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Research Article

FOSTERING LOCAL IDENTITY THROUGH PLACE-BASED EDUCATION: INSIGHTS FROM NIIGATA STUDIES AT A NURSING COLLEGE

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ABSTRACT

Rural and regional areas in Japan face an accelerating population decline, driven by youth migration and falling birthrates. This trend raises urgent questions about how higher education can foster community pride and long-term engagement.

This paper reports on the development, implementation, and evaluation of Niigata Studies, a first-year liberal arts course at Niigata College of Nursing, co-designed by a faculty member (the author) and a Joetsu City research institute. The course integrates two core themes—self-identity and regional resources—to strengthen students' connection to their local context while cultivating transferable intercultural perspectives.

The eight-week course (2022–2024) combines lectures, group discussions, and presentations. Drawing on both quantitative survey data and qualitative student reflections, we examine changes in regional awareness, self-perception, and community engagement intentions.

Post-course surveys revealed a significant increase in satisfaction scores, rising from 4.52 (2022) to 4.82 (2024) on a 5-point scale. In 2024, positive perceptions of Joetsu City increased from 50% before the course to nearly 90% afterward, and those of Niigata Prefecture from 65% to nearly 100%. Qualitative reflections indicated a shift from seeing regional assets as isolated facts to recognizing their interconnections, human agency, and cultural value. Students increasingly expressed pride in their hometowns and a willingness to contribute to sustaining local resources.

By combining academic inquiry with personal reflection and municipal partnership, Niigata Studies fosters both self-identity and place-based competence. Such integrative, human-centered learning is particularly relevant to nursing education, where understanding local context enriches patient care. This case illustrates how interdisciplinary approaches can be embedded within professional curricula to address socio-cultural as well as clinical competencies.

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1. Introduction

Population decline is one of the most pressing issues facing regional Japan. Joetsu City and Niigata Prefecture — the location of the college where I currently teach — have experienced a steady reduction in population due to the combined forces of youth outmigration and falling birthrates.

My academic background is in intercultural communication and English education, disciplines that emphasize cultivating self-identity in relation to "the other" as a foundation for meaningful engagement in an increasingly diverse and interconnected world. I have long been interested in the potential of liberal arts education to develop reflective, adaptable graduates, even after I transitioned to the nursing college in 2016, following 18 years at a liberal arts college.

In 2022, our college introduced a new first-year elective course titled *Niigata Studies* as part of a broader curriculum reform aimed at strengthening community-based learning. Co-developed with the Joetsu City research institute, the course was designed to connect nursing students to the local region in ways that were academically rigorous, personally meaningful, and professionally relevant.

The collaboration between the college and the city brought two key concepts into focus: self-identity and regional resources. In intercultural communication, self-identity involves recognizing one's own values and experiences while remaining open to others' perspectives. Regional resources, according to Uchiumi (2019), encompass both tangible and intangible assets—landscapes, histories, traditions, and human creativity—that give a place its distinctive character. Taken together, these concepts provide a powerful framework for understanding how individuals situate themselves within their communities, and how communities, in turn, are shaped by individual contributions.

From the outset, *Niigata Studies* was not intended as a conventional lecture series, but rather as a shared inquiry into place, identity, and responsibility (Nakamura, 2024). My hope was that by learning to see the region's assets with "new eyes," students would also begin to see themselves differently—as inheritors and stewards of their community's future.

2. Methods

2.1 Course Context and Setting

Niigata Studies is offered at Niigata College of Nursing, a small public institution established in 2002 with the mission of "nursing education rooted in the region." The college enrolls 95 students annually, over 85% of whom are women, and approximately 80% originate from within Niigata Prefecture.

