

D5.5 Integrative report: Professionals and organisations

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Increasing societal cultural, linguistic and socioeconomic diversity calls upon competent professionals who can support children and families aimed at equity and inclusiveness. The ISOTIS work revealed that professionals feel less competent in addressing this diversity in their daily work compared to feelings of general self-efficacy. The ISOTIS work involved professionals working in diverse informal (community or after-school care) and formal (preschool) education settings and focused on improving our understanding of their intercultural and global competences and the extent to which professional development can contribute to enhancing these competences. Intercultural and global competences encompass professionals' knowledge, skills, attitudes, and beliefs that result in everyday behaviour and practices. The relation between professionals' competences and their behaviour and practices is bidirectional, suggesting that change can occur in both directions.

Overall, the different studies illustrated the complexity of professionals' beliefs towards cultural and linguistic diversity. Professionals generally showed more positive beliefs towards multiculturalism than towards multilingualism, but upon closer scrutiny, when professionals were confronted with their actual behaviour and practices in their daily work, professionals showed tendencies of ignoring or denying diversity, reflecting more of a colour-blind perspective. Professionals reported overall slightly positive practices towards diversity, which appeared particularly related to considering cultural or religious practices towards nutrition and availability of creative materials to address differences in physical appearance, reflecting more of a surface-level approach to diversity. Aspects such as integrating different cultural values, increasing children's knowledge on different cultures and adapting the work to children's cultural background were less commonly implemented in daily practice. Thus, a more comprehensive approach of embracing and addressing diversity in the (classroom) curriculum and practices or in communicating with children and parents were less well developed. There were differences between countries, though, and there also appeared a positive relation between more culturally sensitive beliefs and corresponding practices and organizational policies. Consequently, an important aspect of professional development included addressing one's beliefs and attitudes as a means of changing behaviour and practices.

Reflection and enactment were identified as key mechanisms for changing professionals' intercultural competences and played a central role in the intervention study. The interventions carried out in four different countries in different context were highly informative and indeed confirmed that reflection supported professionals in gaining more awareness of their beliefs and attitudes and how these affected their behaviour and practices in their daily work. The close relation between the professional development activities and the professionals' context and daily practices proved to be effective. Moreover, reflection was also carried out using examples from other countries or contexts, which proved to enrich the professionals' experiences and considerations for expanding their perspectives and action repertoire. Enactment also showed to be an important mechanism for professionals' change as it allowed them to experience in real life how children or parents reacted to their change in actions or behaviour, which appeared an eye opener and powerful mechanism for enhancing their awareness and understanding of the situation at hand.

In addition to these intra-individual processes, the ISOTIS work also highlighted the importance of the context at different levels, including the proximal level (e.g. in the classroom or relations with parents), the organizational level (e.g. policies towards diversity or parent involvement, a clear organizational mission focusing on empowerment and equity or opportunities for professional development) and even the macro policy level (e.g. national or local curriculum framework or guidelines or lack thereof). The work revealed the necessity of addressing diversity in more diverse contexts, but also showed that when clear organizational or national/regional guidelines on addressing cultural and linguistic diversity are lacking or are inconsistent, this poses challenges for professionals to address diversity adequately in their everyday work, resulting in highly varying practices of professionals. Therefore, it is foremost important to establish a clear vision and mission at the organizational level, which should be translated into concrete guidelines for professionals to support them in aligning their everyday practices with the organization's vision. At the same time, clear guidelines or a focus on addressing diversity and inclusiveness in (national) curricula provide further support and legitimacy for professionals to address this in their daily work with children and families.

The need for further professional development is obvious as professionals feel ill-prepared to deal with the challenges deriving from working in a highly diverse context. Professionals need sufficient and dedicated time to do so and would benefit from a team-based approach and continuous forms of professional development. This means that a traditional approach of a one-off course or training will not suffice. Rather, professionals need to engage in continuous and dynamic forms of professional development, such as regular team meetings to reflect and discuss the work with children and families and how to tailor the work to the children's and families' needs in view of optimal child development. Exchange in a community of learners, especially when learners come from different contexts or countries, can be enriching and provide professionals with new and innovative ideas for enlarging their perspectives and changing their practice. Moreover, it is important to bridge the gap between (scientific) knowledge and theory and practice. Thus, professional development should be actively guided by an expert who can help professionals in understanding and applying new and/or situated knowledge into daily practice. Overall, it requires the willingness and ability to reflect on one's own beliefs, attitudes, knowledge and skills and the interrelatedness of all these components. Professionals' openness and readiness for change are key to initiating change for the better and need to be explicitly addressed by the expert guiding the professional development activities.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Invest and support professionals' engagement in continuous professional development activities, which includes providing them with ample time and attention, and ensure that time is used for this purpose, for reflection and enactment to raise their intercultural awareness and practices that will benefit child outcomes and improve equity.
2. Ensure that professional development addresses the whole range of competences, including professionals' knowledge, skills, attitudes and beliefs in view of changing their behaviour and practices in the daily context in working with children or families using a variety of different strategies. Providing professionals with ample opportunities for reflection and inter-collegial exchange, especially between professionals working in different contexts, are essential in raising professionals' awareness of their knowledge, skills, beliefs and attitudes, thus providing an important first step in changing behaviour and practice.
3. Develop concrete guidelines at the organizational, regional or national level, that clearly set the boundaries on the goals when addressing diversity and promoting inclusiveness in view of improving child outcomes and enhancing equality in order to strengthen alignment across all levels, including practice

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TO TACKLE INEQUALITIES IN SOCIETY**



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