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Teachers as frontline agents of integration: Refugees and physical education in Finland

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Abstract

The responsibilities of physical education teachers are responding to increased migration and wider political shifts in Europe. How might tertiary institutions prepare the next generation of PE teachers to address issues of social inclusion and cultural pluralism? This article critically reflects on an experiential learning intervention in Jyväskylä, Finland, in which trainee PE teachers facilitated kinaesthetic language-learning workshops for asylum seekers. We focus on how this intervention may have transformed the trainee PE teachers' understandings and expectations of their emerging professional identities. We interpret the trainee PE teachers' written accounts of the experience through contemporary theories of acculturation.

Keywords: Physical education; teacher training; transformative learning; refugee; integration; professional identity.

Highlights:

- Cultural inclusion is a growing responsibility for PE teachers in Europe
- Trainee PE teachers attitudes to new migrants are diverse
- Practical interventions with migrants during tertiary training can transform and expand trainee PE teachers' understandings of professional identity

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Introduction: Agents of integration

How should young people be taught in, through and about their bodies?

Upheavals in multiculturalism in Europe have made Physical Education more politically contentious now than perhaps at any point in the last century. This contention was vividly illustrated by a recent legal challenge against the Swiss government by parents seeking to absent their children from mixed-gender swimming classes on religious grounds. The case subsequently went to the European Court of Human Rights, which affirmed the Swiss government's position and emphasized that school plays "a special role in social integration, particularly where children of foreign origin were concerned" (European Court of Human Rights 2017, p.1). Regardless of one's political viewpoint on this particular case, the ruling

clearly demonstrates that Physical Education teachers are expected to be frontline ‘agents of integration’. So how might tertiary study prepare such agents?

As educators of the next generation of PE and Dance teachers, the authors of this article are concerned with how we prepare our graduates to activate young learners through embodied practices, within classrooms that are becoming more and more culturally, socially and politically complex. We acknowledge that cultural diversity in classrooms is an often confronting and complex issue for teachers (Ullucci, 2007), and that the attitudes and approaches that teacher-educators present during tertiary training has a significant impact on teacher’s subsequent classroom practices (Gay, 2015). As we design our courses we therefore ask ourselves, how might these new teachers develop confident professional identities to engage in a culturally dynamic education environment? How might our activities and assessment tasks encourage ideals of inclusion and tolerance in Physical Education and Dance, at a time when values of exclusion and intolerance insidiously and explicitly extend themselves across Europe’s political landscape?

Within this article, we focus on an experiential learning intervention in which second year PE students at the University of Jyväskylä presented kinaesthetic language-learning workshops to asylum seekers, mainly from Iraq and Afghanistan. The applied use of physical education in this context provided a distinct opportunity to consider a PE teacher’s professional identity as an agent of integration. Through a structured, qualitative questionnaire we sought the trainee PE teachers’ reflections on this intercultural encounter. We subsequently positioned these reflections within theories of cultural sensitivity, to gain an understanding of how this intercultural encounter may have contributed to a transformative learning experience for the trainee teachers.

We first discuss the socio-political context of refugees in Europe, and contending approaches to cultural integration. We then rationalize the intervention undertaken by the trainee PE teachers at a local Reception Centre, and the transformative learning aims for the trainee teachers. This leads us to introduce our research process, which crystalized around the research inquiry: How did this learning intervention transform trainee teachers’ approaches to cultural difference amongst learners? Our subsequent discussion on transformative learning, professional identity and cultural sensitivity extends on the reflections provided by the trainee PE teachers.

Movement in a time of crisis: Inclusion, integration, and intercultural competence

Europe, and the entire world, is facing the worst refugee crisis since the Second World War. According to the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), tens of millions of people have left their homes to escape war or persecution. This massive and seemingly endless influx of refugees from war-torn countries has occurred in tandem with terrorist events within Europe that are perceived to be associated with foreign conflicts. The integration of asylum seekers within the national cultures of Europe has thus become more urgent, as it has been argued that the exclusion of migrant minorities can lead to acts of terrorism that impact upon the whole society (Hornqvist & Flyghed, 2012). Our research thus takes place at a time of widely felt political concerns for European cultural identities, in which national languages have been valued as central to the maintenance of European identity, rated as even more important than religion and cultural customs, and more than twice as important as place of birth (Wike, Stokes & Simmons, 2016). Extending upon this idea, cultural fears and xenophobic expressions have entered more mainstream political discourse in Europe, contributing to the

rise of far-right parties and the politics of ethnic exclusion. The rhetoric surrounding the electoral victory of US President Trump and the referendum to end British membership of the European Union provided high-profile and evocative expressions of this exclusion (Costello, 2016; Woolfson, 2016). So how might individual PE teachers, as agents of integration, function within such a politically discordant context? When the meeting of cultures is so contested, what does 'integration' mean, and how might it be achieved?

