

Chapter

CONCEPTS OF FINNISH EDUCATION: AFRICAN STUDENT TEACHER REFLECTIONS AT THE CULTURAL CROSS-ROADS

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this research was to study international students' learning experiences and the concepts they are using when describing Finnish comprehensive school. The study is based on the observation portfolios of 23 international student teachers during the first term of their undergraduate studies in Finland. The results indicate, that the student teachers describe their early school years in their homeland in terms of educational ranking, the connection and influence of relatives, disciplines, control, and authorities. Their reflections of the Finnish school system, based on their observation reports, were connected to three main concepts – individuality, equality and freedom.

Keywords: equality, individuality, freedom, teacher education, student teacher

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1. UNDERSTANDING MULTICULTURAL LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

In general, the number of international students is increasing around the world. Overseas campuses, the international mobility of staff, international collaborations on teaching, and the internationalisation of curricula are global effects of internationalisation (Gordon, 2010). The goals of higher education include intercultural education and the promotion of intercultural competence. This study has two aims. The first aim is to research international student teachers' reflections on the observation period that occurred in the first term of their undergraduate studies in Finland. The second aim is to broaden university staff views on the internationalisation aspect of cultural differences and examine how international students perceive the school and the learning environment in the teacher practicum of the Finnish education system. Internationalised curricula shape students by enabling and prohibiting certain practices, actions, and ways of being. Teaching and researching in an international context always involves elements of comparison because our understanding persuades us to see the others in relation to what exists around us (Abdi and Kapoor 2009). The focus of this study is not on comparisons between countries or their education systems. Instead, the study aims to describe students' reflections on their professional identities and competences, the nature and role of nationality through their early school year experiences in Africa, and observational notes as described in their study portfolios during the first term of their studies. In general, the teaching profession has been created within historical and cultural contexts.

Each person is a member of a microculture with their own ethnic backgrounds, family educations, and personal resources; each person is also a member of a social macroculture with values, norms, and sanctions (Nurmi and Kontiainen, 1995). Some researchers have stated that schools can be considered a continuation of the family, as they are places where knowledge, values, and morality are learned. On the other hand, schools can also be viewed as institutions that provide the knowledge and skills that families are not able to teach to their children. Teachers are expected to concern themselves with the identities of their students and the learning environment (Smulyan, 2009). There is a growing expectation that professionals in higher education should recognize and respect the diverse backgrounds of students (Sambell, 2017; Sambell, Brown and Graham, 2017). Here the internationalisation can be seen two ways, firstly, African students are earning their Bachelor of Education degrees in Finland and they experience internationalisation. Secondly, Finnish faculty members, students, and other actors

in the institution and the local community experience internalisation by their connections and interactions with the African students. The results of this study provide information necessary for quality assurance and is crucial for enhancing the intercultural competence of faculty members involved in the internationalisation process.

Internationalisation is closely related to internationalism and interculturalism. Internationalism involves interactions between people and nationalities and often does not have a hierarchical relationship between the interacting groups or persons. Interculturalism, or intercultural competence, can be divided into key qualifications such as social competence, method competence, self-competence, and action competence (Moosmuller and Schönhut, 2009). A study by Push (2009) states that being interculturally competent means an individual is cognitively and behaviourally flexible, has tolerance for ambiguity, and can show cross-cultural empathy. Internationalised education trains students for a multicultural society and multicultural values, linguistic and cultural borders, and responsible citizenship (Conçalves 2010; Soilamo, 2008). Interculturalism is a process that requires agents, and in this study, the agents are the international students. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development views students as international if they have left their home country and have moved to another country for education (OECD, 2014).

