This article explores the complexities of the development of Finnish multicultural vocational social care education of the 1990s through reflections of students.

Introduction

The winds of internationalization blew through Finnish educational institutions in the early 1990s as national educational policy increasingly began to emphasize the importance of multicultural perspectives as an essential element of professional competence in a globalized world. Though trendy at the time, there were many different implicit understandings of what the terms ‘multiculturalism’, ‘inter-culturalism’ and ‘internationalization’ meant in practice in Finnish education. Courses that began using these terms in the early years tended to associate the use of a foreign language as the primary language of instruction as equivalent to multiculturalism or internationalization. The target group of the education, as well as qualifications required of teachers, often remained unclear.

1 An earlier version of this paper was presented at the UNESCO Conference on Intercultural Education Jyväskylä, Finland (15-18 June 2003).
For four years in the early 1990s, I worked as a teacher in social care education at a vocational institute which offered English language courses to train Finns and migrants in multicultural social care. During the time that I worked at this institute, I wrote my licentiate thesis in social work on how the term ‘multiculturalism’ was utilized in Finnish social care education (Clarke 1999). My interest in writing the licentiate thesis was to make sense of the emerging discourse on multiculturalism in Finnish society in general and in social care education specifically. As teachers of the first multicultural courses, many of us felt very confused about what the term ‘multiculturalism’ meant in a Finnish context and how it was to be practiced in the classroom as well as integrated into the curriculum. At the time of the study, students expressed deep dissatisfaction about classroom relations and educational content; many even said that they considered themselves to be more racist and intolerant than when starting the multicultural course. In short, the term ‘multiculturalism’ appeared to remain an abstract concept to many of the teachers and students, strangely disassociated with the everyday practices and relations within the classroom. Solutions to the impasse between the multicultural policy and practice were difficult to find. Hence the important questions of power relations and social inclusion in the classroom, which shaped students’ experiences, often tended to be obscured by a focus on cultural difference and dissimilarity.

Although I have not worked in social care education for several years, I wanted to return to the classroom experience by interviewing former students to see how they evaluated their educational experience in retrospect after several years of work in the field and how they saw the significance of multiculturalism in their professional lives. This article presents a summary of the findings of the earlier study of multicultural vocational social care education and then revisits the classroom through a discussion of the main themes that emerged in the in-depth interviews of six former students. My aim in this article is to explore the complexities of the development of Finnish multicultural vocational social care education of the 1990s via the reflections of the former students.

Slouching towards multiculturalism

Finland has traditionally been a country of emigration, rather than immigration. However, migration trends shifted in the mid-1980s and Finland began to receive a greater number of migrants than ever before. Though the actual numbers of migrants remain small compared to other European countries (less than 2% of the population of Finland was born in another country), the amount of migrants in Finland has quintupled since 1987 (Pitkänen and Kouki 2002, 105).

In the early 1990s, the number and diversity of refugees, asylum seekers and migrants in Finland rose sharply. Many of the new migrants were in a very vulnerable situation because they had few social networks, did not speak Finnish and lacked job skills to enter the Finnish labor market. Finnish authorities thus had a strong motive to
fund vocational training that would help new migrants integrate into Finnish society and find work to stabilize and support their situation in Finland. Inclusion in the labor market was also thought to ultimately benefit to Finnish society, which is expected to face a labor shortage in the future (see Forsander 1999). The development of multicultural education was thought to be a solution to the question of integrating migrants into the Finnish labor market as well as providing Finnish students with important inter-cultural skills.

Multiculturalism increasingly became an issue in an ambivalent Finland in the 1990s driven, in many ways, from above rather than the grassroots level. Few migrant community organizations were able to establish themselves as functioning independent groups, despite the founding of registered organizations such as the National Equal Opportunities Network (NEON) and the Migrants Association for Social and Health Promotion (MAP). The lack of ethnic enclaves and a critical mass of migrants pressing for community mobilization, as well as the lack of connections and skills to get funding, presented significant barriers to migrant community organization.