Acculturation, or the coming together of different cultural groups, can lead to the assimilation, separation, marginalization or integration of migrants depending on how the encounter is managed (Berry, 2005). These four theoretical constructs illustrate the different directions a migrant may take:

- When *assimilating* into a new culture, migrants let go of former cultural protocols and habits, and reconstruct their identity through the cultural practices of the new group.
- When *separating*, migrants remain socially ghettoized within the geographic space of the new culture, maintaining the cultural patterns of their former homeland.
- When *becoming marginalized*, migrants forsake both their new and their former cultures; developing a sense of alienation from both.
- When *integrating*, migrants manage to negotiate space for a new, hybrid culture that can include valued elements of both their former and their new cultural environments.

The cultural pluralism formed through such *integration* challenges the essentialist idea that culture is inherently locked within particular ethnic/racial groups and geographic locations (e.g. Hofstede, 1991; Huntington, 1994). Integration acknowledges that cultures and collective identities have been socially constructed (Clarke, 1973; Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983; Anderson, 1991); that this construction involves appropriating cultural ideas and artefacts across groups (Chatterjee, 1994); and that ultimately culture involves the creation of new hybrid ideas and artefacts (Bhabha, 1990). When seen from this view, European culture has continually evolved through history as a result of encounters with different groups. Such evolution can take place more readily when intercultural encounters are based on a tolerance for, and, ultimately, a celebration of, difference (Martusewicz, Edmundson & Lupinacci, 2015).

Guided by the European Union's common principles for integration, in Finland the idea of acculturation seeks a non-discriminatory and equal society, through which immigrants settle and socially, economically and politically become part of the society and their new living environment while maintaining their own languages and cultures (L1386/2010, 2010; Valtioneuvosto, 2016). This requires adaptation and adjustments by both the immigrants and the host society, in several interrelated areas of life that can proceed in varied ways in each area¹ (Integration of immigrants 2009). The acculturation strategies in Finland have therefore been designed to challenge assumptions of assimilation, separation or marginalization; that migrants will simply 'fit in' to established Finnish behaviours and attitudes, isolate themselves in distinct cultural ghettos, or simply become culturally alienated.

Gaps in policy and practice exist, however, in many areas of public service, and it is evident

¹ A report on "Integration of immigrants into Finnish society in distinctive domains of life" (2009) considers the integration of immigrants into Finnish society in five domains of life: (1) work life, (2) family, children and life conditions, (3) community/society, (4) health and well-being, and (5) service systems. A salient theme is the two-way process of integration. (2009, 8)

that the meeting of different cultures does not automatically lead to a comfortably shared sense of cultural pluralism. As Kerri Ullucci notes, teachers in government schools do not automatically “operationalize culturally relevant pedagogies” (2011, p.389), despite exposure to theories of multiculturalism during tertiary training. For *integration* to occur, all of those involved must be willing and inclined to renegotiate the possibilities and pluralities of culture.

The inclination to reconstruct culture and foster integration can therefore require a dispositional shift; from desiring universal conformity to a perceived cultural status quo, to desiring cultural pluralism, evolution and diversity. This might be understood as a transition from an ethnocentric to an ethnorelative perspective which, as Bennett (1986) describes, involves progression along a spectrum of viewpoints. This spectrum includes, at the ethnocentric end, a denial that any differences exist amongst cultural ‘others’, then to a belief that any differences are wrong/abnormalities, and onto a belief that such abnormalities are very rare/minor. This can progress towards the ethnorelative end of the spectrum, from first a full recognition that differences exist and are rational and normal within their context, then to adapting behaviour to accept different cultural forms in the same geographic space, to an active willingness to integrate such differences into one’s own cultural identity and behaviour, ultimately creating new cultural expressions and forms, in hybrid or third spaces (Bhabha, 1994).

The integration of distant cultural groups is relatively new within Finland, which remains more culturally homogeneous than many parts of the world. Notable issues within this national identity include the continuation of Swedish as the second official language and the legacy of the forced assimilation of the indigenous Sami people (Aikio-Puoskari, 2001). Intercultural encounters are still relatively rare however, in the more rural regions. The city of Jyväskylä is situated in central Finland, subject to a sub-arctic climate, and has so far had relatively little experience of non-European immigration.

