Reflective Practice and Cultural Competency

**Key Terms**

- **Cultural competence**: The capacity to value differences, conduct self-assessments, acquire cultural knowledge, and adapt to diverse cultural contexts (National Center for Cultural Competence). Cultural competence is regarded as a developmental process requiring ongoing professional development.

- **Culturally-responsive**: A term which describes a program which responds to and supports the cultures of children and their families.

- **Culture**: Shared beliefs, values, and practices of a group. Includes cultural artifacts, rituals, and attitudes.

- **Material culture**: Cultural artifacts or tangible items shared by a group of people. Examples include clothing, food, and language.

- **Immaterial Culture**: Intangible aspects of culture. Examples include the values and beliefs shared by a group.

- **Cultural simulations**: Games which emulate the components of culture. These include the material and immaterial forms of culture. Used as a tool for experiential education.

- **Experiential education**: Awareness, knowledge, and/or skills developed through experiences. Critical reflection is an integral component in experiential education.

- **Critical reflection**: Thinking about current knowledge and experiences as they relate (differences, commonalities) to prior knowledge and experiences. Entails higher-order thinking skills including application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation.

- **Concept Mapping**: A technique that allows students to understand the relationships between ideas by creating a visual map of the connections. May be used to assess students’ understanding of cultural competence (pre-/post-).
Cross-cultural simulations include opportunities for students to examine their world views and reflect upon the limitations of their knowledge. The use of cultural simulations to encourage reflection and develop cultural competence serves as a promising approach to teacher education programs. Examining the effectiveness of simulations on the development of cultural competence among early childhood students will provide insight into the manner in which cultural simulations may be integrated into core teacher education curricula.

Barnga and Heelotia, two well-known cultural simulations, utilize dilemmas and critical reflection.

Heelotia refers to a fictitious culture in which participants must understand cultural rules and ways of communicating in order to be successful.

Barnga, a West African village, is the inspiration of the Barnga simulation. The creators of the simulation encountered differences in the population’s health practices. They recognized the importance of understanding cultural differences in order to work successfully with those in the village. The simulation incorporates this experience. Players must understand and reconcile differences in order to function effectively.

According to Thiagarajan & Thiagarajan, these simulations may be of potential value in increasing key elements in cultural competence.

Students must be engaged in experiences which allow them to reflect upon their own cultures and biases (Hanson & Lynch). Learning is transformative when students challenge their own frames of reference and reflect upon the boundaries of their knowledge (Imel).

This is in keeping with Mezirow’s theory of transformative learning. Changes in perception result from a “disorienting dilemma,” one which challenges students to reflect upon their values and biases.

Cultural simulations provide opportunities for students to experience variations (dilemmas) in communication, values, and belief systems. Such variations may be very different from the student’s own beliefs, values, and style of communication. In order to successfully complete a simulation, the student must acknowledge these differences and develop strategies to work within the context of these variations.