Purposive sampling refers to participants recruited to a study because of their experience or knowledge of the research area (Moule and Goodman, 2017). An electronic information poster advertised the study and an invitation email was circulated requesting volunteers. Students were free to choose to volunteer or not.

Data were collected using digitally recorded one to one semi-structured interviews (ten 'face to face' and four telephone) and were transcribed verbatim with permission from students. Field notes were written immediately after each interview. Interviews took place at a time and venue convenient for the participant and lasted between 15 and 40 min. Open-ended questions, prompts and probes facilitated the discussions (Table 1). Participants had the option to verify that their verbatim interview transcript was a true and accurate recording of the interview but none availed of this opportunity. Data collection was completed once all students who volunteered to partake in the study were interviewed.

Data were thematically analysed using a modified version of Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework. Initially two researchers independently listened to and read the transcripts. Following this and working together, both coded the initial themes within two of the transcripts. This proved beneficial in ensuring consistency between study aims, data collection, analysis and presentation of findings. Thereafter and working independently of each other, the researchers coded the themes within the remaining twelve transcripts During the penultimate stage, both reviewed and agreed the findings, themes and sub-themes. The write up comprised the final stage. Reflexivity is a crucial aspect of qualitative research and was central to this analysis. Guba and Lincoln's (1989) framework for assessing the creditability, dependability, transferability and confirmability of the findings was used to ensure rigour of the study.

3. Findings

Findings highlight the value of intercultural classroom learning opportunities whilst drawing attention to some of the challenges experienced by the home students. *Navigating intercultural learning* describes home students' experiences of *developing awareness*, *connecting* and *sharing cultural knowledge* (Table 2).

3.1. Theme 1: Developing Awareness

This theme describes students' experiences of *nurturing self-awareness* whilst *acknowledging differences* both in academic expectations and culturally. Students appreciated the opportunities to think about their own cultural identity, norms and heritage and described how the intercultural classroom prompted such thoughts. However, students described how developing this self-awareness was unexpected and not always part of the curriculum or explicit learning objectives.

Table 2
Findings presented as themes and subthemes.

Navigating intercultural learning		
Developing awareness	Connecting	Sharing cultural knowledge
• Nurturing self- awareness • Acknowledging differences	• Sharing similar goals • Negotiating through learning activities	• Learning from others • Learning about others

…I learned about myself and my own culture, which is something I hadn't expected. I was surprised how much I gained from hearing others [students] which helped me think more about myself and my beliefs (P 6).

Listening to nurses who were educated and had practiced in other countries was valued. However, many students viewed practices and behaviours of internationally educated nurses through a Eurocentric lens, failing to acknowledge similarities and respecting differences between healthcare structures and practices.

I was shocked with the level of understanding and experiences in practice of international students in comparison to our own (P8).

The majority of students had been unaware of their ethnocentric attitudes and views and a greater self-awareness occurred through sharing of experiences and views.

I wasn't aware of my wider opinions and how they impacted on me when coming into contact with people from different nationalities. The programme and learning with international students has helped me to think about them more (P6).

However, in the absence of facilitated opportunities to explore such opinions in any depth, some students perceived their nursing knowledge, expertise and levels of competence to be superior to those of international students. As a result, ethnocentric attitudes were not always effectively explored and in some cases were reinforced.

Most of us are quite senior nurses with in-depth understanding and awareness of our role and it transpires that many of the international students do not have a lot of experience or expertise (P7).

Students described how the intercultural classroom encouraged them to think about differences within cultures, learning expectations and nursing experiences.

International and Irish students are at two different levels in terms of where they have come from [professional preparedness] and their general cultural beliefs and customs (P8).

Although there are diverse learning needs and varying levels of practical and academic experiences within any classroom, students in this study focused more on the differences between home and international students. Some discussed these differences in terms of knowledge, understanding and experiences in clinical practice.

I felt their knowledge was at a different level to ours. It appeared as if it was the first time that they had discussed topic like primary care, they didn't really understand (P12).

Others described the differences in terms of expectations from the programme and different levels of commitment to learning, development and engagement.

Culturally we had different expectations of college and what was expected of us in class (P14).