In 2016, when our research took place, this situation had at least temporarily changed. In 2015, 32,476 people had applied for asylum in Finland. These asylum seekers generally lived in reception centres while waiting for a decision on whether they would be granted asylum, which could take more than 12 months (Finnish Immigration Service, 2016). Reception centres provide asylum seekers with accommodation, food, healthcare, information about Finnish culture including legislation, employment, equality (such as gender roles and norms), and organize activities, such as language instruction. These reception centres are located in different parts of the country, and the Red Cross maintains approximately half of the reception centres in Finland. While some asylum seekers may work outside the reception centres, in general their mobility, education, professional opportunities and contact with Finnish people is very limited (Red Cross, 2017).

As Finland is becoming more heterogeneous through increased immigration, cultural pluralism is becoming a more tangible issue. There are local shifts in understandings and expectations of ‘others’, and PE teachers are facing radically different educational environments to the schools they grew up within. As future teachers, the young women and men enrolled in the Faculty of Sport and Health Sciences at the University of Jyväskylä will inevitably influence how children from many different backgrounds will understand their moving bodies. So how might we best prepare them for such intercultural encounters?

Movement encounters: Transformational learning and professional identities

The programme in Health and Physical Education at the University of Jyväskylä is the only teacher training programme for PE teachers in Finland, attracting students from across the country. This five-year programme includes BA and MA (3 + 2 years) degrees as all public school teachers in Finland are required to have a master's degree. It thus qualifies graduates to teach Physical Education within the Finnish public school system. Situated within the second year of study, *Meeting individual needs in physical education* is a compulsory course that extends understandings of student-centred learning. Three main themes are explored: intercultural and multicultural learning, adapted physical activity and special needs in learning, and sexual and gender diversity. Introduced in 2014, the course responds to shifts in the socio-cultural environment of Finland and extends wider policies within the University to advance social inclusion and cultural pluralism (SIMHE, 2017). Relevant to these policies, the course aspires to the following learning outcomes:

- The student becomes aware about how his/her own values, attitudes and cultural background influence encounters with individual pupils
- The student is able to reflect critically on his/her own practices as a physical education teacher from the viewpoints of equality, equity and human rights
- The student is able to perceive each pupil's individual style of participation and learning within a diverse group of pupils
- The student is able to teach physical education so that each pupil, regardless of his/her abilities and background, has equal opportunities to participate and experience success in physical education

(Liikuntatieteellisen tiedekunnan opinto-opas [study guide of Faculty of Sport and Health Sciences], 2014, p.64)

Prior to the introduction of this course, theories of cultural diversity within the degree programme were only delivered through lecture-based forums. The teachers of the degree recognized the limited exposure that many graduates had of cultural diversity before undertaking their first jobs, and the challenges this presented to new teachers. This prompted a need to provide students with an opportunity to actually encounter multicultural groups, an experience that might prompt reflections on what it means to be a teacher to diverse learners.

As an experiential learning component of *Meeting individual needs in physical education*, second year students provided Finnish language workshops at a local Reception Centre for approximately 180 asylum seekers, on February 10-12, 2016. Before planning the workshops the students attended a preparatory lecture organized by the Red Cross, which is mandatory before entering a reception centre as a volunteer worker. Some students also participated in a voluntary workshop on kinaesthetic language learning arranged in collaboration with Zodiak – Center for New Dance. This workshop provided functional, movement-based ways of learning language, as developed by the Zodiak Centre². Within the workshops presented at the reception centre, the PE students facilitated task-based activities that blended physical activities and games with the acquisition of Finnish vocabulary. This has been described as the applied use of learning through movement (Green Gilbert, 2006; Minton, 2008), kinaesthetic learning (Kuczala, 2015), and embodied learning (Anttila, 2015). This active

² Zodiak is a dance organisation in Helsinki and the production house of contemporary dance. The workshop at Zodiak was arranged by the Faculty of Sport and Health Education of the University of Jyväskylä in co-operation with the ArtsEqual research initiative.

learning task therefore provided the trainee PE teachers with a practical experience of both kinaesthetic language teaching, teaching in a multicultural classroom, as well as cross-curricular, or phenomenon-based learning. All areas might be considered extensions from the traditional roles of PE teachers, and relevant to their responsibilities as agents of cultural integration.

