

D5.4 A Virtual Learning Environment model of professional development aimed at enhancing diversity and inclusiveness

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Description of Action of Task 5.4 refers to the development of a transferable model of professional development using a virtual learning environment (VLE) considering the contextual and organisational characteristics and the needs and challenges of diverse professionals working in these contexts using a design-based approach. The VLE will prioritize the promotion of community bonds in multilingual, multicultural and socially disadvantaged (pre)school and informal settings among the main actors (practitioners, parents and children), and the promotion of global intercultural competence of individuals and communities by i) raising awareness and knowledge of multiple languages, cultures, human rights, discrimination mechanisms and promoting skills in multiple languages and in critical thinking and establishing shared understanding, ii) promoting agency of all stakeholders based on valuing their cultural background, resources and identity, iii) using the resources available in the form of diverse family languages and cultural backgrounds to innovate learning practices of children and professionals and to create rich learning experiences, and iv) sustaining communication and collaboration between stakeholders, encouraging and supporting networking between stakeholders. The task includes two aspects: i) the co-design and implementation of a VLE, ii) a professional development (PD) intervention supportive to both the design of the VLE and to increasing professionals' intercultural competences. The design and implementation of the VLE is a task that is shared with the work packages WP3 (parents) and WP4 (children in classrooms), and is regarding the technical part coordinated by WP4. The present report D5.4, therefore, focuses on the PD intervention to increase the intercultural competences of professionals working with children and families at risk of social exclusion and on the use of the VLE as support to the PD intervention. The design and technical development of the VLE is reported in D4.4.

The PD intervention followed a contextual approach, which highlights the importance of flexibility and adaptability from the professionals involved as well as the researchers guiding the process and resulted in unique interventions in the four countries. One of the main differences between the four countries concerned the type of professionals and the setting they work in. In Portugal, the work was conducted in primary school settings with school teachers, whereas in the Netherlands the work was carried out in preschools with preschool teachers and all supportive staff (managers, pedagogues). In Italy the work was conducted in a primary school and preschool (located in the same building). Lastly, in France the intervention was conducted in an informal setting, namely a community centre with social workers and volunteers that aimed at improving the relation between (mainly immigrant and disadvantaged) parents and their children's schools. Another difference between Italy and Portugal on the one hand and France and the Netherlands on the other hand, concerned the additional involvement in T4.4. The work in T5.4 focused mainly on PD and improving professionals' competences, with use of the VLE whenever relevant, whereas the work in T4.4 focused on the work with children in the classroom and improving their competences. The Italian and Portuguese teachers were involved in both T4.4 and T5.4, thus allowing for more synergy in aligning the work conducted in both aspects of the intervention. The work in France and the Netherlands was initially mostly focused on professionals, but soon also developed to more concrete work related to daily practice with children and parents to strengthen the connection between theory and practice.

INTERVENTION IN PORTUGAL

The Portuguese intervention involved two primary schools in the greater area of Porto and included both professionals working directly with children (e.g., teachers) as well as other staff (e.g., school board member, school administration member). Both schools have disadvantaged student populations from low income families, but particularly the school in site 2 is known for having several children from the Portuguese Roma minority (the larger and most discriminated ethnic minority within the Portuguese context). It is important to note that the professional development intervention (T5.4) was conducted in both sites in strict articulation with the development of the classroom and school activities under T4.4. Therefore, the focus was on the development of the T4.4 activities that could enrich their curriculum as well as getting the opportunity to learn from professionals in other countries and the PD activities were aligned with that. In site 1, the intervention mainly focused on topic of economic inequalities and social justice, whereas site 2 addressed multiculturalism education.

The professional development aspect of the intervention supported teachers in enactment and reflection on the classroom activities that were designed and implemented as part of T4.4. The teachers carried out student projects addressing socioeconomic inequalities and multiculturalism and were actively supported and supervised by the ISOTIS researchers. The VLE was actively used by the children in the classroom, but less frequently used by the teachers. As part of the professional development, the professionals were involved in multiple exchange activities with professionals from other countries. The teachers, for instance, worked on a welcoming kit for newly arriving children and exchanged the results of this project with Italian teachers. Also, the teachers exchanged experiences with Dutch preschool teachers on the book activity and the skin tones activity.

