Developing learning games for culturally responsive Home Economics teaching

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Abstract

The increasing cultural diversity in schools represents a challenge for Home Economics teaching. Future teachers need the knowledge and skills to not only understand the cultural heterogeneity that exists in the classroom but to also act meaningfully in classroom situations and in cooperation with parents. We call these abilities culturally responsive teaching. This paper discusses the experiences of Finnish teacher education students in the development and utilisation of learning games as tools used to incorporate cultural knowledge into learning and teaching. The games were designed by teacher education students with the aim of finding meaningful methods of connecting learners’ home cultures with the learning culture in schools. Teacher students’ experiences of playing games with secondary school students, vocational education learners and youth outside of school activities were analysed to identify the elements of culturally responsive learning and to assess the games according to the type of multiculturalism they represented and the type of interaction playing the games involved. The method used was qualitative content analyses. For the deductive analyses, a model (Raunio et al., 2011) that describes types of multiculturalism and various ways of interaction was used. The findings suggest that games assisted in creating opportunities for a super diverse learning environment that can contribute to culturally responsive Home Economics learning.

Key words: culturally responsive learning, Home Economics education, learning games, teacher education, higher education

Towards culturally diverse classrooms

Teachers’ experiences of societal changes have inspired Benn (2010) to ask how to improve learning conditions, circumstances and education within Home Economics education. The future challenges of Home Economics education focusing on consumer education have also been discussed by Jarva (2011) in earlier volumes of this journal. Benn’s (2010) two-year action research project among grade 6 Home Economics students at two Danish schools was conducted to investigate participatory methods for change. Based on this experience, Benn argues the importance of research—and, more specifically, action research—for the development of Home Economics education so that it can better relate to the everyday lives of twenty-first-century students. Jarva’s (2011) analysis of the challenges of consumer education calls for a futures-oriented form of consumer education that responds to the changes in consumption practices. Globalisation has also been recognised as one of the trends...
related to the field of Home Economics (Pendergast, McGregor, & Turkki, 2012). Janhonen-Abruquah (2012) describes how a family operates as a network when its members are physically living in different countries or continents, still maintaining a close family relationship.

In this article, we focus on cultural diversity in classrooms as one of the major changes occurring in contemporary society. The rapid increase in the number of immigrants within the past 20 years in Finland is challenging the Finnish education system and teacher education. Intercultural education (Räsänen, 2007) is seen as one tool of global and informal education that concerns all citizens and is firmly anchored in lifelong learning (Kaivola & Melén-Paaso, 2007). The Finnish government has addressed the issue of education in the multicultural society (Government of Finland, 2011) stating that “The objective of Finnish education and cultural policy is to guarantee all people—irrespective of their ethnic origin, background or wealth—equal opportunities and rights to culture, free quality education, and prerequisites for full citizenship” (p. 50). The programme further claims

Finnish culture and education will be openly international. The integration and employment of migrants, communication across cultural boundaries, and activities to combat racism will be promoted through education. Special attention will be paid to migrant young people arriving in Finland who are near or at the end of compulsory school age. (Government of Finland, p. 53)

In Finland, teacher educators and teachers in the field have primarily lived and been trained in a relatively monocultural society. However, in their working lives, they face culturally diverse classrooms. According to Holm and Londén (2010), the ongoing discourse concerning multicultural education has failed to recognise the various forms of diversity that exist in the country and in classrooms. Consequently, immigrants have been the focus of the discourse on diversity (Graeffe & Lestinen, 2012). Dervin, Paatela-Nieminen, Kuoppala and Riitaoja (2012) suggest developing multicultural education that is based in cultural–historical analysis and global ethics. It aims to understand plural meanings and does not domesticate students into nation states, nor develop competences that serve such purposes.