The intervention was situated within a forum in which young Finnish teacher trainees could encounter asylum seekers, in the environment that they live, to partly witness the journey some immigrants take to gaining legal residence. This was designed to prompt an experiential understanding of the cultural distance between the trainee teachers and the refugee students, and open pathways to accepting and integrating the needs of diverse learners. In this sense, the intervention was a catalyst for transformative learning (Mezirow, 1991; 1997; 2009). Such transformative learning involves,

...experiencing a deep, structural shift in the basic premises of thought, feelings, and actions. It is a shift of consciousness that dramatically and irreversibly alters our way of being in the world. Such a shift involves our understanding of ourselves and our self-locations; our relationships with other humans and with the natural world; our understanding of relations of power in interlocking structures of class, race and gender; our body awarenesses, our visions of alternative approaches to living; and our sense of possibilities for social justice and peace and personal joy.
(O'Sullivan and Morrell, 2002 p. 18)

Such transformative learning can be distinguished from simply the acquisition of content knowledge or skills competence, and requires a significant change in the student's "habits of mind" which are articulated as new "points of view" (Mezirow, 1997, p.5). Transformative learning has been identified as relevant to intercultural sensitization and the development of an ethnorelative viewpoint (Taylor, 1994), and might be considered a key step towards acclimatizing PE teachers as agents of integration in 21st century Finland.

While it might be assumed that simply because a change in perception has been expressed by students then broader behavioural shifts will automatically follow, there is little evidence to support this (Taylor, 1997). As Mezirow notes, "Having a positive experience with one of these groups may change an ethnocentric point of view but not necessarily change one's ethnocentric habit of mind regarding other groups" (2009, p.93). Moreover, an expressed point of view in the professional context of being a teacher may not reflect a 'habit of mind' shift that would result in less ethnocentric mindsets in other social or political contexts. Put simply, a teacher may express empathy towards the needs of a particular group of students, without necessarily empathizing with other groups with similar needs, or without wanting, for example, to welcome one of them into their own family.

Addressing this concern, Murrell and Foster (2003) suggest that changes in a teacher's *dispositions* are more relevant to their teaching behaviours and practices than changes in their personal belief systems. A transformative learning experience may therefore indicate a habit-of-mind shift specifically limited to the dispositions a teacher carries within their *professional* identity. Developing a professional identity as a teacher (as distinct from developing one's *personal* identity) allows one to actively participate in the community-of-practice of educators (Wenger, 1998). The development of such an identity requires a reflective process that contrasts personal values with professional goals and "can ultimately involve a compromise between idealism and pragmatism" (Rowe & Martin, 2015, p.28). For

movement teachers predominantly working with active learners in highly physical endeavours, this process of “reflection on one’s function as a teacher can allow for a more nuanced daily pathway past the Scylla and Charybdis of teacher-centred and student-centred learning” (Buck & Rowe, 2014 p.170). Developing confidence in one’s professional identity can in this way be crucial to the sustainability of a teaching career (McShane, 2006); it allows a teacher to maintain an individual sense of purpose within the wider institutional expectations of formal education, while framing a very personalized approach to ongoing reflective practice (Schön, 1987).

Disentangling a personal identity from a teaching identity means that we can value the transformations in habits-of-mind that take place in a professional context alone; shifts that make a teaching practice more sustainable, without evidence that a broader transformation in personal beliefs has taken place. Mezirow has distinguished this transformational process into “thinking like a teacher” as an occupational “socio-linguistic” shift, distinct from broader “moral-ethical” and “psychological” transformations (2009, p. 93). Our research thus sought to understand how the intercultural encounter at the reception centre influenced the trainee teacher’s attitudes and approaches to *teaching* migrants, rather than changes in their broader attitudes to migrants and foreign cultures in general. So how did this learning event prompt a shift in professional dispositions towards integrating cultural differences amongst learners into their own professional practices?

Methodology: Collective interpretations

Our approach to this question acknowledged the complexity and diversity of the students’ experiences of the intervention. Adopting an interpretive approach, we specifically sought to understand their experiences, rather than to determine the causes behind, and results emerging from, the experience (Wasser & Bresler, 1996; Stinson & Green, 1999). We were not driven by an attempt to prove the efficacy of the intervention; instead, we were concerned with the students’ “... personal perception or account of an object or event as opposed to an attempt to produce an objective statement of the object or event itself” (Smith, Jarman & Osborn 1999, p.218). From these accounts, we have sought to understand how a learning intervention may function as transformative, shifting professional dispositions towards social inclusion and cultural integration.

To obtain these accounts, we constructed an open-ended, qualitative, yet structured, set of questions that prompted students to reflect on how they felt and what they thought before, during and after the encounter. These were followed by additional questions that asked students to identify any epiphanies they may have experienced, and to speculate on how they may approach similar events differently in the future.

Following the ethical protocols of the University of the Arts Helsinki, students were provided with the option not to participate in the data collection through the subsequent questionnaire. Of the 70 students participating in the workshops, 21 of the students completed the questionnaire, in their own time outside of class. The data was anonymized and translated into English, and subsequently analysed collaboratively by the research team. The gender of those participating was almost evenly split, although a comparative gender analysis is not central to our study and so gender has not been identified in this discussion.