Research on the prevalence of multicultural studies in Finland, however, showed an exponential rise in the amount and diversity of publications that dealt with multiculturalism both on the academic as well as the administrative levels (Matinheikki-Kokko 2002). Multiculturalism research first became institutionalized in the 1990s, largely through a focus on planning. By the end of the 1990s, the Academy of Finland sponsored a large-scale research program and multicultural research became increasingly commodified as project work.

The measurable products of research are publications, the number of international projects, international relations and further qualifications in the field. This emphasis on commodification has, on the other hand, tended to exclude certain matters of significance from the point of view of social progress in multiculturalism, such as the rise of an academic generation that is familiar with multiculturalism, career development and employment in the sector. Even though the research programmes of the Academy of Finland (1992, 1999) have given researchers engaged in post-graduate studies in the field an opportunity to work in relevant research teams and working collectives, these programmes have not met the need for basic studies and tutoring in multiculturalism. (Matinheikki-Kokko 2002)

Multiculturalism as a concept, however, tended to come from the mainstream as few migrant researchers were involved as writers of the publications. The discourse on multiculturalism thus remained hermetic to some degree, with migrants serving as informants and rarely influencing the findings or conclusions of the emerging field of research.

The process of multiculturalizing Finland, however, proved to be more problematic
than initial optimistic assessments of planners. The Finnish public as a whole had little experience with migrants and issues surrounding cultural diversity. Hence, there were few institutional or societal mechanisms to deal with issues such as discrimination, xenophobia and racism. The rise in immigration coincided with a deep economic recession and thus threat images of foreigners played on an insecure public imagination, sometimes making for an inhospitable environment. Moreover, many vulnerable migrants and asylum seekers in a precarious situation and who faced racial and ethnic discrimination on an everyday basis found it difficult to see themselves as future professionals permanently resident in Finland. Many were therefore reluctant to invest time, energy and personal emotion in the courses when they were not sure whether they could or wanted to stay in Finland.

In many respects, the conceptual confusion over terms such as ‘multiculturalism,’ ‘internationalization,’ and ‘inter-culturalism’ used in education in the 1990s reflected a fundamental ambivalence and uncertainly over the significance of increasing cultural diversity in Finnish society. Despite the growing literature on multiculturalism, as researcher Kaija Matinheikko-Kokko pointed out, the absence of systematic development of multicultural practices on a basic level precluded the establishment of a clear pedagogical foundation from which to develop courses in a systematic manner. Indeed, the use of cultural terms often seemed to simply refer to an abstract vision of cultural harmony in future Finland that could be learned through multicultural education (see Helve 1999). There was little discussion of discrimination or institutional barriers to integration. At the same time, belonging in Finnish society continued to be constructed in public debate as a largely ethnic category which tended to exclude those considered to be ‘different’ by mainstream society (see Lepola 2000). The emergence of ‘multiculturalism,’ ‘internationalization’ and ‘inter-culturalism’ as key concepts in 1990s Finnish education thus reflected the tension between exclusive notions of belonging and hazy promises of future harmonious cultural and racial co-existence. Perhaps more importantly, the migrants themselves were not included as stakeholders in the process of developing multicultural programs which resulted in the lack of key information about the everyday lives of migrants in Finland.

The case study of the Tukkiharju Institute of Social Care
The Tukkiharju Institute of Social Care initiated multicultural social care courses in 1993. The aim of the education was to develop the field of migrant social care work in Finland. Students were recruited from migrant groups already resident in Finland as well as among mainstream Finnish citizens. Within a few years, the Institute advertised in international papers and received applications from foreign students not necessarily intending to remain in Finland. The English language was the primary language of instruction which, according to students, was one of the main attractions for applying for the program.
The licentiate study focused on two courses offered between 1993 and 1997. Each course had an approximate average of 13 students. One course offered a diploma in social care (social educator), while the other one offered a vocational qualification in social care (practical nurse). The diploma-level course had a very small proportion of migrant students whereas the vocational-level course had a more equal amount of Finns and migrants.

**Method of the study**

The study was divided into three parts. The first part reviewed and analyzed theoretical constructions of multiculturalism. The second part examined conceptions of Finnishness and their relation to notions of multiculturalism. The final section focused on the case study of the Tukkiharju Institute of Vocational Social Care. Through a qualitative approach, I analyzed how multiculturalism could be seen in everyday classroom practices through a textual analysis of curricula as well as written feedback and essays from the students.