A common error in schools is to view all students with immigrant backgrounds as homogeneous. Warsame (2010) corrects this misinterpretation. In his study, Somali parents’ views on, and knowledge of, their children’s education varied significantly. The problems cannot and should not be considered narrowly—that is, as solely the consequences of immigration or a particular cultural or religious background—nor should the problems of immigrants be blindly separated from those encountered by the majority. Immigrants do not form a coherent group and neither do the so-called “native” students. Amongst all the students, there is great variation, for example, in terms of their identity, learning skills, cultural family heritage and socioeconomic status, amongst other variables.

At times, young people have to balance the expectations of their family backgrounds and those of the Finnish school system. Parents’ impulsivity was seen as one of the major dilemmas of leadership in multicultural schools, according to the results of a study by Kuukka (2009) that investigated ethical leadership from principals’ points of view. Immigrant families
and their youth face challenges because home and school cultures clash. Therefore, it is important to find ways to bridge families' transnational everyday lives (Janhonen-Abruquah, 2010) and the Finnish educational context. The assumption is that these connections will enhance co-operation between the youth, their families and the schools and indirectly improve the integration process of the whole family.

**Cultural Responsiveness in Teaching and Learning**

A critical multicultural approach notes that education is never objective, rather, it is always affected by teachers’ value orientation and world views (May, 1999). It recognises the power of the dominant majority culture as well as that of normativity, and it calls for teachers to stay reflectively critical without becoming ethno-relativists. The aims of critical multiculturalism are equality, justice and transformation (May, 1999). This corresponds to Giroux’s (1991) description of teachers as transformative, able to cross cultural boundaries and as intellectuals seeking change.

There may be conflicting ideas and interests as pupils live their transnational everyday lives (Basch, Glick Schiller & Blanc, 1994) but enter schools representing national structures. The educational system and curricula are mainly constructed based on a national point of view that is rooted in the assumption that a nation state exists and that there is one common lingua franca. Education and its aims are nationally defined not only to educate citizens but also to ensure the wellbeing and wealth of the nation. One of the challenges of education is that people live transnational lives, in which they act, live and make decisions across cultural, linguistic and national boundaries. Teachers are trained to work in an environment that is very much based on nations, however, they meet students who live *super diverse* (Vertovec, 2007) lives in their transnational families (Bryceson & Vuorela, 2002; Janhonen-Abruquah, 2010).

Both practical and theoretical tools are needed to help teachers to cope with diverse learners and to understand the ongoing changes occurring in society. In this paper, the concept of *cultural responsiveness* (Gay, 2010) is adopted. It is used in a manner that recognises the plurality of cultures that is present at all times. In fact, everyone has his or her own culture, thus, each social interaction is a multicultural encounter. The diversity in schools requires teachers to be culturally aware, to know about various cultural orientations and, moreover, to act meaningfully within a culturally heterogeneous group in a culturally responsive manner. This also sets new demands for the development of Home Economics teacher education.

**Models for cultural encounters**

Cultural stereotypes are based on defining the *other* (Hall, 1992; Löytty, 2005) and the borders built between— that is, I am defined by *me*, and the *other*, who is different from *me*, is also defined by *me*. Stereotypes may be based on nations, such as Finnish or Swedish people, or on geographical areas, such as America or Africa, for instance. Dichotomies constructed in a dualistic manner are common and include concepts such as north/south, east/west, black/white, old/new, rich/poor and gay/straight. This type of categorisation may serve to enhance familiarisation with the unknown world. The world views accompanying
these dichotomies are too simplistic. The realities of life do not come in black or white but in all colours, shades and tones. The danger of the cultural categories arises when one forgets who has defined the specific category or starts applying the characteristics of the category to single individuals. The increasing level and kind of complexity of current multicultural societies require an approach that is able to capture the differences in transnationally connected people of multiple origins (Vertovec, 2007).