Our research team was comprised of practitioner/scholars with varying degrees of proximity to the learning intervention. Mariana, as a lecturer at the University of Jyväskylä and the

convener of *Meeting individual needs in physical education*, had a more intimate knowledge of the curricula aims and learning processes. Eeva, as a professor of dance at the University of the Arts Helsinki and team leader of the Arts@School team of the ArtsEqual project (a research project funded by the Academy of Finland that seeks to advance social inclusion and equality through the arts), identified the relevance of the intervention to wider political concerns within education in Finland. Nicholas, as an associate professor of dance at the University of Auckland with experience of dance education in the Middle East, prompted reflections on theories of cultural difference, transformative learning and professional identity.

All three of us attended the intervention at the reception centre, observing/participating in the workshops and meeting with the trainee PE teachers and asylum seekers. We subsequently corresponded through email and held face-to-face meetings, to further build our understandings of the event and construct an analysis that might reflect its significance. Our collaborative, interpretive process involved a dynamic series of negotiations where new meanings and understandings emerged. Sharing our perspectives have generated a critically reflective social space, or “a place where multiple viewpoints are held in dynamic tension as a group seeks to make sense of fieldwork issues and meanings” (Wasser & Bresler, 1996, p.6).

In the following section, we present results from the questionnaires and our collective interpretation. The insights that the students’ accounts have generated within our interpretive zone are distillations that result from a shared process where language produces meaning, rather than reflects social reality (Richardson, 1994). At another time, with different theoretical lenses, and by different researchers, the insights would be different. Ample citations from original accounts provide a possibility for the readers to evaluate how our interpretations connect with students’ experiences and thoughts.

We first discuss the students’ prior expectations and prevailing attitudes towards working with asylum seekers in such a context. This then leads into an analysis of their reflections on how the experience stimulated shifts in their pedagogic approaches and professional identities as PE teachers.

Preconceptions of others: “I was a bit scared and tense”

The trainee students entered the workshops at the Reception Centre with clear expectations that a cultural difference would exist between them and the learners. They generally acknowledged that their preconceptions of the asylum seekers were built on media representations, which had led to some apprehension. This sense of cultural ‘otherness’ inspired mixed reactions:

...The impression based on media is very negative and surely because of that I was a bit scared and tense in the beginning ... (P9)

I did not really know what to expect, I was quite tense partly because of things that I had heard before but on the other hand, enthusiastic, because I have no previous related experience. (P6)

My expectations towards the workshops were quite contradictory. It was fun to go and practice things that are foreign to me with people I don’t know, but at

the same time I was worried about what will happen when we necessarily do not have a shared language with which to communicate. (P12)

I had quite reserved feelings and I was a bit sceptical about visiting the centre. I think that this is due to my upbringing and my experiences about asylum seekers. I come from [area where] we did not have many asylum seekers or at least when I lived there. Now there are certainly more. These kinds of earlier experiences create a quite clear background for my scepticism towards asylum seekers. I try to be myself however and as positive as possible, and open minded towards people I don't know. (P14)

I expected a completely new kind of teaching environment where I had never been before. I also expected people with whom it would be difficult to communicate, and that cultural differences would influence our actions there. (P18)

The data collected from the students indicated that none of them presumed that cultural differences do not exist in the world, so did not appear to be positioned at the ethnocentric end of Bennett's (1986) spectrum. While they all anticipated that they would be encountering people whose worldviews and practices would differ from their own, they did not however articulate any observed differences amongst the asylum seekers. Perhaps due to the brevity of the experience, and perhaps as a result of preconceptions, the trainee-teachers did not seem to distinguish between Iraqi, Afghani or Syrian nationals, Kurds or Arabs, or any other ethnic, cultural, religious or national identities. The participants in the workshops appeared to remain homogenized as 'asylum seekers'. This homogenization may have limited the extent to which discrete cultural differences could be valued and reflected upon.