The concept of internationalisation is not quite clear; we need to consider whose home we are referring to when we discuss internationalisation at home (Larsen, 2016; Sahlberg, 2011). Multiculturalism implies the existence of a dominant culture, and it has to do with the balance of power between the majority and the minority. Therefore, some critics have stated that internationalisation and student mobility processes increase the hegemony of Western knowledge and cultural values (Dei, 2014). Furthermore, some critical voices state that the social and cultural existence of the African people is challenged by global capitalism (Shizha and Abdi, 2009). Western educational policies and educational methods, such as learner-centred pedagogy or participatory teaching, have been adopted in many African countries. However, these reforms can lead to epistemological blindness (Larsen, 2016; Vavrus, 2011). Multicultural competence consists of cultural knowledge and pedagogical skills and attitudes related to multiculturalism (Talib, 2006). Internationalisation creates ties to new international communities and fosters new identities (Gonçalves, 2010), and in the context of geographical or ethnic borders, the concept may be close to cross-culturalism (Apfelthaler et al., 2007). With the ability to go across borders, intercultural competence is a crucial step towards becoming able to reflect on the cultural norms, values, and social identities of individuals (Eisenchlas and Trevaskes, 2007).

2. LEARNING HOW TO LEARN AS A STUDENT TEACHER

It is essential to understand the concept of professional development in teachers' learning. Learning how to learn is a complicated process that involves individual and collective competencies and the cognitive and emotional involvement of teachers. Teacher reflection can be seen as an analysis of needs, conclusions, problems, changes or beliefs. These contribute to professional development, such as enhanced cognitions of improved practices (Avalos, 2011). Therefore, the student teachers learn at university from their reflections and experiences and through dialogues in the technical learning environment, which includes standards, school rules, and regulations. Being in this environment helps student teachers develop an awareness of cultural issues, such as confidentiality. This may help them develop a professional identity as a teacher (Calvo de Mora, 2014; Gort and Glenn, 2010.)

Learning to teach as a student teacher is viewed as an issue of individual behaviour rather than a social negotiation of personal biography within the context of school culture. By observing teachers in the field, student teachers get a holistic picture of the tasks that are included in the job and in the school system. Some pedagogical aspects are also studied. This is emphasized by Britzman (1991), who identifies the teacher profession from three dimensions: the teacher as a complete controller of the learning environment, the teacher as an expert of assembling and disseminating knowledge, the teacher as born professional, and teacher identity (Fenimore-Smith, 2004).

3. THE AFRICAN BACKGROUND AND DEVELOPING TEACHER IDENTITIES

The continent of Africa offers an opportunity for scholarly research (O'Sullivan, 2004). Yet, not much has been done to study African intercultural competence. It must be noted that Africa is not homogenous; it is said that Africans share the background of three cultures: traditional African culture, Islamic culture, and Western culture (Nwosu, 2009). However, there are some principles present nearly everywhere on the continent. Although more than 1,000 languages are spoken in Africa, English is standardized as a national language in many countries. However, minority languages are also spoken, especially in the rural areas (Bureau of Democracy, 2007). This article will not provide an in-depth description of African culture or its core values or beliefs. However, some cultural themes connected to the educational context deserve

to be mentioned: the relationship between the individual and the community, time management, and social relations. In general, there is a symbiotic relationship between the individual and the group. In African culture, the *ubuntu* principle means that the individual does not exist outside of the group; it means “I am, because we are, and since we are, therefore I am” (Makgoba, 1997). This means that an individual’s behaviour has an impact on others and on the full functioning of the community. The idea of *ubuntu* is connected to social relations, fundamental values (such as respect for elders), acceptance of hierarchical structures, and respect of ancestors. In the African context, it is considered disrespectful to use first names when referring to people of higher authority, status, or age. Also, researchers have categorized time into two systems. In the monochronic system used mostly in Western countries, time is segmented into small units and is scheduled and arranged. The polychronic system used in Africa views time as a less segmented than in Western countries, cyclical, and flexible concept. To Africans, the concept of time has a more philosophic meaning: time is how we communicate and how we connect with each other. Perceptions of time in Africa are connected to a concept of activity that values *being* over *doing* or *becoming*. In the African perspective, work is not just a place to perform tasks, but a place to establish strong interpersonal bonds. These beliefs are assumed to enhance the communication process essential to good performance (Nwosu, 2009). Previous studies have shown that culture tends to change slowly even though social, economic, and technological change can be rapid. Many rural and semi-rural countries in Africa, are non-literate, and non-Western. In these areas, childcare emphasizes health and physical survival, and the teaching of moral and other values may occur through oral storytelling (Schumba, 1999).