Novel behavioural patterns emerge as different cultures meet. In intercultural encounters, perceived boundaries are crossed (Hooker, 2003). This kind of boundary crossing leads to complex intersections of cultures, nations, languages, genders, social classes, educational levels, occupations and ages (Crenshaw, 1991). Power relations play a crucial role in these intersections. As people increasingly move both physically and virtually, there is a demand to shift away from the dichotomy and towards a more pluralistic world view. Salo-Lee (2009) describes this as a “we are all here and there” area, indicating that one’s own culture is solely one context that creates meaningful definitions and identities. People move, share their professional and non-professional lives with others and cross borders even without noticing that these borders exist. Entering the frontier zone (Bryceson & Vuorela, 2002) enables new patterns of behaviour to take place. Moving towards a cultural hybrid zone (Hall, 2000) shakes the power relations and provides an opportunity for more equal encounters. In the frontier zone, cultural and linguistic translators, gatekeepers and cultural navigators play important roles (Hall, 2000).

Theoretically, cultural encounters—when people from different cultures meet—have been described in several ways. Berry’s (2008) acculturation model focuses on the concepts of adaptation, integration, marginalisation and segregation/separation. Attention is paid to how meaningful and important the culture of one’s home of origin is compared to that of the new home country. The model sees majority and minority cultures being different from each other and acculturation taking place in people’s interactions. The importance of one’s own culture compared to the existence of different cultural frameworks is described in Bennett’s (1998) continuum. When exposed to a new culture, one gradually shifts from ethnocentrism towards the ethno-relativistic approach. Bennett sees the change as a process of moving through stages from denial, defence and minimisation towards acceptance, adaptation and integration. The continuum illustrates how one first sees the world only through one set of glasses but gradually learns to view it through different glasses. Vertovec (2007) has introduced a “super diverse approach”, referring to the intersectionality of cultural encounters that sees diversity beyond ethnicity and describes the interaction of variables of difference.

Raunio, Säävälä, Hammar-Suutari and Pitkänen (2011) developed a model (see Figure 1) that is particularly useful for the purpose of this study. It defines the four arenas (types) of multiculturalism and interaction present in contemporary Finnish work life and social life. The four arenas are identified based on two intersecting dimensions—multiculturalism and communication. The dimension of multiculturalism ranges from local, national and homogenic to transnational. The dimension of interaction is described on a continuum ranging from one-way to reciprocal communication.
The above model by Raunio et al. (2011) is used as a framework for our data analyses and is thus tested in the educational context of Home Economics.

The elements of successful multicultural Home Economics education (Figure 2) have been identified by Venäläinen (2010) and developed as her guided activating learning model, which has three important elements: first, teachers’ multiple tool use; second, collaboration and peer work; and, third, teachers’ ability to connect their teaching with immigrant students’ everyday lives. When these three elements were present, a shared object was established in the classroom, and education was described as successful (Venäläinen, 2010).
University students’ project: Creating a super diverse learning arena

A group of Finnish teacher students in the Home Economics Education programme at the University of Helsinki were provided a training module titled *Home Economics in a Multicultural Society*. The aim was to prepare them for the challenges and opportunities resulting from cultural diversity in their future work in schools. The university students were given the task of creating a super diverse learning environment, as defined by Vertovec (2007). The learning space, which was developed through playing games, was to increase reciprocity in learning and communication, deepen understanding of cultural diversity and facilitate the students’ efforts to get to know each other. The starting point was that each learner is the best expert of his or her own culture.

As a part of the training module, Home Economics teacher students carried out a project with learners in comprehensive schools, those in adult education and with youth in outside school activities. The aim of the project was to help university teacher education students to get to know their students well and to understand everyday life from the latter’s perspectives. To overcome cultural and language barriers, the student teachers were asked to develop learning games. This was also done to encourage them to learn about the everyday contexts of their students’ lives.
First, the student teachers familiarised themselves with some already existing games that aimed to increase cultural awareness. They were asked to keep in mind that the games should enhance learning in Home Economics. The student teachers developed role plays, games that involved some physical activity, card games and a board game. They were then instructed to choose their target groups which consisted of culturally diverse learners. The games were played together with groups of primary education pupils, youth in vocational education, youth groups engaged in outside school activities and adults in an integration course (Table 1). The integration course was organised by the unemployment office for immigrants with poor language skills in Finnish.