Questioning the relevance: "This kind of thinking makes me somehow melancholic"

As might be anticipated within such a politically controversial context, not all of the participants in the research responded positively to the experience, or considered it as an aspect of work that they would wish to extend within their professional identities as a PE teacher. For some, this engagement with migrants was reasoned as generally irrelevant to their perception of the role of a PE teacher:

I don't have great feelings towards people who live in asylum seekers' centre, and I do not have any political opinions towards immigration. Of course, it is good if asylum seekers can be acculturated from the beginning, and that they feel welcome. But this issue is not personally meaningful to me. (P18)

This comment identifies that the integration of asylum seekers into Finland "is not personally meaningful", illustrating a view that this concern is only relevant to individuals who are *personally* interested in the issue, and not one that is associated with the *professional* identity and responsibilities of a PE teacher. A few other students questioned the relevance of cultural integration to a PE teacher's identity:

I am not greatly interested in teaching in these kinds of environments. The reason for this is maybe that in these environments the emphasis is on leading activities that are self-evident for me and for me it would be important to be also personally challenged through the content. Of course, there are challenges in multicultural environments, but they are a bit different. (P16)

Although the workshops were not unpleasant, I still did not get the experience that

would make me want to continue doing them. I want to teach movement, but in this environment the quality and motive of teaching focuses more on integration and knowledge of local culture than motor learning. (P18)

Their disinterest reflects a sense that the experience felt banal, with activities that are “self-evident” and not “personally challenging”. The purpose of a PE teacher (and thus their professional identity) appears to be mostly valued in association with “motor learning” rather than the applied use of physical learning for social and cultural support.

For other students, the political complexity of the situation and the controversy surrounding asylum seekers dis-incentivized further involvement:

The experience at the asylum seekers' centre was great and I learned a lot. Despite that I would not want to continue working in an environment exactly like this. I felt myself all the time a bit uncertain, and I don't like that. In addition, it would be mentally taxing to be in the middle of the asylum seeker discussion all the time, that is, following who did something wrong, at times an asylum seeker, at other times someone from here. This kind of thinking makes me somehow melancholic. (P11)

While none of the participants responded in a manner that was completely antithetical to any sort of engagement or support for the integration of asylum seekers, and those expressing a disinterest were relatively few, these comments do illustrate that simply an exposure to cultural others is not enough to prompt a universal interest in cultural integration or an enthusiasm for being an agent of integration. This suggests that degree programmes that are seeking to graduate PE teachers as agents of integration may need to further define, rationalize and evidence the importance of cultural integration to students. Additionally, PE programmes may want to select students for admission who are pre-disposed to activating integration and the applied use of physical learning, just as they may currently select students who are pre-disposed to kinaesthetic learning.

Positive affirmation: “I want to show them respect, interest and acceptance”

For other participants however, the workshops were a more positive experience, one that provided an opportunity to extend understandings of their practices and their professional identities. For some, this positivity appeared to be associated with broader ideals of civic responsibility, rather than specifically related to the process of cultural integration:

For me it is most meaningful to help others in a difficult situation. Especially as their own desire to learn new things and to adjust in the prevailing situation was admirable. (P21)

For others, this sense of civic responsibility was directly aligned with the importance of fostering cross-cultural understandings:

Among all the negative talk towards immigrants that easily becomes generalized as an attitude concerning all Finns it is also important to show that not everyone shares these views. I want to show them respect, interest and acceptance, so that they would also get positive experiences of us Finns. The aim would be to help them get to know Finnish culture, language and habits, and to understand better their habits and culture. (P2)

I want to do my part in supporting their acculturation. The asylum seekers need

positive experiences on encountering Finns and vice versa. Movement is an excellent way to get to know each other and to encounter new cultures. (P15)

I want in my life make people happy. In this kind of activity, I get to make people who are in an arduous and unpleasant situation glad, to forget other issues for a moment and to share the joy of movement. That I can touch other people on a mental level, make them see other sides of Finns than “we don’t want you in our country” is really valuable and meaningful to me. (P2)

I would like to continue this kind of activity ... I am interested in different cultures and languages and I feel that I want to learn more about them all the time. It is interesting that Finland becomes more multicultural and I consider it important that individuals are integrated into society. Knowing Finnish language here is important and the aim of language workshops could be to increase social inclusion through improving language skills and through giving the asylum seekers etc. a feeling that they are welcome here. (P7)

These comments suggest that the participants were motivated by altruism and a deep-felt desire to let the asylum seekers know “that they are welcome here”. The actual process of acculturation that they expect is less clear however, and the conceptualizations of assimilation or integration were not overtly distinguished. A general interest in multiculturalism (and in the cultures of others) suggests that these respondents were open to an integrated process of cultural exchange. That the asylum seekers were themselves not antithetical to engaging with the Finnish trainee teachers was revelatory to some;

I learned that it is not a good idea to form preconceptions based on information from media. Everyone had for sure some conceptions that the media spreads everywhere, but these preconceptions go to trashcan quite fast ...I think that for most of us, preconceptions have dropped away during the activity. I learned about the participants that they were really friendly and grateful people. They reflected enthusiasm and joy about the fact that we had come to the centre because of them and arranged activities for them. They brought up gratefulness many times, and this made me feel good. (P9)

Other participants valued the workshops through the opportunities to encounter others, and foster relationships that had meanings beyond the stereotypes of donor-recipient, or Finn-foreigner. In doing so, the encounter allowed for the dismantling of cultural assumptions relating to Finnish reticence (Olbertz-Siitonen & Siitonen, 2015); and some participants suggest that the exchange had extended their understandings of the world and their place in it.

