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Diversity in the Classroom:

How Teacher Perceptions and Teacher-Child Interactions Matter

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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 paper, teacher's beliefs, and attitudes and how these affect communication will be discussed. The power of teacher-child relationships will be highlighted, and suggestions made about effective practices to promote communication and build relationships

Key words: ethnic diversity, prejudices, implicit beliefs, teacher-child relationships

Statements and Declarations

We confirm that there is no potential competing interests regarding this study.

As authors of the study, we have approved submission of the manuscript to Behavior Analysis in Practice

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We declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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Introduction

Teachers have a key role in contributing to create 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 recognize the difficulties children might experience and be able to provide improved opportunities for them in collaboration with the school's management team and with 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). 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 and 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 European countries (OECD, 2010). On the other hand, there is evidence of how student dropout rates have been increasing during the

transition to upper levels of education for ethnically diverse students (Herweijer, 2009). This has 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 and Dunne, 2013). Therefore, in this paper, we evaluate how understanding and support of ethnic diversity can be promoted across early years and school settings via enhanced child-teacher interactions.

Promoting successful engagement of all children into school context via recognition of different cultures

According to Ladson-Billings (1995), cultural awareness and implementing culturally responsive practices should not be confined to academic instruction but should also cover students' cultural heritage and background within all aspects of the learning environment. Therefore, school policies and teaching practices should allow for the implementation of this kind of approach (Coronel and Gómez-Hurtado, 2015, Horenczyk and Tatar, 2002). Key to this is the importance of understanding cultural requirements may have a powerful impact on behaviour patterns and expectations of children and families. In some cultures, asking questions or initiating a communication with an adult may not be appreciated, whereas in other cultures students are expected to take the initiative and be curious. In cultures with a collectivistic nature the emphasis on social and relational components within communication might be much stronger (Kagitcibasi, 2010, Beyazkurk & Kesner, 2005). Therefore attitudes, practices, and values of the differing cultures should be understood by both parties for effective communication (Shor and Bernhard, 2003). If it is expected that ethnically diverse individuals should be able to be successfully integrated within the mainstream culture, then it

should be noted that adaptation may be best achieved via effective and respectful communication between students, parents, and professionals within schools.

Teachers need to have an understanding of the distinct cultural components of their students and the factors affecting their community life. This would enable the effective design and management of the learning environments and help meet the needs of students (Milner & Tenore, 2010). Notably, flexibility and creativity are the crucial aspects in creating such environments (Biasutti, Concina and Frate, 2020). In that sense, ethnic diversity can be seen as an opportunity to create a welcoming and respectful classroom environment in which difference is viewed positively. Creative and adaptable environments would also promote better inclusion of children into classroom processes. This can also be an invaluable way to enable other children to explore and understand diverse cultures and respect for others.

For promoting culturally responsive practices in the settings, in addition to culturally sensitive and inclusive school policies, teachers also need to recognise their own cultural biases which might be either unconscious or conscious. There are indications that teachers might not be confident how to implement culturally responsive practices and how to identify potential biases within their own, and others, educational practices (Malo-Juvera, Correll and Cantrell, 2018, Herzog-Punzenberger et al., 2020). This lack of confidence might be an issue for teachers and practitioners. One method to help support the development of teachers confidence and understanding is to be exposed to diverse classroom environments as a part of systemic practice (Price-Dennis and Souto-Manning, 2011, Darling-Hammond et al., 2020). This is not only important for the individual person but also for the society as a whole as a lack of understanding in variations across ethnic identities and cultures might lead to biased attitudes and prejudices. Within an early years or school environment a prejudiced approach might hinder the academic performance of ethnically diverse children. Results from a previous study based on teacher ratings of children from different racial groups showed

interesting results (Yates & Marcelo, 2014). While the ratings of the teachers in terms of children's imagination and expressive play did not differ between the racial groups, the attributions of teachers regarding adaptation levels of children changed according to the race of the children. Therefore, it is essential to understand potential biases and challenges that ethnically diverse children might come across in varying levels of education (Glock, 2016). Earlier exposure, from the very beginning of their teacher-practitioner training period at university/college, to the diverse nature of educational settings would be beneficial for teachers in terms of self-reflection, recognising own biases, and understanding the strengths and challenges of ethnic diversity (see Malo-Juvera, Correll and Cantrell, 2018). It is evident that contact with other individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds would be helpful to make stronger connections with others and to reduce potential biased intergroup attitudes which is not only valid for one ethnic group but for humanity as a whole (Sparkman and Hamer, 2020).