A learner-centred curriculum has been recently introduced in some African countries. This pedagogic approach was considered an effective method to the teacher-centred practices used in the former apartheid system. One of the first studies on the Namibian education system was done by O’Sullivan (2004). Her case study raised questions about the implementation of the learner-centred approach. The educational standards were very low prior to the country’s independence, and the education system operated on a dichotomy believing students were either black and poor or white and rich. Some of the schools in the poor, rural areas did not have electricity, had a shortage of textbooks or paper, or did not have any effective communication. O’Sullivan (2004) describes the conditions of a learning environment in a rural area, stating that 76% of the teachers were unqualified, the dropout rate was 13%, and it was typical to have over-aged learners in the class in the studied geographic area. In general, the classrooms were dirty and untidy, and learners were often running around the school during class. The children who were living outside the village were boarding in hostels with weak facilities (no furniture or running water). The data in O’Sullivan’s study indicated that these students were not implemented into the school, as they should. This was probably due to the professional capacity of teachers at the time of the study, as well as limited resources, cultural factors, and learner backgrounds. These factors may have limited the learner-centred approach, which O’Sullivan (2004) calls *learning-centred* in her study. It has to be noted that some researchers posit two paradigms in early childhood education:

paediatric and pedagogic. Beyond infancy, children learn new skills by imitation and observation in the context is a hierarchical society where the authority of a parent, a teacher, or another adult is not to be questioned (Porchner, 2015).

During the last decade, Namibian teacher education has taken big leaps by developing teacher education programs, curricula, and technical facilities (UNAM, 2018). Also, the percentage of qualified primary teachers has increased. By the year 2012, over 90% of female secondary teachers were qualified in Namibia (Ministry of Education, 2012).

4. RESEARCH-BASED FINNISH TEACHER EDUCATION AND CENTRAL CONCEPTS

Teacher education in Finland is research-based, and the goal is to create reflective teachers who are free and able to use research when designing learning environments, pedagogic solutions, and the content of teaching. This freedom is also an essential part of a teacher's job. He or she has a great deal of professional autonomy to decide the best teaching methods and learning environments for students. The concept of freedom is studied in philosophy. Discussions about positive and negative liberty, or freedom, often take place within the context of political and social philosophy. The researchers of the concept distinguish between positive freedom (being free *to* something) and negative freedom (being free *from* something). (Berlin, 1969; Carter, 2016.) Teachers, pupils, communities, and universities have certain academic and educational freedoms in Finland. This means they can make their own decisions based on individual or local needs; it also means Finnish comprehensive schools do not have school inspections. However, some common principles, such as the National Core Curriculum, have to be obeyed.

The equal opportunities of education stem from the comprehensive education system being funded by the government. Equity in education means more than access to an equal education for all; it aims at guaranteeing high-quality education for all in different places and circumstances. In the Finnish context, equity is about having a socially fair education system based on the equality of educational opportunities and a right to participate in special education. To promote success in learning, each student in special education has a personalized learning plan based on the school curriculum (Sahlberg, 2011). It must be noted that the terms *equity* and *equality* are frequently used by many researchers, scholars, and educators as if they were interchangeable. However, equity refers to same possibilities what it comes to needs or achievements, whereas equality refers to same possibilities for instance between the social groups or opportunities (Espinoza, 2008).

Individuality is a concept connected to equal learning opportunities. In Finnish schools, individuality means that the learner-centred approach is used and that some activities are even designed together with the pupils. This has become possible because

of research-based teacher education, which requires student teachers to write essays and create portfolios to reflect their experiences and to construct their learning (Kaasila, 2014). The idea of constructivism is shared in many of the Western countries and posits that expertise should be actively constructed by learners rather than passively received. This ideal is supported especially in adult education, where self-direction is needed. Adult learners have are responsible for their own decisions, and they are orientated and motivated to learn (Semali, 2009). Constructivist learning should be active and reflective, context-related, and strategic. Especially in higher education the aim is towards student-centred learning. This means that students are encouraged and supported to think deeply about what they are doing. Learning in the university demands commitment and involvement on the part of the learner (Sambell, Brown and Graham, 2017). Models and curriculum can be divided into traditional and active models. To distinguish between these principles, some of the key concepts are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. From traditional to active approach (modified from Sambell, 2017, p. 17)

| | Traditional | Active |
|--------------|--|---|
| Teacher role | information provider, purveyor, broadcaster of knowledge | facilitator, designer, coach, supervisor, guide |
| Curriculum | structured around the inclusion of important content | broad specifications of knowledge and skills; study programmes are designed to support and promote development of the learner |
| Progress | linear phenomenon | accretive and iterative phenomenon |
| Assessment | measuring decontextualized knowledge and skills; used to test and place learners in ranked order | used to show learning achievements and to promote learning via engagement, activity, and participation |