The Portuguese intervention showed that the teachers hardly had time allocated for professional development, thus the researchers decided to work on professional development while meeting with teachers in preparing and evaluating the classroom activities. The researchers actively supported the teachers in the classroom, which was highly appreciated and contributed to a positive and collaborative relationship. It required flexibility and adaptability from the researchers to maximize opportunities for professional development in this process. In the end, the teachers showed great appreciation and indicated they have further developed their global and intercultural competences.

INTERVENTION IN ITALY

In Italy, the intervention included seven teachers from a preschool and primary school (located in the same building). The schools are located in a culturally highly diverse neighbourhood of the city of Milan with a significant percentage of the children coming from disadvantaged immigrant families (mainly Arabic and North African families, but not exclusively). A particular feature of the Italian PD intervention was the strong synergy with the interventions focusing on parents (WP3) and on classroom processes (WP4). Due to this characteristic the intervention focused on a) increasing teachers' awareness and knowledge regarding some of the central ISOTIS topics (e.g., multilingualism, second language learning, intercultural competences, family-school collaboration), b) promoting more positive and open attitudes towards linguistic and cultural

diversity within the school, c) supporting teachers' reflection skills, and d) increasing teachers' skills in dealing with multilingual and multicultural classrooms and in engaging in meaningful and effective dialogues with diverse families.

The intervention hinged around 5 main key-topics (i.e. knowledge on multilingualism and multiculturalism, ICTs, reflection skills, family-school collaboration, international exchange). Considering the central role that the VLE played in the Italian intervention (due to the synergy between the three WPs in Italy) the VLE was already introduced during the kick-off meeting and later presented more in-depth during the dedicated training meetings. The intervention combined different PD strategies, such as training, coaching, and reflection and was highly embedded in the VLE structure itself. The VLE is organized in different parts (namely, *did you know, observe and reflect, what can you do*) and these various parts provided opportunities to foster professionals' critical thinking and activity-designing skills (especially in the *observe and reflect* section). Moreover, one teacher engaged in a cross-country exchange and provided feedback on some of the Portuguese VLE activities which proved valuable for the Portuguese teachers and at the same time inspired the Italian teacher.

The Italian intervention was the most comprehensive and required the most extensive time investment of both the teachers and the researchers, which was mainly related to the involvement of Italy in all three WPs. The teachers were generally satisfied with the intervention, especially in relation to their increased knowledge and skills. They appreciated the professional development but were somewhat more critical towards the VLE for this purpose. It was children's enthusiasm that helped the teachers to better appreciate the potential of the VLE. Due to this complexity of the intervention (given the comprehensive approach) there were moments the teachers perceived the intervention as challenging and sometimes tiring. At the same time, the intervention was mostly focused on individual teachers rather than the team of professionals. Already in the exploratory phase, it appeared that there was a lack of strong team cohesion and collaboration at the chosen intervention site and the intervention did not succeed in improving that.

INTERVENTION IN THE NETHERLANDS

The Dutch PD intervention involved two locations of a large preschool organisation in the city of Utrecht and included both professionals working directly with children (e.g., teachers) as well as other staff (e.g, managers, pedagogues). Both locations are characterized by a highly diverse child population, with the majority of the children coming from low educated families or having an immigrant background (e.g., Maghrebian, Turkish, Indian, Polish). The aim of the intervention was to align the work as much as possible between the two locations, but still tailor the activities to the local context of each location. As a result, a kick-off meeting, VLE workshop and assessment meeting were combined for both locations, whereas the other meetings were held separately for both locations. Four cross-location goals guided the Dutch intervention focussing on a) enhancing awareness of one's own beliefs and attitudes regarding multiculturalism and multilingualism through reflection, b) expanding knowledge on the topic of diversity and inclusion, c) improving intercultural competences by exchanging (good) practices and knowledge between locations and countries, and d) reflection on and improvement of the relationship with parents and parental involvement.

The intervention mainly focused on the professional development of the organisation and staff. Therefore, each meeting focused on expanding professionals knowledge as well as reflecting on their attitudes and beliefs in order to raise awareness on their practice. A combination of the resources on the VLE, results of the T5.3 Staff survey and other findings in ISOTIS, and some additional theoretical models was used to expand knowledge and facilitate as a starting point for reflection. The use of the VLE as an online community of learners was addressed in two ways. Firstly, participants from the two locations were encouraged to exchange experiences and comment on each other's work via the online forum. Secondly, the VLE was used to facilitate cross-country exchange with Portuguese and Italian teachers. An activity concerning skin colour (conducted in Portugal) and a welcome kit (developed in Italy and Portugal) were shown to the Dutch professionals to reflect on the topic of skin colour and to raise a discussion about ways to welcome new children and parents to the preschool. In addition, a reflection activity on implicit messages in children's books (conducted in the Netherlands) was performed in Portugal as well, and the VLE was used to facilitate an exchange on these reflections.

