

## Brief

# Teaching and Learning Needs of Culturally Diverse Post-R.N. Students

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Malgré la nature multiculturelle de notre pays, les écoles canadiennes de sciences infirmières attirent généralement les femmes blanches de la classe moyenne. La documentation a établi un grand nombre des difficultés que rencontrent les étudiants issus de diverses cultures pour ce qui concerne la façon de s'adapter au programme et comment le terminer. Les raisons de ces difficultés comportent les différences dans les manières d'apprendre, certains étudiants préférant l'apprentissage visuel (Crow, 1993; More, 1989), les différences dans la compétence langagière, surtout pour les étudiants dont l'anglais n'est pas la langue maternelle (Bowker, 1992; Harrison, 1992; Phillips & Hartley, 1990), les différences dans le style de communication (Wax & Thomas, 1961), l'absence de modèle de rôle et de soutien social au sein de leur groupe culturel (Bowker, 1992; Edwards, Smith, & French, 1989; Sedlack, 1983) et un défaut de compréhension de la part du corps enseignant et des autres étudiants pour ce qui a trait à leur mode de vie, leurs antécédents et leurs croyances (Abu-Saad, Kaysar-Jones, & Gutierrez, 1981; Crow, 1993; Harrison, 1992).

Despite the multicultural nature of our country, Canadian schools of nursing have generally attracted white middle-class females. The literature has identified many of the difficulties culturally diverse students experience in coping with and completing their program. The reasons noted for these difficulties include differences in learning styles, with culturally diverse students preferring visual learning (Crow, 1993; More, 1989); differences in language aptitude, particularly for those students whose first language is not English (Bowker, 1992; Harrison, 1992; Phillips & Hartley, 1990); differences in communication style (Wax & Thomas, 1961); lack of role models and social support within their cultural group (Bowker, 1992; Edwards, Smith, & French, 1989; Sedlacek, 1983); and a lack of understanding among faculty and other students regarding their lifestyles, backgrounds, and belief systems (Abu-Saad, Kaysar-Jones, & Gutierrez, 1981; Crow, 1993; Harrison, 1992).

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The purpose of this descriptive study was to explore the individual perceptions of students regarding the teaching/learning environment with a view to gaining insights into the influence of cultural backgrounds on student learning and success. The general research question guiding this exploratory, descriptive study was: "What is the influence of cultural background on students' teaching and learning needs?" For the purposes of this project, learning style was defined as "the characteristic or usual strategies of acquiring knowledge, skills and understanding by an individual" (More, 1989, p. 16). However, learning style also incorporates sensory modes and the physical setting (More). The objective was to ascertain the perceptions of the students regarding the teaching/learning environment.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured, tape-recorded interviews focusing on demographics as well as perceptions and ideas related to the student's culture (e.g., upbringing, lifestyle, and knowledge and practice of cultural traditions) and teaching/learning environment (e.g., learning-style preferences, assistance from university personnel and fellow students, learning goals). The time required for each interview was one to two hours. Thirteen participants were interviewed from our post-R.N. program. Focus-group interview sessions were conducted by both researchers at the conclusion of the data-collection process to provide an opportunity to confirm interpretations and offer additional insights.

A thorough analysis and interpretation of the data included having an auditor read half of the transcripts and discuss the generated data with the investigators (Guba & Lincoln, 1981; Lincoln & Guba, 1985, 1986). The demographic data were tabulated to delineate a descriptive profile of the participants.

### **Findings**

The average participant had completed a two-year college program, was currently enrolled full-time in the first year of the baccalaureate program, and was a female of 33.5 years. The sample comprised four aboriginal persons, two Japanese, two Canadians, one French, one Greek, one Jamaican, and one Bahamian.

Three major themes emerged: (1) role models, (2) teaching/learning, and (3) cultural identities.

**Importance of role models.** Many participants recalled stories about those key individuals who influenced them, with respect to not only education but life in general. Interestingly, grandmothers were noted most frequently as important role models among the culturally diverse participants. The Canadian participants who were Caucasian highlighted the importance of not their grandmothers but their parents. Often, the grandmothers cited as role models had neither formal education nor paid employment, yet they were deemed to be heads of the household as well as central figures in the community. These women were respected in their communities because of their roles and the abilities they displayed. Other individuals identified as role models were aunts or uncles, or, in one case, a registered nurse whom the participant knew. Almost every interview elicited stories of parents defying the odds and succeeding in a society that was predominantly white and in every way culturally alien. In several instances parents had immigrated, learned English, adjusted well to the new cultural milieu, and secured satisfying occupations. Importantly, the parents of all the participants had insisted upon their children succeeding in school.

**Teaching/learning styles.** For all participants, regardless of cultural background, university education was seen as fostering critical thinking and self-directed learning, whereas college education was seen as concentrating on tasks and memorization. Considering the ethnic diversity of the participants, it is interesting to note that very few could speak the language of their parents; particularly surprising is the fact that the four aboriginal participants could not speak their mother tongue. Students preferred a variety of teaching styles; contrary to the findings of other authors (Crow, 1993; More, 1989), there was no confirmation of a preferred learning style based on cultural background.

**Valuing cultural identities.** The last theme was important to the participants both as students and as members of society. Some participants had grown up in a milieu in which they were the ethnic majority and had since moved to a society in which they were a distinct minority. Others were raised in a setting in which their ethnic group was a minority. Many individuals experienced overt and covert racism. For example, one participant related having been called a "wagon burner" as a child, because of her aboriginal ancestry. Another participant commented, "I don't think I appreciated being Japanese when I was younger, because when I was younger everybody wanted to be the same. [It was] 'Oh, I want to be white'." Thus, feeling accepted by society and fellow students is paramount to success in society generally, and in educational institutions specifically.

### Recommendations

The results of this study have a number of implications for the teaching environment, based on the three themes. Since role models were identified as an important aspect of the participants' lives, incorporation of role models into the academic setting would be one option; for example, guest speakers of various ages and from various cultural backgrounds could enhance the teaching environment.

In addition, faculty should demonstrate positive role-model characteristics. Literature by non-Caucasian nurses should be included on reading lists.

The participants in this study indicated a preference for variety in teaching styles. Faculty members must be prepared to learn about the cultural backgrounds of their students and to embrace diverse teaching styles. A number of authors provide examples of teaching styles that have been effective in post-secondary settings (see Adams, 1992; Martin, 1991; Ognibene, 1992).

Finally, all students need to feel comfortable in the classroom environment. Faculty members must acquire the skills to deal with comments or situations that demonstrate overt or covert racism, such as students exhibiting stereotypical or biased behaviour in class. Exercises can be carried out in the classroom setting to help students come to terms with values that differ from their own (see Jackson, 1993; Larke, Wiseman, & Bradley, 1990). Additional strategies to consider include developing buddy systems for students and having social events such as ethnic potluck suppers to alleviate students' sense of isolation and to enhance understanding among groups.

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