To provide contextual background, Figure 1 illustrates the geographical location of Niigata Prefecture and Joetsu City. Niigata Prefecture, located along the Sea of Japan on Japan's northwest coast, is characterized by its long coastline, fertile plains, and heavy snowfall—features that have historically shaped its agriculture, culture, and industry. Within the prefecture, Joetsu City lies in the southwest, approximately 120 kilometers from Niigata City, the prefectural capital. With a population of about two million, Niigata ranks 16th among Japan's 47 prefectures, while Joetsu City itself is home to roughly 180,000 residents.

Both the prefecture and the city have experienced sustained population decline in recent decades due to youth outmigration and declining birthrates, reflecting broader demographic trends in regional Japan.

Figure 2 depicts population trends for both. Using 1995 as a baseline index of 100, Joetsu City and Niigata Prefecture had already dropped to 84 by 2025, with projections suggesting a further fall to 60 by 2050. These demographic shifts raise a critical question: How can education help young people see themselves as part of their community's future rather than apart from it?

Figure 1: Geographical location of Joetsu City and Niigata Prefecture

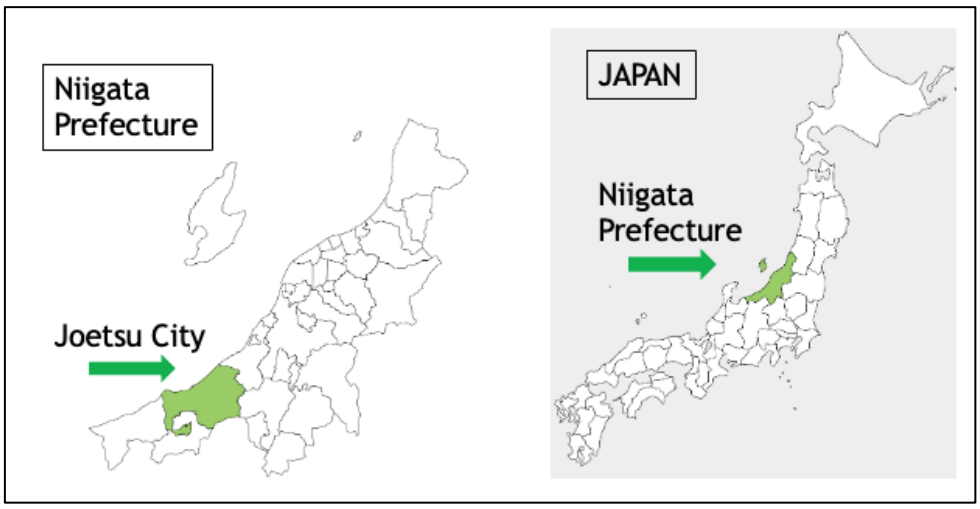
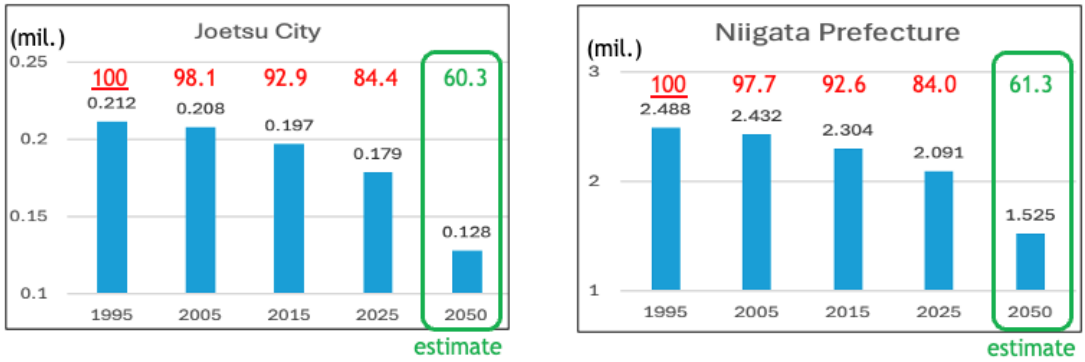


Figure 2: Population trends of Joetsu City and Niigata Prefecture



Source: National Institute of Population and Social Security Research (2023)