When cultural diversity and potential biases are recognized by teachers, culturally responsive practices can be promoted successfully across classroom practices. However, it is difficult to understand every aspect of cultural diversity. We cannot expect teachers to have an in-depth knowledge of every aspect of all cultures. Instead, the most crucial factors are for teachers to see this as an opportunity for learning rather than a challenge or difficulty and to appreciate that anyone can become a part of a minority ethnic group if s/he does not come from the dominant culture (Rogoff, 2011), even in one's own homeland. Therefore, it is crucial for a teacher to think about how classroom practices and learning/instructional activities can be enhanced based on culturally relevant/sustaining pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 2014, cited by Han and Thomas, 2010). Teachers should display interest, be open and respectful, and communicate with people from diverse ethnic backgrounds to understand how new strategies can be integrated in the ongoing practices. A lack of such cultural sensitivity and

responsiveness of teachers may result in misunderstandings and biased perceptions regarding ethnically diverse groups which, in turn, may lead to ineffective support for those children with diverse background (Han and Thomas, 2010).

Factors affecting teachers' beliefs and attitudes about ethnically diverse children

Many previous studies indicate that it is crucial to understand teachers points of view as teachers are seen as starting point to promote social competency and academic success of children (Pianta, 1999, Howes, 2000, Pianta, Stuhlman, and Hamre, 2002, Pianta and LaParo, 2003). It is also important to know what challenges they face and the insights they have in relation to teaching children from cultural backgrounds e different than their own. Although the role of teachers in promoting school success of ethnically diverse children is crucial, there are very few studies evaluating teachers' implicit and explicit perceptions of native and ethnic minority students (Van den Bergh et al., 2010, Peček, Macura-Milovanović, and Vujisić-Živković, 2014). The studies investigating teachers' hidden beliefs and attitudes towards their students mostly focus on expressions of explicit beliefs via face-to-face interviews or self-reporting measures (Payne, Burkley and Stokes, 2008). However, it is difficult for any person to express their beliefs without any bias. Teachers' own ethnic background might also influence their beliefs. Any prejudiced attitudes, explicit or implicit, may affect the understanding of any ethnic group which may, in turn, affect the expectations and behaviours of students and teachers. These expectations and attitudes may also be extended to parents of those students (Van den Bergh et.al., 2010, Redding, 2019).

Teachers' attitudes towards ethnicity may also be related to their beliefs regarding the levels of academic success in the classroom. If students show underachievement academically, they may not meet teachers' (and the schools') expectations of success. These expectations may reflect teachers' anxiety that their class will not achieve a high performance, or success rate,

because of those academically underachieving students (Wubbels, Den Brok, Veldman, and Van Tartwijk, 2006, Ready and Wright, 2011, Adair, 2015, Banerjee and Lamb, 2016). In a Dutch study, researchers found that the range of biased attitudes varied across different classrooms. However, teacher's performance was found to be consistently related to their biased evaluations and implicit attitudes, specifically regarding ethnically diverse children, such as lower intelligence and poor academic performance (Van den Bergh, Denessen, Hornstra, Voeten and Holland, 2010). Another finding reported differences between the perceptions of Dutch teachers who have elevated level of biased attitudes and those with low level of biased attitudes towards ethnically diverse students. They found lower achievement status in classrooms where teachers were highly prejudiced towards ethnic diversity students compared to classrooms with less prejudiced teachers. Although teachers' explicit attitudes toward those students might be influenced by academic achievement, there is also a bias in evaluating ethnically diverse children's performance (Glock, 2016).

Another factor in influencing attitudes could be the motivation and enthusiasm of the teachers themselves. Teaching can be highly stressful and demanding (Glock et al 2019). Sometimes, teachers might have difficulties in sustaining their own motivation because they might experience emotional exhaustion which influences their professional commitment and the quality of interactions with children (Ansari et al., 2020). In addition, they may not know how to create a diverse approach to capture all the needs of children and, specifically, ethnically diverse children (Herzog-Punzenberger et al., 2020). However, teachers should not wait until they experience a diverse classroom to develop these skills. They should be prepared for this in advance and therefore be welcoming to all children, regardless of background. Therefore, it is worthwhile to recognize teachers' motivation and enthusiasm to learn about themselves and their own attitudes, which can then be translated into more inclusive education methods. To achieve this, it is not sufficient for teachers to only participate in courses, training, or

workshops. A professional framework based on competencies driven by ethnically and culturally sensitive principles is required (Muniz, 2020).

