


Chapter 12

Diversity in the Classroom: How Teacher Perceptions and Teacher–Child Interactions Matter

Derya Ası

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7647-3029>

University of Dundee, UK

Tracey Joyce

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7705-538X>

University of Dundee, UK

ABSTRACT

In early years settings and schools, the population of children from diverse ethnic backgrounds has been increasing all over the world. Along with this increase, there is growing interest and concern in meeting the needs of these children and their families throughout their early years and school experience. Within any mainstream culture it is assumed that an ethnically diverse population should be able to be successfully integrated; however, it is not always clear how this could be achieved. Adaptation and integration to a new culture or school environment may be best achieved via effective communication between students, parents, and professionals. In this chapter, teacher beliefs and attitudes and how these affect communication will be discussed. The power of teacher-child relationships will be highlighted and suggestions will be made about effective practices to promote communication and build relationships.

INTRODUCTION

Living in a multicultural community has many benefits and also many challenges. Significantly, it has been shown to have an influence on the social and mental wellbeing of children and their parents (European Union, 2013a, Gopalkrishnan, 2018, European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2019). Some of the challenges of cultural and linguistic diversity from the early years of childhood have been emphasized in previous studies (Souto-Manning & Mitchell, 2010, Oades-Sese et al., 2011, Gay, 2013) and it has been shown that children from ethnically diverse backgrounds' behavioural, emotional, and cognitive devel-

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opment can be negatively influenced by such challenges (NAEYC, 2009, Daglar, Melhuish, & Barnes, 2011, Oades-Sese et al., 2011, Garner, et.al., 2014, Belhadj Kouider Koglin, & Petermann, 2014, Doan, Marcelo, & Yates, 2019). Along with the increasing number of children from diverse ethnic backgrounds in many countries over the years, there has also been arising concerns about effective teaching of those children as ethnically diverse students are at higher risk of leaving school earlier compared to native-born peers (OECD, 2012, European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2019). Because of these concerns, schools are increasingly aware of the need to provide secure, confident, and encouraging learning environments for all children in order to increase inclusivity and engagement in the education process (OECD, 2012, Darling-Hammond, 2020). We suggest a better understanding of ethnically diverse populations by those involved in early years and schools would offer better experiences for children, their families and all professionals working in the education field to spread social justice across communities more effectively (Hannon & O'Donnell, 2022)

Teachers have a key role in contributing to creating a secure context for all children and supporting them in adapting to the school context. Within this role, they are expected to have the skills to recognise the difficulties children might experience and be able to provide improved opportunities for them in collaboration with the school's management team and wider stakeholders. Teachers also have the role of interpreting the indicators and behaviours of children and to encourage their motivation for better engagement in academic learning and to foster their social adaptation within the school environment (OECD, 2010, Darling-Hammond, 2020). Their interactions with children can model how effective communication can be managed with others and this can have an impact on creating welcoming interactions within the classroom context (Geerlings, Thijs, & Verkuyten, 2017). This may be particularly relevant when working with ethnically diverse children as teachers might have some additional concerns while working them (OECD, 2010). Teachers may feel they do not have the knowledge or experience to manage ethnically diverse classrooms effectively. Teachers might also have some implicit or explicit attitudes which could affect their ability to create harmonious and welcoming classroom environments. As indicated by Greenwald, Nosek, and Banaji (2003), some of these attitudes may not be expressed explicitly by individuals. The reasons for this may be that they are aware of the issues but are not willing to express them, or they cannot express these because they do not know exactly how they think or feel. Thus, while it is possible to ask people's overt opinions about different ethnic groups, if they do not recognise their own hidden attitudes and associations, which may come from prejudiced beliefs, the answers given may not reflect reality.

There are good examples of how schools have been performing well with their ethnically diverse student population across many countries (OECD, 2010, Goodwin & Stanton, 2022). On the other hand, there is evidence of how student drop-out rates have been increasing during the transition to upper levels of education for ethnically diverse students (Herweijer, 2009). The reasons for this increase in drop-out rates have been attributed to the nature and the frequency of the support provided for students from diverse backgrounds as well as changing academic demands (Baker et.al., 2001). Therefore, it is important to provide adequate opportunities and resources for all, but more specifically for ethnically diverse children as early as possible. It is recognised that this targeted provision is dependent on the teachers' skills and understanding (Gazeley & Dunne, 2013), and, we argue, effective child-teacher relationships are the core factors in supporting culturally diverse students. Therefore, in this chapter we focus on how understanding and support of ethnic diversity can be promoted across early years and school settings via enhanced child-teacher interactions.

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