2.2 Course Design and Pedagogical Approach

The course was launched in 2022 as a two-month elective designed for first-year nursing students. It consists of eight 90-minute sessions delivered between June and July. The structure follows a progressive design: six lecture-based sessions are followed by two student-led sessions: one for group discussion and one for presentations. Two thematic pillars shape the curriculum:

1) Self-Identity – Encouraging students to reflect on their own backgrounds, values, and cultural perspectives in relation to others.
2) Regional Resources – Exploring the tangible and intangible assets of the Niigata region, including its natural environment, history, cultural practices, and human creativity.

The course is co-developed and co-taught by myself — drawing on expertise in intercultural communication, English education, and liberal arts pedagogy — together with the Joetsu City research institute. This partnership integrates academic and policy perspectives, ensuring that the content remains locally relevant while fostering critical and reflective learning.

2.3 Conceptual Framework: "Shin-Etsu Border Area"

A distinctive feature of the course is the reframing of the Joetsu region as part of the broader "Shin-Etsu Border Area," which encompasses neighboring the Uonuma area in Niigata Prefecture and the northern region of Nagano Prefecture (Uchiumi, 2019). Shin-Etsu is a compound term derived from "Shin" (Nagano) and "Etsu" (Niigata). All of these locations are accessible as day-trip destinations from Joetsu, underscoring their practical interconnectedness.

This expanded perspective encourages students to view borders not as fixed limits but as spaces of exchange, opportunity, and shared resources. Following Frampton's (1983) concept of "critical regionalism," students are invited to reinterpret local identity not as administrative divisions but as lived, evolving cultural experiences. Figure 3 provides a map of the Shin-Etsu Border Area, outlining its geographical scope.

Figure 3: The outline of the "Shin-Etsu Border Area"

Source: Uchiumi (2019).

Regional resources can be examined from the following perspectives:

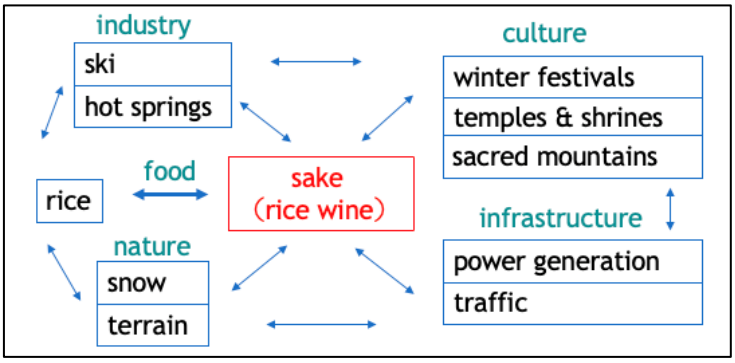
1) Objective Data – Using statistics and factual evidence to strengthen credibility.

2) Expanded Regional View – Looking beyond administrative borders to uncover networks and complementarities.
3) Border as Opportunity – Viewing peripheral zones not as margins but as spaces for innovation and exchange.
4) Contextual Backstories – Tracing the socio-historical and environmental narratives behind each resource.
5) Human Agency – Recognizing that all resources are shaped and sustained by human effort, creativity, and resilience.

This framework advocates a broader, trans-prefectural perspective in regional development, challenging the assumption that prefectural borders define cultural and economic boundaries. It defines regional resources as the unique features—natural, cultural, economic, and historical—that have been cultivated and sustained by local communities over time.

For example, the Shin-Etsu Border Area hosts numerous sake (rice wine) breweries. Their presence is supported by local rice production, itself shaped by snow, climate, and terrain. These shared natural conditions have also contributed to the development of spiritual traditions, pilgrimage routes, and hot spring resorts near ski areas. In this way, nature, culture, and human activity are deeply intertwined, and the region's story becomes one of human resilience, creativity, and hope. Figure 4 illustrates the interrelationships described above.