The workshop was very successful in my opinion and it changed my conceptions about asylum seekers a lot. I managed to avoid prejudices and be open, happy and social myself also at the reception centre ... we tried to be more encouraging, positive and happy teachers...This worked well and their own support to each other worked as a boost to the activity. I had a music device with me and it increased the activity at our station significantly. Many participants came to explore the device and talk with me about music and life. I let them also play their own songs and they became very enthusiastic. I think that music connects people. It was meaningful for me to discuss music with a few asylum seekers. They were happy, genuine, and interested in me and my music, as well as my hobbies and background. Some of them even added me as their Facebook friend and thanked a lot our visit. This makes even a man from the far North feel happy. (P14)

For yet other trainee teachers, the experiential nature of the learning activity provided an opportunity to reflect on ‘what works’ in cross-cultural learning contexts:

We had thought that we would take a couple of soccer balls along in case they would become a bit enthusiastic about playing with the balls. I was really astounded because when we got there they were really enthusiastic when we brought the balls. I could not have imagined that a couple of soccer balls could be such a great thing for them. I think that taking the balls there was one of the best things because it encouraged so many people to participate. Of course, it would have been better to have a bit more space, because at times plates and glasses were clattering a bit. (P9)

These reflections further began to become articulated as a transformation of personal and professional identity. The intercultural workshops prompted reflections regarding “*the possibility to learn a lot new about myself ... the workshop made me think about my previous experiences and ways of acting*” (P14). Participants further noted that cultural integration was increasingly central to a teacher’s professional responsibilities, and how this may develop into their own professional identity:

In the future encountering different cultures surely increases in the school world. Teachers have to know different cultures in order to be able to interact with different pupils. That is why I am interested and willing to continue working in multicultural contexts. Different cultures interest me. (P15)

With this kind of experiences my own tolerance develops and of course knowledge and experiences of a multicultural world improve. (P6)

These comments suggested that some of the trainee teachers valued the experience and rationalized the value of their role as PE teachers within the cultural integration of migrant groups. Our research sought to extend beyond simply acknowledgement however, and further identify if and how the trainee PE teachers might actually adjust their workplace practices in response to cultural differences amongst learners. How did the experience prompt them to “think like a teacher”, and transform their teaching practices to address the needs of the learners? How might this indicate the transformation of their professional dispositions and identities, to acknowledge cultural integration as a required aspect of being a PE teacher?

Professional identities bend and extend: “I slowed down the progression of the game”

Our enquiry acknowledges that the transformation of a habit-of-mind, which allows people to navigate the world in a way that is “more inclusive, discriminating, open, reflective and emotionally open to change” may be sudden or cumulative (Mezirow 2009, p.92). Small shifts in professional identity development may therefore contribute towards larger transformations in habits-of-mind towards cultural integration. Such a cumulative effect may therefore be seen taking place through the small and seemingly insignificant adaptations that the trainee teachers made to their teaching practice:

I felt that I welcomed the residents through my behaviour. When the activity began, I slowed down the progression of the game and took a so-called instructing role ... I instructed the activity towards an even more calm direction so that everyone could follow. (P17)

I noticed that after being a bit tense in the beginning it was quite easy for me and my group to throw ourselves in and encourage others. Although I feel that my language abilities are not very good I managed quite well in this kind of situation. Verbal

communication was supported by nonverbal communication, body language and arm gestures helped. A cheerful appearance and positive attitude carries far! (P1)

The instructions became clearer as the day progresses, excess words and too difficult phrases were left out when I noticed that the asylum seekers do not understand everything that I supposed they understand ... we also changed the activity so that the asylum seekers had to say the directions that we showed themselves. This improved the situation clearly. (P18)

I understood the significance of nonverbal communication and in general, the importance of clarity and accuracy of communication when we explain an activity to people who are in the beginning stages of learning a language. (P19)

It was important that things were repeated many times. I noticed that it was motivating for the participants to show and say movements themselves and not only follow and do teacher-directed activities. I was active and I felt that I am using my abilities as best. I felt that I have a lot to give. (P7)

These reflections illustrate how the trainee teachers recognized the cultural challenges that the learners faced, and acknowledged their own responsibility in making the learning accessible. Their “thinking like a teacher” adaptations within the class imply a concern for the communicative challenges of the learners, and a clear desire to maintain an inclusive learning environment.