As part of constructive learning, a greater focus is put on student engagement. This concept involves personal relationships between students, teachers, and other college staff, as well as student involvement in his or her own studies. Student engagement can be promoted by encouraging student-staff contact, promoting active learning

techniques, giving prompt feed back, and respecting diversity and different ways of learning (Sambell et al., 2017). Atjonen, Korkeakoski, and Mehtäläinen (2011) have researched teachers' perceptions of teacher identity. They posit that the teaching profession can be seen as a profession where learning methods, learning environments, students' individual needs, and competencies are focused. In general, their study finds that Finnish teachers' reflections on learning, teaching, and teacher identities have become more learner-centred. Constructivist learning and a change from transmission toward transaction describe the pedagogical intentions according to teachers' perceptions. Teachers see themselves as multi-skilled experts, empathetic educators, and leaders (Atjonen, Korkeakoski, and Mehtäläinen, 2011)

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The aims of this research are to study international students' reflections of the observation course (University of NN, 2016) in the beginning of their undergraduate studies, to broaden the views of internationalisation, and to learn how international students see the education system of Finland. Two specific research questions were generated to address these aims. The research questions that formulate the core area of this study are: 1) How do the international student teachers describe their early school years? and 2) What are the basic concepts African student teachers use to describe Finnish schools? The written portfolios were analysed to find the basic concepts used to describe the Finnish learning environment in the comprehensive schools.

5. METHODS

The data in this study consists of portfolios the international students created during their first term studies. This study represents qualitative research that has undergone content analysis. The data in this study was collected from the students who were obtaining Bachelor's degrees as part of a global educational service project and came from an African country with a colonial history. The country is a multi-party parliamentary democracy with several ethnic groups; however, the Christian community makes up 80–90% of the population. The entering age of the students was 19–28 years, and the average age was 23 years. The youngest of the students had recently completed senior secondary school studies, while the older ones had practiced various studies or had working experience, mostly as unqualified teachers.

Peltzer (1995) has identified three groups of African people concerning their intercultural backgrounds: traditional persons who are little affected by modernization, transitional persons who are shuttling between cultures, and modern individuals participating fully in the activities of the contemporary industrial world. Based on the background information of the study group, the students involved in this study were transitional persons or modern individuals. However, Peltzer's study is decades-old and may not apply to the current situation in this African country. The students in this study started their school careers in a traditional setting in remote areas, but later moved to bigger cities with secondary schools or universities.

6. ETHICAL VIEWS ON THIS STUDY

We obtained individual, written permission from each student participating in this research. The international student teachers were aware that the observation reports would form the basis of the research material. The names of the observation report writers were replaced by codes, and the code key was kept separate. The researchers are not specialized in African culture. The selection of the students was conducted with help from the local authorities and the University in the researchers' home country in Finland. As interpreters of the research material, the researchers are well-aware of the contexts in which they live as teachers and researchers, as middle-aged Scandinavian women, and as specialists in the field of teacher education. It must be noted that we, as researchers, may not be able to notice all the details represented in the observation reports. One reason for this might be that we are not part of the educational context in Africa.

7. RESEARCH MATERIAL

The data in this study was the student teacher observation portfolios from the international Bachelor of Education programme. These documents were based on the university course "Orientation Studies of Bachelor of Education," which the university describes as an "Orientation to teacher's field of work with 6-year-old children and primary school with 7- to 12-year-old children" (University of NN, 2016). The observation studies were designed to prepare the students to carry out training, lesson design, and teaching in the classroom. The written observation portfolio requirements stated that it should include "various documents which reflect your thinking, observations, interviews and general knowledge of the schools visited. Together it will produce an overall picture of the training period

and will give a good basis for understanding the Finnish education system, your present thoughts on teaching, and further development as a teacher”. (Turunen, 2017.)