The Dutch intervention showed that integrating such an intervention in the existing PD structure (e.g., allocating time and resources) is an important aspect both during the intervention as well as in view of sustainability in the longer term. Relatedly, a team-based intervention including managers and other supporting staff besides teachers, can enrich the discussion and strengthen the possibility for implementation and sustainability. At a more individual level, the intervention illustrated the importance of professionals' beliefs and attitudes in addressing intercultural competences and highlights the important role of reflection as a PD strategy in raising awareness of their (sometimes prejudiced) beliefs and attitudes, and how these are related to the professionals' actual practices and behaviour in the daily context.

INTERVENTION IN FRANCE

In France, the task was carried out in a community centre in Paris involving the manager and seven professionals (of which four were volunteers). The centre was located in a diverse neighbourhood with a majority of low-income families and/or of (North) African or Eastern European background. The organisation's approach is based on the principle that professionals should support parents in developing the necessary competences to contact and collaborate (and if necessary confront) with the school and teachers, rather than act as a mediator between the school and the parents. In other words, the organisation should rather empower parents to approach school. It was therefore agreed to address family-professional's collaboration (also termed co-education). Consequently, the PD intervention aimed at the development of the staff's knowledge, beliefs, attitudes and expectations, hereby advancing their competences to better fulfil the organisation's mission.

A crucial part of the intervention consisted of group-wise reflection about actual cases or situations that participants shared with the rest of the group. These cases were related to the co-education approach with the final aim of improving disadvantaged children's educational opportunities and were experienced as challenging. Complementary to the group reflection on the shared cases, the researchers also prepared a presentation of theoretical models and scientific research to augment the participants' knowledge on relevant subjects connected to the

main topics and objectives. A few of the VLE resources were used to enrich participants' knowledge as well. In addition, a cross-country exchange via the VLE was facilitated by providing the participants with narratives about the ideal day written by Dutch professionals, which helped them reflect on their own parent-professional relationship. Finally, the researchers supported the organisation in the development of a game that can be played by parents, children and teachers to enhance parents' knowledge regarding the French education system.

The French intervention showed that the (para) professionals expressed satisfaction with the PD meetings as it brought them relevant tools (skills) and ideas (knowledge) on empowering parents. Already during the exploratory phase it appeared that there was, within the organization, a lack of a clear-cut definition of the professionals' role in the relationship with parents, which caused confusion especially when parents solicited their help in a conflict with the school. This issue was addressed in the intervention but not fully resolved yet. Possibly, establishing an organizational policy in which the professionals' roles and functions are clearly stipulated and shared agreement on functions and roles is sought, can support the professionals in establishing and maintaining a professional identity. This seems especially relevant for non-permanent staff who work in the organization on a voluntary basis. The same holds for establishing clear guidelines on how to conduct the activities with children and parents.

MAIN CONCLUSIONS CONCERNING THE VLE

The VLE proved to be a rich resource on several topics, including cultural diversity, multilingualism, second language learning, intercultural competences, family-school collaboration, economic inequalities and social justice with a repository of video clips, narratives, concrete examples from practice and dilemmas for professionals to reflect on. Further, it provided examples of concrete activities for both professional development and activities with parents or with children in the classroom, supporting professionals in enacting their competences. These resources were generally appreciated by professionals and contributed to enhancing their knowledge about specific topics. The joint reflection on one or more of these resources, which was part of the PD activities, supported professionals in reflecting on their beliefs and attitudes.

Another function of the VLE was establishing a virtual community of learners. Although most professionals gave this function a try, as this was facilitated by means of the cross-country exchange, the potential of this function has not been fully explored yet. This exchange was completely guided and supervised by the ISOTIS researchers, which appeared necessary also in view of tackling language barriers. Although the VLE was available in many languages and featured an automatic translation function, this did not always function well. Some nuances got lost in translation and sometimes the automatic translation created confusion among professionals. Therefore, it seems essential to have someone actively guiding the process of exchanging experiences.

MAIN CONCLUSIONS CONCERNING PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The PD intervention was contextualized and adapted to the needs of professionals in their local situation, while taking into account the organizational structures and policies, which resulted in different processes in the different countries and organizations involved in the intervention. However, this design-based process followed a number of phases from the exploration of the context, the co-design, implementation and evaluation of the intervention and all countries adhered to the general guidelines that were formulated. Altogether, this resulted in a process taking place over the course of more than one year.