However many of these views were underpinned by ethnocentric ideologies of knowledge, understanding and expectations.

As a result, misunderstandings and tensions sometimes occurred, which went un-noticed or overlooked by lecturers.

They didn't seem to understand the expectations when giving presentations. Sometimes they were disrespectful during the group presentations but the lecturers didn't do anything. I don't know if they really cared that we were trying to give presentations or simply just didn't understand the importance of listening (P1).

3.2. Theme 2: Connecting

Connecting describes participants perceptions of the importance of finding mutual similarities and the benefits of having *shared similar goals* to succeed on their programme through *negotiating learning activities*. Sharing the same goal to succeed and do well in their academic endeavours helped form connections, grow relationships and friendships.

With time, I didn't notice any differences between students, we were all there to learn. Working and learning together is a norm for us now (P13).

Participants described the value of structured and facilitated learning activities which particularly encouraged discussions between and within cultural groupings.

We actually had a discussion in class, on one of the topics within the presentations which was about marriage. It was so interesting and they were sharing experiences about their culture (P3).

Engagement helped ease the discomfort of not fully understanding cultural differences, helping students focus less on differences and more on commonalities.

I became relaxed over time as I stopped over reviewing things and looked more at ways at looking for commonalities and connecting (P5).

This engagement helped students appreciate the importance of respecting differences between and amongst all students and cultural groupings.

Respect is key and we had that in our group and even if things were a little bit frustrating at times we stayed calm and respectful (P9).

Learning and teaching activities that encouraged sharing of beliefs, opinions and experiences helped create a greater understanding, respect and empathy for cultural difference, which helped address stereotypical perspectives.

We did individual presentations….it was good to get insight into the different cultures perspectives. When you actually met and spoke with them you got a bigger picture (P2).

However, the need for appropriate preparation, ground rule setting and skilled facilitation was identified:

I think you need to be careful, if you are teaching in a multicultural classroom that everybody is actually on the same wavelength and that can be quite difficult for the person delivering the lecture (P4).

Despite the diversity within the classroom, students from similar nationalities and cultural backgrounds clustered together.

I noticed the Indian students stuck together and the Irish students did the same (P6).

Clustering in monocultural groupings was not intentional but were often the result of students feeling pressurised to achieve their academic objectives, but intercultural learning was perceived as not relevant to achieving these objectives.

We were so occupied with ourselves and our academic work that we didn't mingle. They may have felt that they weren't wanted. We didn't intend that to happen but we'd be talking within the class about our own assignments and that mattered to us (P3).

When intercultural grouping were allocated during group activities, this helped break down some of the potential barriers that were perceived.

Maybe we all kept a little bit to ourselves. But we had a class where we had to mix and that was good as we got to know each other (P2).

3.3. Theme 3: Sharing Cultural Knowledge

This theme describes how students recognise the value of *learning from* and *learning about* students from diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds in the safety of a classroom setting. The benefits of hearing students share their experiences about different healthcare structures, healthcare beliefs and cultural norms was acknowledged.

It is imperative that every student experience intercultural learning, especially as we are progressing to a multicultural society. It helps us to think about differences in healthcare and gain insights about different cultures (P3).

Having opportunities to discuss cultural and religious norms was seen as valuable to gaining insights and developing cultural knowledge.

There was good intercultural learning because you learned about different cultures, practices and challenges. It is very interesting (P8).

Sharing these experiences was mutually beneficial for developing culturally sensitive attitudes, practices and behaviours.

I shared information about practice with the Finnish girl….hearing other student experiences was so important….it was different in the classroom because it enabled looking at things from the other side (P6).

This helped reduce some of the uneasiness and uncertainty with not knowing how to act or behave during cross-cultural encounters, which can be mirrored in clinical practice.

…hearing about their experiences, diets and religion, made me more understanding of patients that I may be looking after from other countries rather than reading it through books or hearing it on the radio (P1).

The following quote illuminates the significance of sharing nursing experiences and facilitating exchange of knowledge about issues from global perspectives. Being able to compare and contrast healthcare systems was seen to be particularly valuable.

The positives was hearing things like, diabetes care in Saudi Arabia and the comparative aspects of the healthcare systems (P8).