**Findings of the study**

Vocational social care education differs from academic social work education in its focus on the provision of care at the level of the client or community. Social care workers perform a great variety of tasks in many different locations, such as residential care, community care, day care and other occupations that deal with clients on an everyday level. Vocational social care education therefore emphasizes personal interaction and needs assessment skills. The challenge of developing multiculturalism in vocational social care education lies precisely in the possibility of re-conceiving everyday interaction, inter-personal relations and cultural assumptions in relation to dominant care practices and good practice.

Multiculturalism in Finnish social care education in the 1990s, though, was often constructed solely as synonymous with teaching in the English language. The Tukkiharju Institute was funded to offer vocational courses in ‘multicultural care and caretaking’ in English because migrants were increasingly recognized as an important client group. However, the curriculum for this was merely translated from Finnish to English and did not demonstrate a specific multicultural focus. Thus, the use of cultural terms did not necessarily mirror a more culturally inclusive curriculum or worldview but rather reflected the view that issues of cultural diversity were an extra, rather than intrinsic, element to be added to a monocultural course of studies. Further, the monocultural basis of the hidden curricula of these courses aimed to assimilate migrant students into Finnish professional social care culture through rather than developing and diversifying social care professional competence. The lack of multicultural curricula aimed at broadening Finnish professional culture and practice in social care work therefore tended to serve to exclude diversity.
The teaching staff and administration of the multicultural courses at the social care institute were for the most part Finnish females. There were few opportunities for diverse socio-cultural groups to offer contributions on curriculum development, teaching and learning practices or educational policy. Multicultural issues were not explicitly addressed through the promotion of cultural competence skills. Therefore, social care tended to be taught and analyzed from a specifically normative and monocultural perspective which was constructed as equivalent to professional objectivity.

The lack of organization at the Institute, in terms of schedules and course material, contributed to the development of negative group phenomena that reflected the deep insecurity that many students experienced during their courses. The pressures that students felt about the course could be seen in the groups’ inability to handle conflict and difference. Power relations within the groups thus intensified and were often fractured along cultural and ethnic lines. Indeed, the strong feelings that students had could be seen in the written material that was analyzed for the study. Notions of multiculturalism or cultural tolerance were sometimes mocked and dismissed by students frustrated with their courses. The focus on practical matters as a source of unease actually often reflected deeper anxieties about encountering and working with cultural diversity that were not addressed by teachers or curricula. For migrant students, the focus on monocultural professional skills and knowledge fostered a sense of disempowerment that often caused them to disengage with classmates and coursework. The multiculturalism practiced in the courses therefore did not necessarily function as an
engine of transforming social relations or developing culturally competent working practices.

The sustainable development of multicultural vocational social care courses could not ultimately be upheld. This resulted in poor outcomes for all parties concerned. The reasons that development work was difficult were manifold. They included the enormous workload that teachers carried, the lack of training as well as lack of institutional and personal support for teachers, and the lack of support for students who often needed guidance on how to handle conflict. The potential for developing a sustainable educational program was continuously present, but in the end was never realized.

Whose multiculturalism?
In exploring how white schoolteachers address race in the United States, teacher education researcher Christine Sleeter asked: “What does it mean to construct an interpretation of race that denies it?” (Sleeter 1993, 161) The dilemma inherent in Sleeter’s question can thus be reformulated in this context as: What does it mean to construct an interpretation of multiculturalism in a society that implicitly denies it? As noted earlier, the term ‘multiculturalism’ in 1990s Finland tended to reflect the multiple contradictions of simultaneously recognizing and ignoring increasing cultural diversity in Finland.