Effective Interactions versus Disciplinary Actions for Ethnically Diverse Children

Schools in general, and teachers in particular, want children to be more adaptive, in terms of keeping the rules, having good relationships with peers and being successful academically. If children fail to achieve these, discipline strategies may be implemented which in fact, lead to the reverse (Gregory, Skiba, and Noguera, 2010). Discipline strategies may change according to regulations within schools. Strategies used by teachers range from a mild warning about behaviour, to temporary or permanent suspension. Research suggests more extreme discipline strategies (such as suspension) are more likely to be applied to ethnically diverse students (Gregory, Skiba, and Noguera, 2010, Okonofua and Eberhardt, 2015). Once suspension from the school towards ethnic students increases, the achievement gap between the ethnically dominant group of students and the student from diverse backgrounds is also likely to increase. This is due to the frequent disciplinary actions which lead to students missing learning opportunities. This, in turn, leads to a decrease in school success and the sense of belonging and inclusion of students. Therefore, disciplinary actions and the way teachers treat their students determine school success and influence the commitment of students.

Instead of using disciplinary actions, it is proposed that any kind of relationship including sensitive and corresponding interactions can function as a protecting and enriching factor to promote children's competencies (Pianta, 1999, Baker, 2006). From this point of view, a motivating classroom environment and positive experiences can help children to adjust to a cultural context that differs from their home context and to meet expectations. It can also assist with dealing with increasing pressures for school success and being comfortable at school (Su, 2005). Close child-teacher relationships together with high quality classroom

organization could contribute towards better behavioural adaptation, greater social competence with their peers and engagement in learning environments (Howes, Phillips and Whitebook, 1992; Pianta, 1999; Howes, Shivers and Ritchie, 2004, Cadima, Doumen, Verschueren and Buyse, 2015). In other words, closer teacher-child relationships lead to a better transition to school, increases in adaptation and academic success.

When it comes to ethnically diverse students, potential expectations may rise in meeting requirements (Ready and Wright, 2011). Some teachers may keep students' motivation high by giving various pathways for enhanced learning and to enable better performance (Wubbels, Den Brok, Veldman, and Van Tartwijk, 2006). If teachers have biased attitudes about ethnic diversity, they are likely to make negative attributions for those students coming from diverse backgrounds. Even students themselves can make negative attributions about their own skills which may inhibit them from actively engaging in learning experiences (Adair, 2015). However, earlier research shows how teacher support can affect the academic performance of students and their commitment to school (Birch and Ladd, 1997, Pianta, 1999, Rucinski, Brown, and Downer, 2018). For this reason, teachers working with any grade level should have competencies such as initiating and sustaining positive student-teacher relationships, effective strategies in managing students' behaviours, continuous monitoring, keeping students' attention on appropriate tasks and creating a positive and culturally sensitive atmosphere within the classroom. The uniqueness of each individual child should be the focus in that sense. Instead of making assumptions about the ethnicity of children and their cultural expectations, teachers need to recognise that each child comes from a different background. By having positive relationships with individual children, teachers may better understand the complexity and diversity of cultural backgrounds. This will enhance ways to communicate with those children and will also help to break down any barriers between children and teachers to ensure a connection is made.

Conflictual relationships stemming from teachers' biased views of ethnic diversity can lead to increased risks throughout school life, meaning that perceived conflict can widen the gap between students from ethnically diverse backgrounds and native students (Van der Bergh et.al., 2010, Vervaet, D'hondt, Van Houtte and Stevens, 2016). From this point of view, close relationships with teachers may function as a protective mechanism for ethnically diverse students (Pianta, 1999, Baker, 2006, Verschueren and Koomen, 2012). It is critical for teachers to understand how close and supportive relationships are significantly important for diverse students when adapting to unfamiliar settings, specifically when considering integration into another culture that is diverse from the original family background (Thijs, Westhof and Koomen, 2012). The more the teachers are experienced with ethnically diverse children and the closer relationships they have, the less likely conflicts will be. Also, working with ethnically diverse students would influence teachers' perceptions, leading to changes in teaching beliefs and methods and teacher-child relationships (Su, 2005).