The observation period was carried out in one month in the spring of 2017 and involved four primary schools and two kindergartens. The students worked in pairs, and each of the pairs observed two primary schools and one kindergarten. The observation period was organized by one of the teachers in the Teacher Training School. As there are only a few private schools in Finland, the observations were made mainly in the public, comprehensive schools. However, one of the schools was a private school in the area. In total, 15 classes or kindergarten groups were observed. Some schools provided classes for students with special needs. One of the schools served also as a teacher training school for the university. The training schools are an essential part of the university’s researched-based teacher education programme. In the training schools, the student teachers carried out their supervised teaching practice studies. The teaching language in the classrooms was mainly Finnish. In one school, the Content and Language Integrated Learning in English (CLIL) method was carried out.

Before and after the daily lessons, the student teachers received guidance regarding the lesson contents from the class teachers to avoid any possible misunderstandings while observing the classes. As aim of this study was to gain a holistic picture of how international students reflect upon the schools and the learning environments, the student teachers sat in the classrooms and concentrated on observing. Instructions for the student teachers stated, “if the teacher is not actively teaching, and pupils are working on something in groups or independently, you can stroll in the classroom and have a better look at what is going on. If you are staying in the back, you can talk in low voices with your co-observer if it doesn’t distract pupils. After the lesson is over, let the pupils go first. If the teacher is still available, this is a good time for questions or interview”. (Turunen, 2017)

The portfolios were completed during the first term of studies after living in Finland for three months. The portfolios ranged from 4–10 pages. There were four chapters in each of the portfolios, and this study analysed two of them: “My school history” (DATA I) and “Observation notes” (DATA II). The chapters we excluded mainly contained contents the Finnish class teachers created, such as lesson plans. The aim was not to follow the individual students from their school history to their observation, but rather to gain a general understanding of the dimensions affecting their attitudes and perceptions of their studies. The data analysis (DATA I and DATA II) was carried out in several phases since the research method here is qualitative. The data was read in detail until the researcher was familiar with its contents and had gained an understanding of the basic concepts

covered in the data. The researcher read the DATA I notes and examined the student narratives of their early school years using content-based analysis. The main themes from the texts during the first iteration were general notifications, learning environment, relation to peers and parents, discipline and authorities, school ranking, and (negative and positive) emotions. Matrix I was designed for this analysis.

We established a matrix of the DATA II notes during the second iteration. In the first phase, the data was collected by reading the texts carefully (Malterud, 2012), and the matrix was drawn using the student reflections. The central key units were collected in the data. These key units were then further categorized and analysed to find the general interests and concepts that described the reflections of the Finnish school from the perspective of an international student. In Table 2, the key unit in the first phase is presented as a word cluster, such as *freedom to choose* or *the teacher's attitude towards the parents*. The abstraction phase is presented as an ideal regarding behaviour or participation. The data was progressed from the meaning systems to singular units, and the analysis was based on the repetitive meanings in the documents, which were not quantified but analysed by the repetitive meanings.

Table 2. Examples of the DATA II analysis

| Portfolio observation notes | Analytical content units | Abstraction |
|--|---------------------------------|--------------------|
| teacher allows learners to be actively part of the lesson by sharing their views | individual views, listening | individuality |
| teacher equally learns from the learners | teacher learns also | equality |
| teacher knows all learners' weak points and strengths | teacher knows the students | individuality |
| teacher has good relationship with the class | relationship, atmosphere | interaction |
| Teacher goes down to their (pupils') level | learner's view | equality |
| teacher has one-on-one relationship with each learner | individuality | individuality |
| beetle board was used to make math more interesting and keep theme inspired | motivating students | motivation |
| teacher -- to provide same opportunity and foundation for every pupil | same opportunities | equality |
| much freedom in learner-centred teaching | child-centrality, freedom | freedom |
| learner has freedom to decide what is right for their learning | learner's view | freedom |
| pupils very presentable, not shy | eager to present | motivation |
| individual timetable | individual time table | individuality |
| learners have option to decide what they want to study first | choice | freedom |
| independent work tasks | independent | freedom |

There were 123 key units that were excluded in the DATA II analysis. These key units concerned didactic methods “sitting in pairs”, materials “using their iPads”, curriculum contents “studying different countries”, and student achievements “they all did well”. In total, 623 ($f=623$) key units were analysed in DATA II. It must be noted that we did not compare the students or their answers and we did not combine DATA I and DATA II. DATA I served as a basis for the DATA II analysis, and DATA I was used to gain a holistic view of the study group’s background.