However, learning and engagement happened in the context of formal classroom learning, with fewer opportunities to meet outside of classroom time.

We didn't meet outside of class as we were only in college one day a week and there was a lot of to do with class work (P1).

Developing cultural knowledge through hearing and learning about experiences of nurses from different cultural and religious backgrounds was seen as a particular strength of intercultural classrooms. The following discussion highlights the value of such learning in preparing nurses to care for patients from different cultures in clinical practice.

4. Discussion

In capturing the perceptions and experiences of home students' individual and collaborative learning with international students, factors that enabled and hindered intercultural learning are identified. Hearing international students' share their experiences assisted home students to appreciate other cultures, their clinical practices and health care systems, which is consistent with the literature (Lee et al., 2014). Students described how this encouraged them to think about their own cultural beliefs and values, which arguably is the cornerstone for intercultural competence development (Taylor et al., 2013). Similar to Chan et al. (2017), the focus on differences with cultural norms, academic ability and learning styles, resulted in limiting intercultural student interaction and engagement. The ethnocentric ideologies concerning knowledge, competence and academic ability that went un-noticed, presented a further barrier to intercultural engagement and learning. Students had not considered the impact of their own attitudes on their relationship with students from different cultures. In the absence of facilitated opportunities to explore such opinions, ethnocentric attitudes went un-challenged and sometimes even reinforced. Although others have highlighted the value of developing cultural awareness in the intercultural learning environment (Brown et al., 2016; Whilborg et al., 2018), this study highlights that an over focus on differences in educational and cultural backgrounds can reinforce stereotypes and ethnocentricities, thus minimising inclusive intercultural learning. There is a need to bring students with different learning needs and from diverse cultural and educational backgrounds to a common ground, before meaningful intercultural learning can occur.

Intercultural learning does not occur automatically and takes time, emphasising the need for careful consideration of facilitation techniques and pedagogies that support the development of an increasingly diverse student population. Although this is echoed by others (Hammer, 2012; Harrowing et al., 2012; Lee et al., 2014), the need to acknowledge and address ethnocentrism in learning and teaching is an area that requires further consideration. Hollinderbaumer et al. (2013) define intercultural learning as the development of an understanding and appreciation of one's own culture and that of others. However, the findings of this study questions how this can occur in reality if ethnocentric ideologies are not sensitively addressed and intercultural learning opportunities are not strategically planned and appropriately facilitated. Exploring what is perceived as acceptable in academic ability, cultural norms and nursing practice and how 'normality' might differ in other contexts, within and across cultures, is particularly important. An exploration of individual identity and how it has been shaped is required, as a means of remaining open to new learning opportunities.

Home students more by circumstance than specific choice were exposed to intercultural learning as they had not made a conscious decision to enrol in an intercultural programme. Therefore, they had to get to know their fellow students, achieve learning and academic requirements, and acclimatise to an intercultural learning environment. Although, the value of being assigned intracultural group work was acknowledged, this rarely happened. It is not surprising that students clustered into their monocultural groupings as they felt more comfortable interacting with 'their own'. Although there are debates within the literature about enforcing intercultural groupings during group work (Lafraya, 2012; Shaw et al., 2015; Rankin and Brown, 2016; Markey et al., 2018b), this study highlights that overtime, this happened more naturally. Tensions and conflict arise from group work (Rankin and Brown, 2016) which can escalate when there are cultural differences, therefore the need to sensitively manage group work in meeting the individual and collective needs of learners, is important.

Over time, learning activities encouraged students to connect with other students and work to a common goal. In this context, the common goal was the commitment and desire to succeed on their programme of study. Identifying commonality and having a mutual goal encouraged

intercultural communication, learning and collaboration, albeit out of commitment to succeed as opposed to developing intercultural competence. It is argued that having acknowledged one's differences, students were then able to 'settle', relax and recognise what was common and similar. This is not unlike the 'sense of safety' when students relaxed with each other, as identified in Chan et al. (2017). The need for 'being connected' (Rankin and Brown, 2016) allows a sense of ease and confidence during student engagement and when this occurs meaningful collaborative learning occurs more naturally. In this way, the process of intercultural learning for this group mirrored the stages of group development of forming, storming, norming, performing and adjourning (Balzer-Riley, 2017). However, at times this goal to succeed took precedence over availing of the intercultural learning opportunities available, raising questions about the value placed on intercultural learning in curriculum design and development.