It is noteworthy to remember that "ethnically diverse classrooms put heavier demands on teachers to manage than less diverse classrooms" as stated by Wubbels et al. (2006). Ethnic diversity is therefore one of the critical factors to focus on for both pre-service and in-service teacher training in organizing classroom settings, learning environments and interpersonal relationships. Regarding preservice teachers' views, there are some variations about how diversity issues were perceived. In Clarke and Drudys study (2006), preservice teachers' attitudes were found to be resistant to meeting the needs of students in a diverse classroom, however this depended on the subject area. Although there was agreement about the involvement of diverse students in schools, they also expressed concerns about having diverse students in their classes. This returns to the idea that teachers are not confident about how to engage with ethnically and linguistically diverse students and their parents (Peček, Macura-Milovanović, and Vujisić-Živković, 2014). Respecting and appreciating diversity is among

the basic steps of social emotional learning skills. Therefore, it is critical, specifically for a teacher to appreciate diversity (Kress and Elias, 2006). It is important to enrich teacher training programs to increase awareness about cultural heritage, via engaging in direct experiences regarding various cultural practices, in order to improve teaching skills and strategies within classrooms. This enables teachers to consider cultural, linguistic, and individual needs of the children more effectively and to see this as an opportunity to develop and extend their teaching practices.

Shifting perceptions negative to positive ones: Improving self-awareness of teachers through supervision

Unconscious bias has been discussed widely as an explanation for racism. If people are made aware of their biases, does it mean they will acknowledge these, accept them and have the willingness to change their behaviour? Noon (2017) questions the assumption that once biases have been identified, that changes to attitudes will follow. Implicit attitudes are described as automatic reactions to an object or situation and therefore are less likely to be adapted to be socially acceptable in any particular context (Glock *et al*, 2019). For this reason, there is a risk unconscious bias could be used as an excuse for prejudiced attitudes in that sense and the idea of these thoughts being unconscious and not intended suggests it may be out with the individuals' control, hence, making behaviour change less likely. Therefore, the main idea should be acknowledging the truth that there may be some biases that might hinder effective communication. It might be difficult finding ways to eliminate those attitudes, however, one can still try to find ways to reduce the influence of these attitudes and beliefs on their behavior rather than reducing the prejudice itself (FitzGerald *et al.*, 2019).

According to Jowsey (2019), there are stages in order to reach a higher level of recognition of diverse cultures and to deal with potential biases. First, at 'the surface competency zone',

individuals need to understand how people behave and organise their daily practices within diverse cultures. This means one needs to have culture-specific knowledge. This may indicate a cultural awareness at surface level such as greeting people in their own languages or asking children and families to bring the most traditional food in their culture to the school. The second stage is ‘the bias twilight zone’ in which individuals look for hidden aspects of their ideas regarding diverse cultures which suggests increasing self-awareness and critical consciousness of biases that might influence behaviours and attitudes towards ethnically diverse individuals. Full competency is not a painless process; it is difficult to face one’s own biases. This is called ‘the confronting midnight zone’. Although the three stages approach of Jowsey seems a bit complicated, it is the key to consider those stages to pull out hidden attitudes that might hinder communication with people from ethnically diverse backgrounds. The most crucial step is to recognise one’s attitudes and hidden beliefs, face them and then revise them to display more bias free behaviours (Jowsey, 2019).

There are many ways of perceiving relationships to achieve enhanced and bias-free communication. Indeed, teachers may learn how to transform any negative perceptions into the positive ones (Alvarez-Hevia, 2017). In order to achieve this, teachers need to know how to deal with their attitudes and potential negative emotions. Using self-reflection and self-criticality in terms of cultural consciousness to enhance experiences of all children as well as promoting better outcomes for ethnically diverse students is key (Gay and Kirkland, 2003). Teachers can reflect on their own beliefs and teaching practices by considering how cultural diversity can embrace all children in the context. Rather than only recognising the cultural difference, engaging in a respective and collaborative communication is another way to promote more inclusive practices in the classroom (Willis, 2021). Spending scheduled time with the children individually might be a helpful strategy to enhance this communication. In order to improve perceptions of both teachers and children, a relationship-based intervention

programme called “Banking Time’ could be used to enhance child–teacher relationships (Pianta, 1999; Pianta and Hamre 2001a, b, c). This is identified as one of the leading interventions in the field to promote positive interactions between teachers and children via face-to-face sessions initiated by teachers. There is a considerable amount of evidence indicating that teachers participating in Banking Time intervention groups had reported more positive relationship perceptions about children in their classrooms (Williford and Pianta, 2020, Driscoll and Pianta, 2010) Similarly, children reported how their relationships had improved via Banking Time sessions (Sahin Asi, 2019). In this intervention, the main idea is to save positive experiences during designated sessions. Although the teacher is the starting point to organise the sessions, the child leads the session without any instruction or interruption by the teacher. The teacher focuses on the child, what the child plays and/or says and tries to understand feelings of the child. This is used to create a key message to best describe the relationship between them to be used as a relationship resource. In this way, both the child and the teacher can get to know each other. This method helps to break down barriers and helps teachers find a connection between them and the individual child from which the basis of the relationship can grow.