The six games developed by the university teacher education students and the groups with which they were played are described in Table 1. The idea of each game is introduced first. The games were either board games (1 and 2), those that required the recognition of foodstuff (3a & 3b) or those that required some kind of physical activity (4 and 5). The categories were formed according to the types of multiculturalism and social interaction they represent (see Figure 1).

The games were designed and evaluated as tools for culturally responsive teaching and learning. They all featured different aspects of culturally responsive leaning: cultural mosaic, assimilation, integration or super diversity (see Figure 3). In the following excerpts, experience with each game is described by the players and the teacher students, and ideas for the further development of the games are presented.

**The Finn Game: An integrative approach**

*One group of boys were enthusiastic and gladly talked about their own cultures. Another group of boys thought that the game was okay, but they were not thrilled. Everyone understood the questions well. They wanted to have more humour in the game. (Game 1)*

The board game on Finnish culture and its comparison to pupils’ home cultures elicited mixed feelings that ranged from enthusiasm to dullness, depending on the dynamics within the small groups and the players’ levels of Finnish language proficiency. The concept of a board game was familiar to the pupils. Developing a good board game takes time and several rounds of testing and development. The questions in the statement cards are a critical component of developing an interesting and relevant game. The teacher students suggested that statements and questions covering different dimensions of Home Economics could be developed to modify the game for the Home Economics class. Furthermore, the statement cards should better stimulate discussions, thereby enhancing reciprocal communication. Careful planning of statement cards is also needed to keep power relations equal and avoid pointing out the right way in which things should be done but rather indicating that there are various right ways. The cards should also provide alternative perspectives and challenge the students to consider new solutions. Different difficulty levels of questions could be developed to facilitate adaptation of the game to different groups.
### Table 1 Games, players and types of interaction and multiculturalism present

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of game</th>
<th>Idea of the game</th>
<th>Players</th>
<th>Types of multiculturalism and interaction present</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Finn Game</td>
<td>A board game containing statement cards with introductions and questions regarding Finnish culture (society, festivities, food, etc.) Students encouraged to reflect on the statements from the perspective of their own culture Played in small groups of 4 to 5 students</td>
<td>Pupils from the 6th grade in primary school, aged 12 to 13 years Cultural background and heritage from Finland, Somalia, Kurdistan, Estonia, Russia, Iran and Mexico</td>
<td>Where reciprocal communication was present: Assimilation—integration Emphasis on one-way communication: Assimilation—cultural mosaic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monopoly</td>
<td>A classic board game where real estate is bought, sold and rented The player who collects the biggest fortune wins</td>
<td>Special education group of visually impaired students, two with an immigrant background, aged 16 to 22 years</td>
<td>Instead of focusing on cultural differences, the game brought up differences in money use and risk taking Elements of super diverse multiculturalism and reciprocal communication present</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recognise</td>
<td>Sensory recognition (smelling) of 16 spices and discussions of their uses Recognition of food stuff from cards</td>
<td>Students in vocational catering programme, aged 16 to 25 Cultural background and heritage from Finland, France, India, Cameroon, Estonia, Russia, England and Thailand Adults, Finnish language learners with diverse backgrounds</td>
<td>Emphasis on cultural mosaic, multiculturalism was mainly transnational Potential for super diverse elements through reciprocal discussions Emphasis on cultural mosaic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Take a step</td>
<td>A role play where the facilitator gives statements, and the attitude, opinions and behaviours of the role personality is expressed by taking a step forward or backward</td>
<td>Group 1 10 to 11-year-old girls in a non-school activity Group 2 multicultural youth group, aged 19 to 24 years Cultural background and heritage from Estonia, Somalia, USA and Finland</td>
<td>Features of integration if position of roles is discussed in the Finnish context Discussions have a key role in determining the type of multiculturalism present</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Me too!</td>
<td>The things that unite and separate us Chairs in a circle, one pupil in the middle, without a chair, voices <em>similarity / difference</em>—for example, “I like snow”—and everyone who likes snow stands up and tries to change seats, including the one in the middle</td>
<td>1st grade students, aged 7 years Cultural background and heritage from Finland, Somalia, Nigeria and Ethiopia</td>
<td>Focus on cultural mosaic with the potential for a transnational perspective through discussion; opportunity to reflect on personal and cultural differences</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Monopoly: Reaching the super diverse

This game could be developed as a good game for Home Economics and consumer education, where the mastering of everyday life and personal finances is recognised (Game 2).

