



WORKSHOP BACKGROUND DOCUMENT

Diversity in education: from challenge to added value



According to the Council of Europe, “diversity implies moving beyond the idea of tolerance to a genuine respect for and appreciation for difference. It is central to the idea of pluralism and multiculturalism”.¹

European societies are becoming increasingly diverse, linked to internal mobility, international migration, globalisation, and socio-economic inequalities. People from different ethnical, cultural, religious and socio-economic backgrounds, LGBTI people and people with special needs live, work and study together. These societal changes affect the educational landscape and organisation and have a lasting effect on schools across Europe. According to the Education and Training Monitor 2019, 34% of teachers in the EU work in schools with at least 10% of special needs students; 24% of teachers work in schools with at least 10% non-native-speaking pupils; 32% of teachers work in schools with at least 1% refugee students; and 19% of teachers work in schools where more than 30% of students come from a socio-economically disadvantaged background.²

The increasing diversity of European societies can be perceived in different ways. A study about diversity in education for the EC DG Education, Youth, Sport and Culture (2017) presents two prevailing understandings of diversity:

1 Karen O’Shea (2003): Education for Democratic Citizenship. Developing a Shared Understanding - A Glossary of Terms for Education for Democratic Citizenship. Strasbourg: Council of Europe.

2 European Commission (2019): Education and Training Monitor 2019. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.



- diversity as a disparity, whereby heterogeneity is perceived as a burden to deal with;
- diversity, multiculturalism and inclusion as an asset, as a source of opportunities.³

The same study also shows that many European countries still perceive diversity from a deficit angle in the design of their educational policies, building on a compensatory approach, rather than on education processes as an opportunity for diversity. This approach attempts to manage social and cultural diversity by providing extra resources for 'deprived' groups, often with a lack of critical awareness of the way social differences are constructed.⁴ However, diversity can be a much more than a challenge to address. It can be of great added value on various levels – among learners, education personnel, trade union affiliates, and in society at large. Encounters with different groups who live, learn and work together can be opportunities for individuals and groups to become more tolerant and culturally aware, to improve cultural dialogue and respect, and to build a more equal, fair and just society together. Education, in particular, has an important role in developing knowledge, skills and attitudes to enable individuals to contribute to a more inclusive society. For example, students can learn from their fellow Roma students about their culture; a diversified workforce would bring in new teaching approaches, which might help students at risk of exclusion; and increasing the diversity of the recruitment pool can address staff shortages, while at the same time allowing the bringing in of new perspectives to the institution's environment and contributing to a democratic school culture.

Meanwhile, the diversity in the student body is not reflected by the teaching staff. A 2016 study by the European Commission suggests that teachers and students with a migrant background in initial teacher education are generally under-represented compared to the diversity of learners.⁵ Yet, increased teacher diversity may contribute to better learner performance and compensate sometimes negative expectations of mainstream teachers about migrant/minority pupil performance. Teachers from minority cultural/ethnic backgrounds also tend to have heightened cultural awareness and can serve as role models for learners from diverse backgrounds.⁶

Other issues regarding diversity in the teacher body concern the lack of young teachers – at EU level, around 40% of lower secondary education teachers will be retiring in the next 15 years⁷ – and the vertical and horizontal segregation of men and women in the education sector. While women are predominant in early childhood education (across Europe, less than 5% of education staff in this sector are men)⁸, they become less and less present with the increase of education levels, with 85% of women teachers in primary schools and 65% in secondary schools. Most teachers in the EU are women, but they are under-represented in leadership and decision-making positions in the education sector. Studies suggest that a strongly gender-divided workforce can reinforce traditional views of the roles of men and women.⁹ Increasing diversity not only in education staff, but also in education trade unions can be an important way to tackle vertical and horizontal gender segregation, reduce pay and pension gaps and improve gender equality overall. For example, having more female negotiators in the collective negotiations would bring up more issues relevant for women in the sector, and could bring in different negotiation techniques.

3 European Commission (2016): Study on the Diversity within the Teaching Profession with Particular Focus on Migrant and/ or Minority Background. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2016.

4 Ibid.

5 European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice (2015): The Teaching Profession in Europe: Practices, Perceptions, and Policies. Eurydice Report. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.

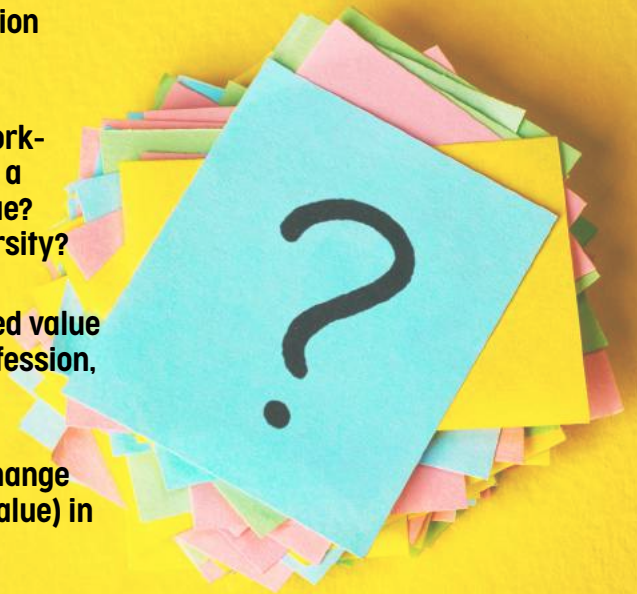
6 OECD (2019), Providing Quality Early Childhood Education and Care: Results from the Starting Strong Survey 2018, TALIS, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/301005d1-en>.

7 Ibid.



While diversity in society and the education sector is often considered solely as a challenge to be addressed, it is also a source of opportunities and is very beneficial for innovation and growth¹⁰, for learning and teaching, for ensuring equality and equity in education and employment and trade unions' work, and for the overall development of our societies. Therefore, **the workshop aims at discussing the added value of diversity in the education sector and how it can be used in the classroom, in the educational institution, in employment relationships between school leader and education personnel, and within education trade unions:**

- **What aspects of diversity are relevant for the education sector?**
- **Why is diversity among learners, in the education workforce, trade union membership, and in the society as a whole not only a challenge but also a significant value? What are the benefits of these different types of diversity?**
- **How can diversity be celebrated and used as an added value in the classroom, education institution, teaching profession, and in the education trade unions' work?**
- **How can education trade unions contribute to this change of perception of diversity (from challenge to added value) in the education system and in the society as a whole?**



¹⁰ Council Recommendation of 22 May 2018 on promoting common values, inclusive education, and the European dimension of teaching.