8. RESULTS

The African students reflected their learning environment through their individual experiences, national identity, and competencies. This study is based on two distinguished groups of study material. The analysis was carried out mainly with DATA II (Observation notes), and DATA I (My school history) was used as background information.

In DATA II, the Finnish teacher is seen as an expert who delivers knowledge by teaching the school subject (see also Fenimore-Smith, 2004). This expertise is strengthened with educational materials, such as school books, exercises created by the teacher, or tasks carried out during the school day. In DATA II, the students reflected pupils’ learning or competencies. It seems that knowing, or competence, is seen as a stable condition rather than a developing, constructivist process.

D1H13: “teachers [in my home country] were very strict—it was believed that for a learner to pass and have good behaviour the teachers much be strict and use corporal punishment whenever necessary.”

D1H17: “It is difficult for me to say what the general attitude towards teachers is [in Namibia], but I would describe [the teacher as] always respected, obeyed, and listened [to].”

As the teacher is an essential delivery agent between the subject and the pupil, the content is seen as a steady condition in DATA II. Some Finnish elementary pupils were described as “astonishing smart” or as able to “remember everything they have learned.” For others, it was noted that “their skill level was high.” These reflections indicate that the teacher is seen as a complete controller of the learning environment and that he or she holds the traditional teacher identity rather than a modern one who engages pupils to construct their own learning

(Fenimore-Smith, 2004; Lindberg-Pitkaniemi, 2014). Also, it seemed that role of the teacher was to control. The holistic control seems to concern the content of the subject, the discipline, the learning, and the learning environment in general. It may be assumed that these reflections are connected to social relations, respect of elders, and acceptance of hierarchical structures.

The teacher students reflected upon the time spent in the schools. The structure of a school day and school term is implemented in the Finnish society in such a manner that even the activities of some non-governmental organizations, public holidays, or parents' working times are organized around the school term and schedule. This is an example of a monochronic time management system. In the data, teacher students reflected upon time management using the expressions "being on time" or "scheduled."

D2H6: "Time management is one thing I noticed that Finnish teachers really respect. They come to classes on time and run the lessons according to how they planned them, thus they finish the lessons on time. However, I noticed one teacher that was late for many classes and this was because she was a busy one."

A monochronic time system was also reflected when describing the participation and awareness of the pupils. This issue was connected to empowerment and self-discipline.

D2H19: "Pupils knew when it is time to take their books to write, draw and when it is time to play games when they are asked what's next on their schedule by the teacher."

Loosely related to time management, the Finnish schools and the learners' (pupils') time in the lessons was described as *free*.

D2H14: "Learners come early to class but continue talking, this is not possible in my home country."

Freedom was one of the basic concepts found in DATA II. Freedom appeared in the portfolios as "moving freely," "stand up whenever they wanted," "can do what they like," and "interacting freely." The concept of freedom was also used when pupils were performing their tasks individually "without monitored." The words *freedom* and *free* were used in situations where the teacher did not control the learners or when the learners could choose things, such as where they wanted to complete a given task, for instance standing up in the classroom, deciding

where to sit in the classroom, or talking with the other learners. In general, the terms were used together with the words *choose*, *choice*, *independent*, and *self-directed*. *Freedom* was also used when pupils voluntarily finished the schoolwork without the teacher interrupting or when the pupils were able to make a choice of what he or she thought was best.

D2H14: "it is very important for learners to be free and this will lead to learners loving school and be able to be open to both their teachers and parents if they are having problems."

D2H17: "One thing—shocked or surprised me a little and that is the fact that children can just stand up whenever they wish and do what they want in the class. The reason why this works might be because there is only a small number of children in one class and the level of chaos is therefore minimized."