Figure 4: Example of a correlation diagram of regional resources, centered on sake (rice wine)



2.4 Data Collection and Evaluation

The evaluation of the course's impact drew on both quantitative and qualitative measures, employing four primary instruments:

1) Faculty Development (FD) Surveys – Annual institutional surveys in which students rated their satisfaction with each course on a 5-point scale.
2) Pre- and Post-Course Questionnaires – Designed to assess students' perceptions of Joetsu City and Niigata Prefecture before and after the course.
3) Minute papers – Collected at the end of each class to capture immediate reflections, which were then shared at the beginning of the following session.

4) Student Reflection Papers – Written reflections administered at multiple points during the course as well as its conclusion, enabling the tracing and deepening students' understanding of regional resources and self-identity.

3. Results

3.1 Quantitative Findings

Enrollment numbers for *Niigata Studies* were 45 in 2022, 62 in 2023, and 40 in 2024. Across these three cohorts, student satisfaction with the course consistently increased. FD survey ratings rose from 4.52 in 2022 to 4.77 in 2023 and 4.82 in 2024 on a 5-point scale.

As shown in Figure 5, post-course questionnaires conducted in 2023 and 2024 revealed a substantial positive shift in perceptions of the local area:

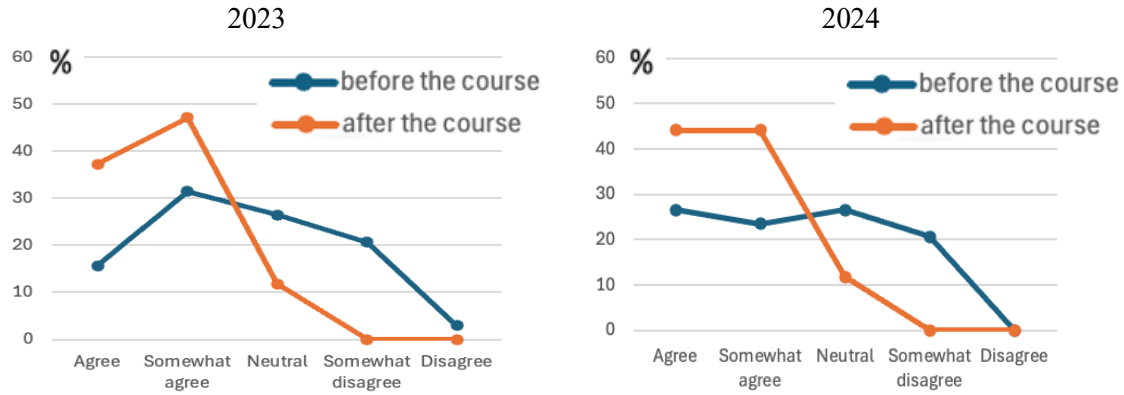
1) Positive views of Joetsu City—students who agreed they were proud of the city—increased from 47% before the course to 84% afterward in 2023, and from 50% to 88% in 2024.
2) Positive views of Niigata Prefecture rose from 52% to 96% in 2023, and from 65% to 97% in 2024.
3) Negative responses for both Joetsu City and Niigata Prefecture declined to zero or nearly zero in both years after course completion.

These findings indicate that the course had a significant and measurable effect on students' regional awareness and sense of pride. The upward shifts in the proportion of positive perceptions of Joetsu and Niigata are clearly illustrated in Figure 5.