Integration has become the primary policy of the Finnish government towards migrant resettlement which was put into law through the Integration Act of 1999. Though the acceptance of integration as a policy demonstrates that Finnish authorities have recognized the fact that increasing numbers of migrants will come to Finland and that the government has an obligation to help newcomers cope with resettlement issues, the shift towards integration reflects an increasing tendency towards ‘mainstreaming’ and ‘normalizing’ migrants through a focus on individual plans (Matinheikki-Kokko and Pitkänen 2002, 57). Migrants receiving benefits are required to make an ‘integration plan’ with authorities to help them ‘adjust’ to Finnish society. Usually, these plans focus on mastering the Finnish language through the provision of language courses. However, in the absence of social contact with the larger Finnish community, many migrants find it difficult to develop linguistic fluency. Educational courses have been thought to be one of the best methods to promote social integration by the Finnish authorities. Finnish integration policy has a propensity to view the migrant as the sole party that must actively accommodate to Finnish linguistic and cultural norms. There are relatively few programs, for example, aimed at reducing discrimination in the workplace, though their number is increasing. Migrant communities have rarely been involved as stakeholders in policymaking. Hence the implementation of integration programs has often lacked the insider perspectives on needs that migrant communities could provide. The practice of integration policy in various institutions is often indistinguish-
able from assimilation, as could be seen in the example of the courses described above. Unequal power relations are often the unaddressed subtext of contested integration issues. Thus, it is difficult to address multiculturalism in a society that does not ultimately see itself as multicultural.

Follow-up interviews on the experience of multicultural social care education

Four years after I completed my research (Clarke 1999), I decided to interview students to understand how they reflected on the impact of the course on their personal and professional lives. I interviewed students from four of the multicultural courses offered at the Tukkiharju Institute during my tenure. I located the students through a snowball effect by asking one former student who put me in touch with many ex-classmates. This method had the limitation of excluding those students who did not want to maintain contact with classmates, left the field, were unavailable or moved away. Hence I cannot claim that this is a comprehensive study of the views of all students in the courses, but rather reflects a snapshot of the perspectives of some students. I interviewed three former students from the diploma courses (two Finnish women and one migrant man) and three former students from the vocational qualification courses (one Finnish and two migrant women). Open-ended interviews were conducted lasting one to two hours, which were tape recorded. In this section, I briefly outline the main findings of the research.

Most of the Finnish students I interviewed were very positive about the impact of their experience in the multicultural groups in retrospect. They also held jobs commensurate with their professional qualifications in the social care field. These former students felt that they had learned a lot about themselves in dealing with culturally different people during their studies. Only one student expressed any regret about attending the course. Some of the Finnish students felt that they would have received better professional training if they had been in a mainstream Finnish language course. The course was represented by many of the Finnish students as the most, and often first, significant encounter that they had had with people from other cultures and nations. Hence the personal encounter with cultural diversity tended to be viewed as solely a private issue and not as a professional development matter. The line between personal and professional development, which should have been underscored in multicultural social care education, thus appeared to be lacking.

It was difficult to locate former migrant students because many had left Finland. Indeed, of those who remained, very few found jobs in their profession in Finland. The migrant women who were interviewed worked in the social care field but at considerably lower salaries and professional status than their Finnish counterparts. Though it is important to note that these observations do not reflect a valid generalization, it would be interesting to study whether Finnish and migrant students have had different
professional employment outcomes and whether gender or race is a factor harming their employment opportunities.

The migrant women were generally positive about their experience in the course, although they did not represent it as a significant event in their lives in contrast to their Finnish classmates. They stated that they had often observed ethnocentric behavior by classmates but had felt powerless to intervene and they were anxious not to speak about these incidents. One migrant woman, whom I will call Lila (not her real name), discussed how divisions were established from the start of the course:

At first there was a separation of cultures. We were grouped without our knowledge. After that it never...there was a lot of discourse regarding who is better. We don't like those kinds of people because of blah blah...There was a lot of mistrust at the beginning. I think along the way it became a multicultural class. I think when we graduated multiculturalism came true. The concept of multiculturalism was accepted at the beginning but not during. There was a lot of envy and distrust.

Here we can see an interesting metamorphosis of the use of the term ‘multiculturalism.’ First, Lila refers to cultural divisions and distrust within the class and claims that multiculturalism was nonetheless realized by graduation. However, she goes on to state that multiculturalism was “accepted at the beginning but not during.” The uncertainty and contradictions surrounding the meaning of multiculturalism in practice is apparent in this description.