These findings indicate that the observer assumed that "chaos" would start immediately if the teacher did not control the learners. This freedom was viewed as a "lack of discipline," but also "a way to learn a way to love the school". In many cases, the freedom was described in connection with how to speak to the teacher. In some reflections, the observer noted that the learners were "speaking freely" to the teacher or "calling her by the first name." This might be connected to the social relations of African people, such as respect for the elderly and acceptance of the hierarchy or higher status. Calling a teacher, who is older and has higher status, by the first name is considered impolite and disrespectful in the African context. Relations with peers and with the teacher (especially) were also described using the word *free*.

D2H9: "Strong interactive relation between teacher and pupils - - The conversations between the pupil and teacher are more joyful and free; pupil feels free to open dialogue with the teacher (in Finland)"

On the other hand, student teachers also reported the classroom teachers' ability to make choices about the contents of the day or "what she thought was best for the learners." The attitude towards individuality was reflected in the data. Reflected by the students, many learners stated that not achieving the goals together with the peers in Africa created some negative feelings or fear. The emotions described here indicate that the presence of control and authority somewhat contradict the concept of freedom.

D1H19: “. . . fear for wrong answers (in Africa), I am still not free to raise my concerns during the lessons, or be able to socialize.”

D1H12: “It was hard for me to count numbers in a correct order (in Africa). The teacher asked me to stay after school to learn how to count, and I cannot go home without knowing them (the numbers). She beat me with a weep.”

Students also commented on control and risks by describing the physical school buildings.

D2H13: “the school does not have cameras inside (in Finland) only outside—there is no fence surrounding the school.”

This detail might be important to international students because they have experienced threats or insecure feelings regarding the school facilities in Africa.

D1H11: “lions were passing through our school—this was terrifying—wildfires—we had to go out there and put out the fire.”

D1H3: “raining—get lost in my ways as there is huge forest or it flooding—the corporal punishment was still in use.”

Student teachers also made reflections about individuality, including “to have a one-on-one relationship with each learner,” “every child has a specially tailored curriculum,” “individual timetable,” and “teacher makes sure every child understands and learns something.” In DATA II, the reflections made notes about resources, such as personal assistants for students with learning disabilities. In general, the portfolios noted the (classroom) teachers’ attitudes towards weak learners, accepting that pupils have individual learning schemas, thoughts, and learning styles.

D2H4: “kids are seen writing words they don’t understand on the board, which they then decode and try to understand with the teacher.”

D2H4: “I also believe the incorporation (inclusion) of students with special needs in schools is good because when these students grow up, they don’t go to a special earth just for them. They are in society, where they belong.”

D2H16: “one learner was slower but was not rushed to finish his work.”

On the other hand, student teachers viewed individuality as a possibility for the pupil to express his or her feelings, thoughts, and attitudes. In the data, the concept of equality was used in various contexts to describe the situation between the schools in Finland, individuals, and possibilities. On the macrocultural level, equality was mentioned as the schools being funded equally (policy level) or that “schools are democratic where everybody is treated respectfully” (value level).

D2H21: “all the schools are equal and free of charge.”

D2H7: “not much difference in state school and public school.”

The concept of equality (or being equal) was used also on a micro level, or individual level. This included the fact that the teachers were listening to and appreciating what the children said as if they shared the same status and were equal to each other. One portfolio stated that “the teacher equally learns from the learners.” The data also indicates that the learning environments were equal, with one student teacher writing that there was an “equal chance of reading.”

Interestingly, there were some key concepts only used in an African context concerning school achievements, such as ranking, competition, and competence. These included (in DATA I) reflections about the school history of the students and their school achievements. The portfolios used expressions like “top ten best-performing students,” “best learner in the class,” and “performance outstanding level.”