Figure 5: Changes in student perceptions toward Joetsu City and Niigata Prefecture (2023/2024)

A **Question**: *Do you agree you felt proud of **Joetsu** before taking the course, and you feel proud of **Joetsu** now after completing the course?*

Response options: Agree / Somewhat agree / Neutral / Somewhat disagree / Disagree



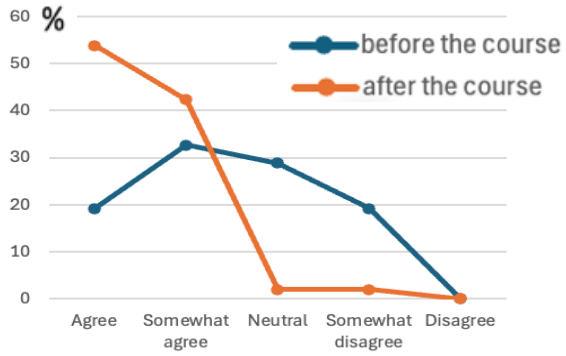
Response rate: 83.9% (n=52/62)

Response rate: 85.0% (n=34/40)

B **Question**: *Do you agree you felt proud of **Niigata** before taking the course, and you feel proud of **Niigata** now after completing the course?*

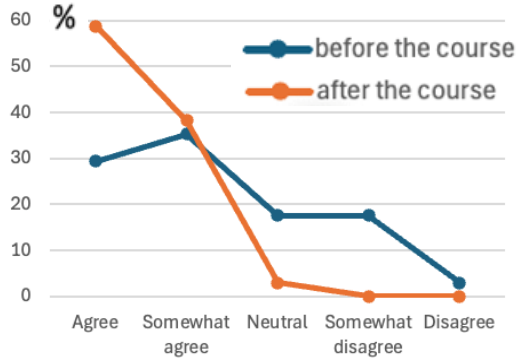
Response options: Agree / Somewhat agree / Neutral / Somewhat disagree / Disagree

2023



Response rate: 82.3% (n=51/62)

2024



Response rate: 85.0% (n=34/40)

3.2 Qualitative Findings: Student Reflections

3.2.1 On Regional Resources

Students demonstrated a deeper understanding of regional resources, reframing them from isolated economic or tourist assets into cultural legacies shaped by human effort over generations. One student wrote: "Regional resources are things people have long protected and built up. They are not just for economic or tourism purposes. We have them because of our history, and we have a responsibility to protect and pass them on."

Others reflected on the expanded perspective of the Shin-Etsu Border Area: "When talking about Joetsu, I used to think only within its boundaries. But now I see it as part of a wider area, including neighboring regions. Visitors don't care about municipal borders – they care about what they can experience."

This shift illustrates how the course helped students to reconceptualize place as a network of interconnected cultural, historical, and natural assets.

3.2.2 On Self-Identity

Intergroup discussions among students from different parts of Niigata and beyond facilitated self-reflection on identity. For many, this process revealed new pride in Niigata's strengths and a recognition of perspective-taking as a transferable skill for nursing. As one student expressed: "Even when we see the same thing, our backgrounds shape our perceptions. I learned not to rely only on my own viewpoint but to consider others' perspectives – something I want to apply in nursing care."

Others emphasized how learning about local resources translated into personal pride: "In group work with classmates from other regions, I realized how unique Niigata's strengths

are, like our high food self-sufficiency. The course helped me see these as part of my own pride in being from Niigata."

3.2.3 Linking Regional Pride and Nursing Practice

Many reflections explicitly connected regional knowledge to nursing practice. Students highlighted the role of cultural and environmental context in tailoring patient care: "Knowing the local culture, history, and environment gives us insight into patients' lives. It makes nursing care more personal and meaningful."

Others saw cultural knowledge as a means to strengthen communication with patients: "Being able to talk with elderly patients about their hometown might ease their anxiety during hospitalization. I hope to become a nurse who can also contribute to the development of the local community."

Such responses demonstrate how students internalized the relevance of place-based education for their professional development.

3.3 Emergent Themes

Analysis of qualitative data identified three interrelated themes:

1) Reframing the Region – Students began to view their hometowns as part of a broader, interconnected area rather than isolated administrative units.
2) Deepened Self-Identity – Reflection on local strengths fostered pride and belonging.
3) Professional Relevance – Students recognized the value of regional awareness directly to context-sensitive, patient-centered nursing practice.