When describing the students least accepted by their classmates, Lila said:

There was a group of Somalis in class. These refugees were outsiders in the group because everyone prejudged that they were stupid. They couldn't write as well and they were not doing their homework. So the other students were angry because they were too lazy. Nobody wants to be in that group. Those people then became one group. It was separate.

What is revealing in this statement is the fact that there were no Somalis in that course. Further, the adjectives used to describe the ‘Somali’ students are very negative: ‘outsiders,’ ‘stupid,’ ‘lazy.’ While Lila was careful to make a distinction between herself and the ‘others’ who ‘prejudged’ the African students, she also reflected on her own view of race:

I was pretty narrow-minded. So the course had an effect on me. I came from a country where the white was held as the best. It gave me a very positive attitude. I thought that I could never be a friend with an African. I thought that I am superior to them because they are not white. But then I also felt inferior because they are white. I
Lila’s statement shows the complexity of ethnic and racial identities and how they had an influence on interpersonal relationships in the course. It also shows her evolution from a ‘narrow-minded’ person to one who could now identify racism and disagree with it. If the course as a whole did not succeed in promoting and supporting cultural competence, students were nonetheless able to draw on personal resources to develop and grow on an individual level.

The migrant female interviewees were reluctant to speak about their personal experiences with racism and ethnocentrism during the course. In the interviews, these women spoke of the course period rather dispassionately and at a great distance. It appeared to have little impact on their current lives aside from the professional qualification which enhanced their employment opportunities. Migrant women were also less likely than their corresponding Finnish classmates to emphasize their professional identity. Indeed, their current occupation was often described as temporary by the women who had future plans in other professional fields.

Some of the Finnish students worried that their vocational training was not on as high level as their colleagues who had attended mainstream professional courses. Some Finnish interviewees described the multiculturalism of the course as interfering with the quality of the education. As one commented: “Difference is tiring.” However, there were also Finnish students who felt that they had greatly benefited from the interaction between culturally diverse students. The most positive Finnish students were those who had come to the Institute as older students with long life and work experience.

The sole migrant male, whom I will call Joseph (not his real name), that was interviewed at times found it very difficult to talk about his course. After the course, he worked several years in a position equal to his qualification in the social care field. Joseph narrated incidents in which he had felt humiliated by other students in great detail even after many years. He emphasized that everything was done in ‘the Finnish way’ in the class. Joseph also said that he felt that the reason that he had been discriminated against by other students was due more to his gender than his nationality. When I asked him to describe a concrete example that would best exemplify his time in the course, he described:

*I noticed that I am always the person expected to follow even if I felt that I had the best idea. I felt that I had to follow the majority…Once we were supposed to do a class exercise where we would form a circle and throw a ball back and forth calling out each other’s name. I found that a useless activity. It sounded silly. I skipped it. It was so annoying to a classmate that she told me that it was unfair because we have
to do it and you are not doing it. But I said don’t follow me. Do what you want. It was a very bitter atmosphere.

Here we can see that Joseph did not like being forced into the passive role of being a ‘follower.’ His rebellion of refusing to join the group activity was carefully monitored by a fellow group member. The explanation that the classmate offered for why Joseph should join in the group activity was very revealing: ‘we have to do it and you are not doing it.’ This reflects a negative and disciplinary view of group activities rather than a constructive and positive outlook on activities as a productive part of learning.

At the time of the course, Joseph said that he had not been able to speak to anyone about his emotional pain because he felt that doing so would weaken his resolve to finish his studies. He was very proud of achieving his professional status but no longer thought about his course:

They asked me to join them (at class reunions) but I didn’t because I thought that it would remind me of the isolation of those times.

These retrospective interviews of students suggest that multicultural social care courses were experienced very differently. Though cultural diversity existed in the courses, the monocultural practices in the classrooms did not give students a language through which they could discuss and negotiate their emerging feelings towards the new experience of being in a multicultural course. Further, the monocultural curricula tended to ‘culturalize’ the social care profession as Finnish, not multicultural. The fact that none of the interviewees discussed multiculturalism in any kind of a professional connection indicates that the dominant impression students took from the class was of multiculturalism on a personal level.