D1H22: “Secondary school is learning the competitive nature of world and different classes of the society even though the school was comprised of mainly one tribe—learners competing for the awards—as the Best Overall Performer learner”

D1H21: “ranked high performing schools nationally, in the top ten—as most people could not afford the school fees”

The expressions used when writing about the school were “top performing school” or “one of the best-ranked schools in my home country”. The school and student achievement, or ranking system, were connected to economic issues. These expressions were only mentioned in DATA I. The basic concepts in the observation reports describing the education system in Finland were freedom, equality, and individuality. These concepts were connected to other concepts near to them and could be found on both micro and macro levels. As a synthesis, some central concepts of the content analysis are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Central concepts of the content analysis in this study

| Concept | Microcultural level (personal, individual, school) | Macrocultrual level (nation, policy, value) |
|----------------|---|---|
| freedom | freedom to choose the place emotional freedom, being without fear freedom to decide move freely not being monitored | calling teacher by the first name authoritative control (teacher, parents) independence |
| equality | equal chance for reading feeling of friendship | democracy schools are democratic opportunities for citizens schools are equal and free of charge |
| individuality | individual timetable tasks stored in individual files | tailored curriculum special children get assistance |

10. LEARNING HOW TO LEARN AS A STUDENT TEACHER

Every person is a member of a microculture with an ethnic background, family education, and personal resources, as well as a social macroculture with values, norms, and sanctions (Nurmi and Kontiainen, 1995). Based on the content analysis, it seems clear that African students reflect upon their own learning environment with more control and authority and less choice for both the teachers and the learners, whereas the Finnish learning environment was described with the three basic concepts of freedom, equality, and individuality.

11. DISCUSSION

The aim of this research was to study international students' reflections of the observation course to gain understanding of how international students see the education system of Finland. This article has discussed the cross-cultural highlights of Finnish and African learning environments to broaden the higher educators' and students' abilities to think, communicate, and understand cultural diversity in teacher education. The study reflects the lesson management, teacher attitudes, learning arrangements, and pupils' abilities and time management.

The study indicated, that the learning environments in Africa are sensitive and fragile and contain factors that may dramatically affect an individual's education. These factors can include parents' working situations, economic issues, health and welfare, relatives, and teachers' competencies. Also, the white-rich/black-poor dichotomy and the government-owned/private-owned dichotomy seem to affect the learning environment. It must be noted that the students represent only one African country and they had spent about three months in Finland before the portfolios were produced. Therefore, it is possible that their reflections of their home country were affected by Finnish society and the internationalizing policy of the university. Such activities include the cross-border delivery of education programs, internationalized curriculum for the bachelor studies, attending the lessons and intercultural campus events, communicating with support groups, Finnish families, peer contacts, financial support systems, and involvement in academic support units such as library activities. However, it is widely known that attitudes and values do not change quickly, so this data serves quite well for understanding the cultural differences and, in a broader perspective, the university internationalisation.

The African students see three basic concepts expressed in the Finnish learning environment: *freedom, equality, and individuality*. These values affect an individual's studies on both a micro and macro level. Our results indicate that one of the basic differences between the countries is how the teachers control the learning environment. Firstly, Finnish pupils are brought up with a sense of freedom and possibility to make their own decisions. This freedom, which is a value of the Finnish school system, concerns teachers, schools, and universities. In this study, the concept of freedom was described more often in terms of the individual and less often in terms of the organizational level. The concept of freedom was described as "being free *from* something," such as learning without being monitored, but also "being free *to* something," such as standing up whenever pupils wanted. Secondly, the students used the concept of equality in the context of equity. This was the case when describing the possibilities for learning or teachers' solutions for dividing her or his time between the pupils. The concept of equality was also seen in a larger context as part of values, strategies, and policies in the education system. Thirdly, the concept of individuality was connected to the concept of equality, and it was often used to describe the didactical arrangements or practical issues in the classroom. The concept of individuality was also used on the macro level to describe the education system in the special schools, including tailored curriculum. Encouraging international competence

may require personal and interpersonal development and learning to combat intolerance and isolation.

The concepts freedom, individuality, and equality are in line with Sahlberg's (2011, 140) description of the future of Finnish education: Sahlberg writes about individuality and individually customized learning plans and points out that academic and interpersonal skills should be learned equally. Especially the older pupils would need this, so that they would manage their own behaviour and learning. The general aim of this study was to broaden the views of internationalisation in the faculty. As Gonçalves Conçalves (2010) puts it, "it is important to look first at the difference, so we may respect it, and later we can look at the similarity".

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