4. Discussion

The results of Niigata Studies suggest that intentionally combining the concepts of self-identity and regional resources can generate meaningful educational outcomes for nursing students. The steady rise in satisfaction scores, together with the marked shift toward overwhelmingly positive perceptions of Joetsu City and Niigata Prefecture, indicates that the course succeeded in deepening students' connection to their local context.

4.1 Interplay of Self-Identity and Place

As someone with an academic background in intercultural communication, I have long valued the role of self-identity in fostering meaningful relationships across differences. In this course, however, we applied that principle not to global cross-cultural encounters but to interactions within our own region. When students from different parts of Niigata—and beyond—shared their perspectives, they began to see their own hometowns through new eyes. This mirrors Pinar's (2011) argument that education should encourage a process of *currere*—self-reflection in relation to one's lived experience—while simultaneously affirming one's place in a broader community.

4.2 Regional Resources as a Framework for Engagement

The concept of regional resources provided a concrete, place-based anchor for these identity reflections. Following Gruenewald's (2003) notion of a "critical pedagogy of place,"

our approach asked students to explore both the physical and cultural resources of the region, including those shaped by historical constraints and human ingenuity. When students began to see these resources not as static features but as products of resilience, adaptation, and creativity, their sense of ownership and responsibility deepened.

The reframing of the "Shin-Etsu Border Area" was especially powerful. By extending the conceptual boundaries of Joetsu to include neighboring parts of Niigata and Nagano Prefecture, students were encouraged to think beyond administrative lines. This broader perspective highlighted regional interconnections and potential for shared growth. As one student insightfully observed, "Visitors don't care where the borders are—they care about the experiences."

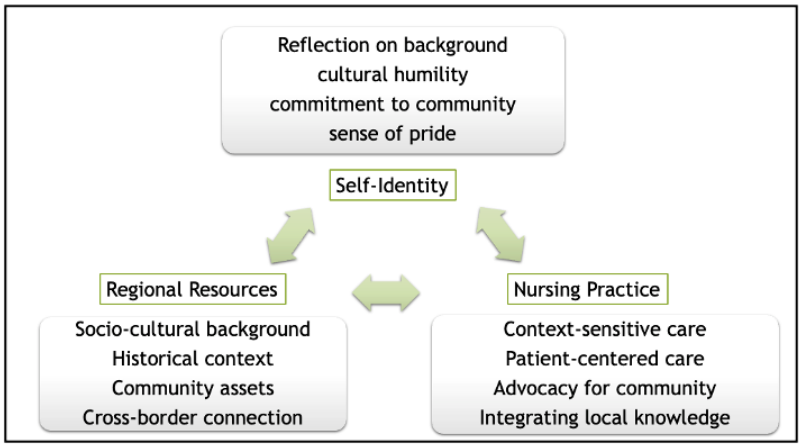
4.3 Implications for Nursing Education

While the course was not explicitly designed as nursing practice training, its relevance to nursing became evident through student reflections. Many students recognized that understanding the socio-cultural and environmental background of patients is essential for delivering context-sensitive care. This insight resonates with Narayanasamy's (2003) work on transcultural nursing, which emphasizes the importance of considering cultural background, environment, and local practices when planning patient care.

Through place-based education, students also engaged in "cultural humility" (Tervalon & Murray-García, 1998)—a critical nursing competency for practicing patient-centered care in multicultural contexts. Moreover, the sense of pride that emerged—valuing local assets and acknowledging their own role in sustaining them—fostered a stronger commitment to community engagement. This mindset prepares nursing students not only to deliver high-quality care but also to act as advocates for the well-being and vitality of the communities they serve.

Understanding the local context provides deeper insight into patients, as place is an integral part of personal identity. Because nursing care must be tailored to the individual, *Niigata Studies* holds strong relevance for nursing education. Figure 6 presents a conceptual diagram illustrating the interconnections among self-identity, regional resources, and nursing practice.