The reflections by former students clearly demonstrated the impact of the multicultural experience of the course on their lives, though in very diverse ways. From the interviews of migrants, it is possible to speculate that the implicit monoculturalism of the course tended to enhance ethnocentric views of the profession and thus exclude them from constructions of professionalism. This might account for the distance that the migrant women seemed to feel towards the profession that they had spent several years training for. For Joseph, the sole migrant male, the significance of graduating as a professional appeared to be a sign of pride in his personal stamina and endurance in a hostile environment rather than pride in gaining entrance into a professional identity.

It was clear from the interviews that race, representations of Finnishness and cultural diversity resonated very deeply among the students of the multicultural social care courses and were the root cause of many of the conflicts. These issues touched students very personally. As the teachers themselves were not trained in how to cope
multicultural conflicts, they could not always offer counseling and support for the students. Moreover, within the framework of the course curricula there was no forum to handle these types of issues. Thus, the personal resources of the students themselves to overcome conflict and misunderstanding were the driving force in the end to make classes, to use Lila’s words, ‘become multicultural.’ The mobilization of personal resources to overcome racial and ethnic divisions within the class is perhaps the highest recommendation of students’ suitability as social care professionals.

**Conclusion: Multiculturalism in social care education**

Multicultural issues have changed in contemporary Finland since the early 1990s. A decade after the first multicultural social care education courses were initiated, Finnish professional and personal experiences with cultural diversity have expanded exponentially in Finland. New courses in multicultural care have sprung up at institutions throughout the country. Social care work with culturally diverse clients is becoming an everyday phenomenon in many cities and towns in Finland. Clearly, there is a growing need for professionals skilled in cultural competence in the field.

Vocational social care education focuses on high quality professional interaction with clients and good practice in care. It is therefore a logical starting point for developing cultural competence training. However, based on a quick survey of the websites of social care institutes there still appears to be few migrant professionals or migrant communities involved in the planning, design and teaching of social care education curricula. The lack of dialogue on a professional level tends to reinforce the disparity between constructions of professionalism, which are often implicitly defined as equivalent to Finnish cultural assumptions, and clienthood, which is often constructed as difference or ‘otherness.’ A greater emphasis thus needs to be placed on the sustainable development of vocational social care education as an explicitly culturally competent profession. The experience of vocational social care institutes as pioneering multicultural social care education in the 1990s can serve as a valuable resource. One promising example of the creative possibilities to develop cooperation and collaboration among culturally diverse students and teachers to promote sustainable development is the Culture Laboratory experiment by the Helsinki College of Social and Health Care (Terävä 2002) where a systematic method is used to collect and reflect on the feedback of migrant students on courses and learning methods together with teachers.

The second generation of migrants in Finland is increasingly applying for study places at social care colleges. Academic social work education, on the other hand, appears to continue to have a high threshold for migrant applicants. Further study of the career choices of migrants and disparities in diversity among professions could provide important information to develop and extend social care and social work as more inclusive professions.
The recruitment and recognition of migrants as having a potentially significant contribution to the development of social care, as well as social work, as a profession is an important first step towards culturally diversifying and enhancing professional quality in the field. It would therefore be essential to address issues of social inclusion in future multicultural social care courses as a core part of cultural competence training. Re-assessing past experiences with multicultural social care education courses could provide a good compass to the future development of social education courses.

Endnote

1 I use the term 'migrant' rather than immigrant to include those people who came to Finland on a long-term without the intention of immigrating. This reflects a transnational view of migration rather than the traditional push-pull view of immigration.

References


Summaries:

In the 1990s, the Finnish Board of Education sought to promote multiculturalism by funding English-language vocational social care courses that would include migrants. The stated purpose of these courses was to promote multiculturalism in social care. Building on previously published research, this article revisits the classroom experience through interviews of former students and explores what impact the course has had on them. The article argues for a reassessment of previous multicultural vocational social care education courses as a compass for the further development of this type of education.

 Invisible in plain sight