Playing Monopoly created an unreserved atmosphere. It was fun to play, and the players were excited and enthusiastic. The players helped each other throughout the game. Monopoly provided an opportunity to discuss personal and cultural differences after the game. As the game does not reflect everyday consumption practices, it should be adapted further to better simulate the use of money in everyday situations. The critical value of the game was its capacity to enable equal participation despite differences in visual and language abilities. The game was not played to focus on differences in eyesight or cultural backgrounds but on how money was handled in various ways.

Recognising Spices and Foodstuff: Cultural stimulus activating transnational thought

Group spirit was well established. I think the game is unbiased enough and did not enter anyone’s private life too much (Game 3a).

We managed to start a discussion about the topic in Finnish. We got to know each other more (Game 3b).

The game was lively in the first group (Game 3a) and a bit more calm in the second group (Game 3b). Using English in the second group was a practical solution to enable participation. Translation was used in the first group. Students in both groups appreciated the opportunity to get to know each other. They reported that their conceptions about a familiar topic widened through discussing the use of spices in different cultures. The diverse use of spaces provides an opportunity to develop new recipes. The game provides an opportunity to learn about each other’s cultures without intruding into private issues. The game has to be adapted to the skill level of the group to keep it challenging. Recognition can also be through tasting. Students liked the game as a good variation on the ordinary lesson and they felt that they could try their vocabulary in new situations.

Take a Step: Changing cultural roles

It made girls think that each of us has our own way of thinking and viewing life from our own perspective (Game 4).

The game was a positive learning experience. It enabled discussion on difficult topics, such as adoption and refugee backgrounds. Thus, some of the statements were difficult, especially for the younger group. The game generated interesting discussions, therefore, it also required thorough knowledge on the part of the facilitator. Shifting the roles make them, and the differences between them, more concrete. Although it is challenging to step into a role that is unfamiliar and requires extensive discussion with the facilitator, this is also a strength.

The teacher students suggested that to develop the game further, the roles could be modified according to the group, for example, with a focus on the real differences between the
students in the group. The discussions provided opportunities to question and break stereotypes.

**Me Too!: Focus on personal and cultural differences and similarities**

*They did not feel embarrassed by suggesting differences. They got even more excited as they were thinking of hobbies and countries they have visited (Game 6).*

During the game, the atmosphere was playful, energetic and almost wild. The pupils were enthusiastic about identifying differences and similarities in order for them to get into the middle of the circle. It was somewhat difficult to ensure that every student received an opportunity to go to the middle of the circle. It was also important to allocate time for a debrief discussion after the game.

To develop the game further, the teacher education students suggested that pupils could be guided to make statements about focused themes, for example, food and cultures. They also pointed out how important it is to know the group. It would be wise to begin with the similarities and then include the differences only if the group is ready. One could add variation to the game by enabling competition between groups instead of individuals.

**Steps towards culturally responsive Home Economics learning**

Playing learning games enabled the students to cross the boundaries between national and foreign cultures (Finnish/non-Finnish) and between home (family, informal learning) and school (formal learning) cultures. When evaluating the games, the first observations related to the strengths. The players found the games easy and fun. Learning games can create an informal atmosphere in which positive learning experiences are easily gained. In the games, each player is an expert of his or her culture. However, the risk is that some of the games are based on nationally dominated thinking and may, therefore, contribute to stereotypical perceptions and advance existing boundaries. To reduce or avoid this risk, teacher students were asked to reflect on the possible cultural representations in the games.