The exploration of the context appeared very important to get a better understanding of the local needs and desires of professionals and how these professionals function within the larger organization. Moreover, this phase also functioned to establish trust and to build positive relations with the professionals, which proved to be essential for the success of the intervention. The co-design phase was new for both researchers and professionals and relied heavily on a good collaboration and mutual trust. Especially the professionals experienced some uncertainty about the intervention and what it would bring them during this phase. In all countries, this led to a stronger connection to professionals' everyday work and to seeking for ways to integrate the PD work in the preparation of classroom activities. The implementation and exchange of activities, especially between professionals from different countries, supported the professionals in understanding the added value of the intervention and was highly appreciated.

MAIN CONCLUSIONS CONCERNING PROFESSIONALS' INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCES

Overall, the assessment of the intervention revealed changes in professionals' intercultural competences based on their own reflections and self-evaluation forms as well as on the ISOTIS researchers' assessment. However, there were some differences depending on the targeted competence (i.e. beliefs, attitudes, knowledge, skills, behaviour and practices). Generally, most changes occurred in professionals' awareness on multiculturalism, intercultural sensitivity, multilingualism, social justice and to a lesser extent on parent-school relationships and parent involvement. These changes were reported by professionals in all four countries and were generally also appreciated by them.

Following our theory of change, professionals' beliefs, attitudes, knowledge and skills showed bidirectional relations with their behaviour and practices. The emphasis on reflecting on one's beliefs and attitudes and on how these were enacted in the classroom, appeared strong facilitators of this underlying mechanism. The VLE played an important role in supporting professionals by providing videos, narratives, dilemmas and concrete examples from practice to reflect on. Also, the cross-country exchange was considered interesting and valuable in enhancing multi-perspectivity. Moreover, the suggestions for (classroom) activities encouraged professionals to enact and apply newly required knowledge, beliefs, attitudes or skills in their own context.

MAIN LESSONS LEARNED

Generally, the professionals were satisfied with the intervention. However, some professionals reported lower levels of satisfaction as their high expectations before the start of the intervention were not fully met. This was particularly related to the VLE and what they had expected of it and to a lesser extent also pertained to the newly acquired knowledge and skills, which in their view was lower than expected. Overall, the evaluation showed that most gains were made in the domains of beliefs and attitudes, which the researchers felt was a necessary prerequisite for changing behaviour and practices. Interestingly, there were examples in several countries in which professionals went beyond the scope of the intervention in initiating a change of practice. This seems an indication of change in professionals' beliefs and attitudes that set in motion a process of change in other domains as well, even though the professionals might not have been aware of it.

The work in the four countries highlighted that there are several aspects of the context (i.e. characteristics of the professionals, the (classroom) context and the organization) that were relevant for the success of the intervention. It appeared important that the intervention was tailored to this local context and adjusted to fit in existing policies and structures in the organization. Despite these contextual differences the overall design-based approach worked well and uncovered some similar findings and lessons learned across countries.

Related to the overall process, there are three points worth noting. The first relates to professionals' readiness to change, which is conceptualised as comprising factors at the individual and organizational level that reflect the extent to which people are inclined to accept, embrace and adopt a particular approach or plan with the intention to change the current situation. Secondly, guidance of the PD process by someone with the appropriate knowledge and skills (e.g., an external expert or a member of staff who is facilitated to guide the team) is critical to success. Throughout the PD interventions in all countries, an active role of the ISOTIS researchers appeared to be essential to guide the co-constructive process in which mutual trust and positive, collaborative relationships were crucial. Last, but not least, sufficient time for preparation and engagement in the intervention was essential too and lack of time appeared a barrier at some points, in some countries.

Concerning the VLE, five aspects seemed important. First, the content, structure and functionalities of the VLE should be customized to the wishes and needs of the professionals who are to use it. Second, the VLE should be viewed as a dynamic and continuously evolving platform adapting accordingly to the context and professionals, which is in line with the idea of continuous professional development. Relatedly, it is essential to have someone actively guiding this process from development through implementation and beyond, to establish a sustainable practice. In line with this active facilitation, a fourth point concerns the embeddedness within the organisation. The results indicate that integrating the VLE within the daily work in the classroom environment is important. Relatedly, in view of alignment and integration within current practice, this also calls for technical requirements to enable this.

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