This study highlights the importance of exploring similarities whilst respecting differences in prior educational experiences, learning styles and cultural backgrounds to enable effective intercultural learning. Although Rankin and Brown (2016) highlight the importance of developing 'learning to learn' approaches across programmes, this study draws attention to the importance of learning to appreciate diversity and valuing intercultural learning opportunities. However, the skills required to facilitate diverse learning needs across cultures is sometimes underestimated (Markey et al., 2018b). Exploring attitudes, practices and behaviours in a safe, non-judgmental environment, where both students and facilitators are not afraid of feeling uncomfortable, can create a greater awareness of the value of intercultural learning. This should help address taken-for-granted ways of thinking, generate new attitudes and opinions, whilst developing a deeper level of awareness and commitment to equity and respect. Hammer (2012) and Harrowing et al. (2012) question the effectiveness of intercultural learning, if attention is not given to facilitation strategies and skills. Students and faculty need preparation and support in exploring sensitive issues and incorporating intercultural engagement in day-to-day learning and teaching activities.

There was an appreciation that over time cultural knowledge can be enhanced through intercultural encounters and engagement in the classrooms. Students described the value they placed on learning from and about students from different cultures, however similar to Chan et al. (2017), this focused on cultural specific knowledge. Interestingly, there was little emphasis placed on the need to understand themselves as well as the way in which they create relationships with people from other cultures. Cultural knowledge alone does not ensure sensitivity; however a lack of knowledge can contribute to insensitive attitudes and behaviours (McAllister, 2015; Markey et al., 2018a). This study highlights the need for learning and teaching approaches that extend beyond development of cultural specific knowledge in isolation, but does not dismiss the value of such information. Although, Chan et al. (2017) describes the value of reflection in making sense of intercultural learning experiences, this study highlights the importance of exploring ethnocentricity, as a means of encouraging more meaningful intercultural learning.

5. Implications for Nurse Education and Research

The growing cultural diversity of the student population brings many benefits and challenges. The findings support other research in highlighting the value of bringing a wide range of cultural perspectives to the learning environment. Exploring students' expectations of the learning environment based on prior educational experiences and cultural backgrounds provides foundations for meaningful intercultural engagement. This study draws attention to the need to encourage and embed the values and practice of intercultural engagement in day-to-day learning and teaching activities. The need for reflection on cultural differences, including recognising how different cultural assumptions affect learning and teaching are key for successful intercultural

learning. Students require support in examining the way in which we judge others beliefs, practices and learning behaviours through the lens of our own personal, professional and educational values. However, the preparation and support for both students and faculty to maximize intercultural learning must not be underestimated.

The growth in numbers of ethnic and culturally diverse students engaging in post registration nursing programmes is on the increase. There is a dearth of evidence exploring the perceptions of home students of individual and collaborative learning in the intercultural classroom. The findings report on a small number of home students' experiences' in one region of Ireland. Although the findings may be applicable in other contexts, they are limited to an Irish setting and are therefore not generalisable. Future studies from a national perspective from different target populations such as lecturers' experiences, is warranted. Nonetheless, this study adds to our educational and culturally responsive understandings to internationalisation of the curriculum and has implications for curriculum design, learning and teaching approaches and supports required for students and faculty.

6. Conclusion

This study highlights how the intercultural classroom provides time and space for intercultural dialogue, which is valued by home students. However, these developments sometimes happened coincidently drawing attention to the need to carefully and sensitively plan intercultural learning initiatives through learning and teaching approaches. Attention should focus on developing cultural awareness and exploring ethnocentrism as a means of maximizing the potential of this learning. Encouraging students from different cultural and educational backgrounds to appreciate the similarities and common learning needs for all students, whilst respecting individual differences is essential for the success of intercultural learning. Nonetheless, intercultural learning opportunities were highly valued by home students, but it took time for the importance of it to be acknowledged. The value of maximizing intercultural learning opportunities in the classroom can support students' personal, professional and collaborative learning which can help prepare nurses to care for patients from diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds.

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