

The role of professionals in promoting diversity and inclusiveness

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This review of the literature is meant to provide an initial theoretical framework concerning the role of professionals in dealing with cultural and linguistic diversity and promoting inclusiveness. Professionals are broadly defined as all adults who work with children, either in an official institution, such as (pre)school, or in the context of community-based (volunteer) services. In view of preparing children adequately for life in the 21st century eight key competences have been identified by the European Union. Among these competences are the ability to communicate in the mother tongue and cultural awareness and expression. This is in line with research evidence showing the importance of the heritage language and culture in identity development, well being, mental health and school achievement. Hence, the role of professionals is pivotal in fostering cultural and linguistic awareness among children and promoting inclusiveness in the classroom or group. First, we identified the state-of-affairs regarding professionals' attitudes and practices with culturally and linguistically diverse children, and, next, we looked at possible determinants of these attitudes and practices using the bio-ecological model of Bronfenbrenner.

The review illustrated that professionals' attitudes towards cultural diversity are inconsistent, with some evidence showing positive or neutral views towards cultural diversity in the classroom, whereas other evidence pointing to (implicit) negative beliefs. Concerning linguistic diversity the evidence is more consistent and generally shows a strong assimilation approach, thus disregarding the importance of the first language. Generally, teachers feel ill prepared in dealing with cultural and linguistic diversity and find it challenging to work with a diverse population. Consequently, there is evidence that teachers treat children with another cultural or linguistic background differently than mainstream children. Some studies have shown that teachers use less positive speech in their interactions with children from another cultural or linguistic background, although no differences were found for the use of negative speech. Moreover, other studies have illustrated that teachers demonstrated a stronger focus on classroom management in culturally diverse classrooms. Another aspect of classroom practices concerns the use of a curriculum and materials that explicitly acknowledge different cultures and promote diversity. The findings concerning these aspects are mixed. In some countries the curriculum appears to show higher levels of diversity acceptance than others.

At the micro level several aspects have shown to contribute to professionals' attitudes and practices concerning diversity and inclusiveness. For instance, characteristics of the professionals appeared related to the degree of diversity acceptance. Demographic factors, such as gender and cultural background, professional background, including pre- and in-service training, and personal characteristics have shown to be related to professionals' attitudes towards diversity. In addition, more experience with different people from other cultural or linguistic backgrounds, either personally or professionally, was related to more diversity acceptance. Also, there is quite consistent evidence that teachers hold lower expectations of cultural or linguistic minority children, which is rooted in a cultural deficit view. Holding lower expectations can affect professionals' (classroom) practices, which in turn affects children's development and achievement and results in persistent inequalities, also in the long term.

Within the context of the classroom, school or institutions several aspects can affect how professionals deal with diversity and inclusiveness. For instance, more exposure to diversity in the classroom has shown to positively affect teachers' perceptions. As professionals are part

of a team of colleagues and an organisation or school, these aspects can influence teachers' beliefs and practices as well. Strong leadership and ample opportunities for professional development as a means of continuous improvement of practices has shown to be effective in this regard.

The mesosystem concerns the relationships between professionals and parents or the home environment. Following Epstein's theory of overlapping spheres the evidence is consistent in showing the importance of collaboration and partnerships between the different systems (i.e. home and school or community services). Despite the evidence on the importance of these partnerships, there are some barriers for parents to be actively involved in the school. Language is a major factor, as many parents do not master the host country's language well enough to be as actively involved as mainstream parents. Another aspects concerns the fact that many minority parents do not feel welcome, accepted or valued in their cultural or language background, which poses major challenges for establishing a relationship with professionals. Outreaching and active efforts from the teacher's part are recognized as effective means of establishing more parent involvement.

The exosystem focuses on the role of the wider community that can include health or social services, community initiatives involving (para)professionals and volunteer organisations. Particularly the role of cultural mediators and the provision of out-of-school activities have been acknowledged as providing a bridging function between home and school. (para)professionals working within the community, perhaps sharing the same cultural or language background as the minority children and their families, can not only be a good role model for children, but also be of support for parents in the contacts with school, in finding their way in the community and within the (social, education, and legal) system. The provision of out-of-school activities not only provides a bridge between the home and school environment, it also allows children to develop other types of skills needed to succeed in life, such as social competence or leadership. These activities have shown to be effective in terms of improving educational and social-emotional outcomes and decreasing delinquency and substance abuse.

Taken together the results of this initial review have identified that teachers and other professionals are not always positive towards cultural and linguistic diversity, which can be explained by deficit views held about the (cultural and linguistic backgrounds of) children and their families as well as the incapability to deal with diversity properly. It is also clear that more exposure and experience with different people can contribute to more positive views, as well as targeted pre- or in-service training enhancing professionals' knowledge about cultural and linguistic diversity. However, knowledge alone is not sufficient in view of changing attitudes and, consequently, behaviour and practices. In view of embracing cultural and linguistic diversity and enhancing social inclusiveness it is important to take a multidimensional approach targeting knowledge, beliefs and attitudes, and the transfer to actual behaviour. Hence continuous professional development embedded within a school or organisational system in which there is a shared view and effort to make a difference and embrace diversity is needed to make sustainable changes.

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