This may be seen as an indication that the trainee teachers were extending their professional identity as a PE teacher. In terms of Bennett’s (1986) ethnorelativity spectrum, these reflections further suggest that the trainee teachers were being adaptive, actively making space to accommodate difference within their learning forums.

The following comments suggest that the students were progressing this relativity further, creatively considering how they may further transform the role and identity of a PE teacher, and expand the culture of Physical Education in Finland. Their critical speculations suggest that they are taking intellectual responsibility for the cultural integration of migrants.

Teaching language through movement and dance was a really effective and motivating way to learn. The activities were fun in my opinion and they inspired the participants... I noticed that the most playful activities enthused only the most active participants. Maybe more “adult like” activities would be more suitable to the men at the reception centre. (P15)

We could have tried to teach more challenging things from the learning Finnish point of view. (P19)

... It would for example be nice to teach language through movement in schools to multicultural children and youngsters, so that they would learn at the same time when they get exercise. This kind of activity seems to interest learners, and I would also like to learn language like this. (P5)

Of course, if there was more space for this, the activities would become more diverse. (P3)

As samples illustrating the students’ responses, the comments above suggest that the experience has moved into the reflective imagination of the trainee teachers, prompting them to engage in nuanced, critical reflections on their practice (Schön, 1987). That they were

expressed with an enthusiasm to improve the learning experience of the asylum seekers, to improve relationships with asylum seekers, and to potentially transform how all children learn language within Finland, all suggests a professional openness to cultural integration amongst the trainee teachers expressing the ideas.

Our analysis has therefore sought to first identify whether or not the experience supported the students' dispositions towards working with asylum seekers, and migrants in general, on language learning through movement. The participants' responses suggest that there were mixed feelings amongst the trainee teachers, as some students felt that the experience was not relevant to the role of a PE teacher. This prompted reflections on how either admission procedures or learning processes might better dispose trainee teachers towards multi-cultural encounters and applied uses of physical learning. For those that were motivated to work again with asylum seekers, some expressed an altruistic sense of civic duty, some emphasized the importance of cultural integration, others reflected on deepened understandings of their teaching practice. For these students, the experience appeared to contribute to a process of transformation, in which they were constructing professional identities that were amenable to the idea of being an agent of integration. Their motivation towards such cultural inclusion manifested within their teaching practices, through examples of adaptations of practice during the event and speculations on how they may extend their practice further, in future interventions. These examples suggested the ways in which the event had contributed to a dispositional shift towards supporting cultural pluralism, and towards expanding conceptions of professional identity for PE teachers in Finland in the 21st century.

Conclusion: Thongs in the snow

The language learning workshops facilitated by the students from the Faculty of Health and Physical Education at the University of Jyväskylä took place in mid-winter. The temperature was around zero, and the asylum seekers participating in the workshops shuffled along paths worn in the snow, between the accommodation units and the mess hall. Many only had thongs on their feet and loose fitting tracksuits, and clung to each other in the cold. The workshops, which lasted for several hours, were spread through the corridors and open spaces of the buildings and the participants from Iraq, Afghanistan and Syria called to each other in mixed dialects as they moved between the language-learning stations.

The reception centre in Jyväskylä has subsequently closed down, as part of wider, centralized governmental strategies for the management of refugees and asylum seekers, and the participants have been moved to other locations. We cannot make any claims regarding the experience of the workshops for the residents of the reception centre, and only hope that in some way the event provided them with a meaningful interaction with young people from the new land in which they sought asylum.

Our research focused on how an experiential learning intervention may transform student dispositions towards cultural integration. Within this article, we have emphasized the formation of professional identities, and how such an experience may prompt students to "think like a teacher" in a way that is inclusive and supportive of cultural difference. Through this interpretive study, we have sought to identify salient themes, which may prompt further research into how teacher education programmes foster future teachers that are confident and competent frontline agents of integration. We are enthusiastic to understand how else tertiary educators might design courses, transformative learning tasks, assessment and admission procedures that extend student expectations of their roles and responsibilities within a

multicultural society.

Our research into the experiential learning event at reception centre in Jyväskylä acknowledged that this approach to training Physical Education teachers is significant within the wider political context of social integration in contemporary Europe. Tensions over cultural identity in Europe, and how identity manifests within physical exercise, continues to be an issue that requires critical reflection. As vividly illustrated by the recent “Burqini Ban” in France (Hathway, 2016), these tensions can escalate and create deep fractures within national and urban communities. The ways that tertiary educators of teachers address these issues now will inevitably influence how future generations of children will respond to ideas of cultural pluralism and social inclusion.

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