Figure 6: Conceptual Diagram, connecting self-identity, regional resources, and nursing practice



4.4 Educational Partnerships and Sustainability

From a practical standpoint, the collaboration between the college and the Joetsu City research institute has been instrumental in sustaining and enriching the course. This kind of partnership embodies Kemmis and Smith's (2008) notion of *praxis*—learning that is inseparable from doing, grounded in a shared commitment to improving the social and cultural life of a community. In our case, the mutual exchange between academic and municipal perspectives has ensured that the course remains relevant both to students' educational needs and to the city's long-term vision for community vitality.

Such partnerships also highlight the potential of higher education institutions to function not only as centers of knowledge transmission but also as hubs for regional revitalization. By engaging municipal actors in curriculum design, the course contributes to the city's ongoing policy efforts, while simultaneously training students to assume future roles as both healthcare providers and community members.

4.5 Limitations and Future Directions

This study reflects the experience of a single institution in one prefecture of Japan, and the findings may not be directly transferable to other contexts. Reliance on self-reported data and the elective nature of the course introduce limitations such as possible self-selection bias. Moreover, while the results point toward positive shifts in student attitudes, longer-term impacts—such as whether graduates remain in the region or engage in community health initiatives — remain to be studied.

Nonetheless, the framework of linking self-identity with place-based learning through regional resources offers broad applicability. The approach could be adapted to other rural or regional contexts in Japan and internationally. In future iterations, we plan to:

1) Incorporate more student-led field research, enabling learners to directly engage with local communities and stakeholders.
2) Strengthen qualitative analysis of student reflections using systematic thematic coding to increase methodological rigor.
3) Develop opportunities for cross-regional and international comparison, for example, by connecting Niigata Studies with similar place-based courses in other prefectures or countries.

Through these extensions, *Niigata Studies* could evolve into a model for interdisciplinary, human-centered education that bridges liberal arts perspectives and professional training.

5. Conclusion

The *Niigata Studies* course demonstrates that integrating self-identity and regional resources within a place-based educational framework can foster both personal growth and community engagement among nursing students. Through lectures, discussions, and collaborative reflection, students not only acquired knowledge about their region's history, culture, and assets but also began to see themselves as active contributors to its future.

From my perspective as an educator, the most rewarding outcome was watching students rediscover their own hometowns—and, in many cases, themselves—through the lens of local pride. This transformation was not merely an emotional shift; it represented a deeper form of engagement that may shape how students approach their future nursing careers. By recognizing the interconnectedness of land, culture, and people, they are better equipped to provide patient care that is sensitive to local realities.

The success of this course also underscores the importance of sustained collaboration between academic institutions and local governments. Such partnerships enrich curriculum design while ensuring that education remains responsive to the needs and aspirations of the communities it serves. In this sense, *Niigata Studies* is more than a single course—it serves as a model for how higher education can contribute to community vitality in the face of demographic change and social transformation.

To extend its applicability, a three-tier adaptation framework is proposed. The first tier, Localize, involves identifying and documenting unique regional assets such as cultural traditions, natural resources, or historical narratives. The second tier, Integrate, aligns these assets with professional competencies in nursing and healthcare, thereby enhancing their relevance for student learning outcomes. The third tier, Partner, emphasizes active collaboration with municipal stakeholders, community organizations, and residents in co-designing educational experiences. Together, this framework provides a scalable pathway for embedding place-conscious pedagogy into professional education.

Ultimately, to borrow from Marcel Proust, the real voyage of discovery does not require us to seek entirely new landscapes. Rather, it calls for us to develop "new eyes"—to reimagine the familiar, to appreciate the overlooked, and to recognize the extraordinary within the ordinary. In helping students to see Niigata with new eyes, *Niigata Studies* affirms the power of place-based education to connect personal identity with collective well-being.

6. Acknowledgments

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