Culturally responsive teaching and learning reflectively recognise the types of multiculturalism and interaction that are exercised. Analysing the learning spaces created during the game playing, using the frame of the model by Raunio et al. (2011), all four arenas for multiculturalism and interaction were found in the games developed by the teacher students (Figure 3).

A cultural mosaic takes place when the various cultures are recognised, for example, during cultural themes, such as American cooking and Indian flavours. The cultures are presented in a showcase manner or as cultural exhibits. The plurality of cultures is recognised, but there is neither real interaction nor true reciprocal communication between the cultures. The *Me Too!* game and the sensory recognition games mainly represented a cultural mosaic approach. Cultural assimilation takes place when communication is mainly one way and multiculturalism is seen from the local point of view. For example, teaching the Finnish way of berry and mushroom picking during integration courses for immigrants is an example of an assimilative
approach. In the games analysed in this study, only the *Finn Game* could be categorised as following an assimilative logic.

The *Finn Game* and the *Take a Step* game, both of which related to immigrant roles, were viewed as representing the integrative approach to multiculturalism. Based on this approach, communication is reciprocal, but multiculturalism is viewed from the national point of view. The integrative approach could also be adopted in situations in which cultural experts are brought into the Finnish Home Economics classroom. Finally, super diverse learning takes place when multiculturalism is seen as transnational and interaction is based on reciprocal communication. Of our examples, the classic *Monopoly* game generated a learning space that could be described as super diverse. This encouraging experience with *Monopoly* suggests that different versions of the game focusing on content areas of Home Economics (e.g. health, consumer issues) could be developed.

The experience of developing and playing the games was generally considered positive by teacher students and the groups that played the games. The games enabled the creation of a relaxed atmosphere, and the introduction of the *game effect* in learning was valued. Playing the games created the stimulus for discussing important topics after the games. The games
were designed within the context of Home Economics education, however, games are such a
generic working model that subject-specific adaptation is easy. Therefore, it is critical to
plan for adequate time for discussion after the game to achieve the objectives given to the
class.

Creating conditions for participating on an equal level, despite differences in language (and
other) skills, is critical for creating super diverse learning spaces. Learning about
multicultural issues can be made more effective by focusing on subjects other than
multiculturalism. A question-answer approach can be challenging to students with limited
knowledge of the language of instruction. Doing practical things also proved to provide more
opportunities for interaction.

Through game playing, the teacher education students engaged in face-to-face interaction
with the learners and obtained personal information directly from the pupils. The game
playing also facilitated the teacher students’ interaction with multicultural groups, and the
ensuing analysis of the tasks stimulated their thinking on multiculturalism. The learning
games were concrete training tools that increased their understanding of multicultural
encounters within classrooms. The findings encourage further use and development of
learning games in teacher education and as learning tools in versatile contexts. As a result,
the importance of creating opportunities for learning in a super diverse environment is
emphasised as a promising strategy for culturally responsive teacher education.

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**Biography**

*University lecturer, Hille Janhonen-Abruquah, PhD (University of Helsinki,
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constructed an analytical tool which handles both the visual and verbal data.
Dr Janhonen-Abruquah has over 15 years of experience in teaching in
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also taught in Ghana.
Hanna Posti-Ahokas, MEd is a doctoral student in Education at the University of Helsinki Department of Teacher Education where she is finalising her Doctoral thesis Female student perspectives to relevance of secondary education in Tanzania—A critical social explanation. She has over ten years of both national and international work experience in the education sector in Finnish primary and secondary schools, universities, UN organisations and NGOs. She has also provided practical multicultural training for Finnish teachers and healthcare workers.

Päivi Palojoki is a Professor of Education at the Department of Teacher Education, at the University of Helsinki. She is responsible for the education of Home Economics teachers. Her previous studies have focused on the use of sociocultural approach in various contexts related to teaching and learning.

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References