Reflecting on the current or previous experiences of teachers would also be helpful to recognise alternatives in enhancing communication across ethnically diverse classrooms. Black (2021) emphasizes the importance of using clear lenses about cultural awareness while communicating with people from various cultural backgrounds:

‘.....(student)’s written reflection made me angry, I felt personally attacked, and I was in denial. These feelings instigated a cycle in which I evaded my racial awareness; I did not believe that I treated (student) and the other Black students any differently than the way I treated my white students.....At this point in my teaching career, I was utterly unwilling (and unable at the time) to view myself as anything other than a colorblind teacher who treated all her students fairly....(pp.122)’

For this reason, a supervision model might be helpful in teacher training programs and/or via in-service training programs to increase awareness teachers about their feelings and attitudes so that they can have better understanding how to manage an ethnically diverse classroom. In order to achieve this, teachers and/or teacher candidates might be supervised via case studies or reflective strategies for a particular period to enhance their skills in building and sustaining healthy relationships with their students. Weekly organised supervisory meetings or mentoring groups and/or individually planned sessions with a supervisor would be specifically helpful. During the supervision period, using reflective techniques, teachers might talk about their experiences, feelings, or struggles they experience. For example, saying if they think about a particular child at home, if so, in what ways, or describing a specific time at which they and a child had a positive experience (Pianta, 1999). These reveal the teacher's perceptions about any particular child and help the teacher become aware of her/his own thoughts, feelings, and/or attitudes. This might be a way to help them realise unspoken thoughts or feelings about children and increase self-awareness of teachers to improve sensitivity and responsiveness during interactions with their students.

Conclusion

There is a necessity to promote respect for diversity in educational settings since cultural variations will always be there. Increasing cross-cultural exchanges may help teachers to understand a variety of cultural practices and how these contribute towards various parts of society, more specifically school contexts (Greenfield, Suzuki, and Rothstein-Fisch, 2006). In this way, it may be possible to achieve a balance and understanding between distinct groups and to help manage diversity challenges in society. It is also critical for teachers to recognise the experiences and expectations of families in order to have a broader sense of children. Teachers should prioritise time to get to know individual children and families they work with. By doing so, teachers can better assess how each family is shaped, better understand

cultural differences, and the potential support ethnically diverse families may benefit from. If teachers have more contact with parents, this is likely to increase the empathetic behaviour of teachers towards ethnically diverse children and their families. Correspondingly, parents and students may display more positive attitudes towards the school, which in turn may lead to more collaboration with teachers and the school management (Gay, 2002, Christenson, 2004). It could also lead to better outcomes academically and a more positive self-concept (Toldson and Lemmons, 2013, Hughes and Kwok, 2007).

A teacher may have a role to protect students against school failure, maladjustment into school context and prejudiced attitudes as well. On the other hand, teachers who are not ethnically sensitive enough may evaluate their students' competencies negatively because of their biased attitudes (Vervae, D'hondt, Van Houtte and Stevens, 2016) or hinder academic success and social competencies of their students (Gregory, Skiba and Noguera, 2010, Van der Bergh et.al., 2010). As discussed earlier, people's attitudes become more positive when they have more positive exposure to diverse cultures (Glock et al 2019, Malo-Juvera, Correll and Cantrell, 2018). This is possible in school environments with a significant cultural mix. However, in settings with limited diversity there could be a danger this could lead to a "stop and point" approach where individuals from diverse cultures are highlighted and could lead to more discrimination as they are being presented as "different." In situations such as this, teachers should be prepared for the likelihood of children from diverse backgrounds entering the classroom and ensure the environment and resources reflect distinct cultures and that their relationships are warm and welcoming. Being prepared for the likelihood of children from diverse backgrounds entering the classroom may require additional initial input, however, enabling a more inclusive learning environment should be viewed as an essential part of the role, not an additional task. Teaching can be a stressful and highly demanding profession;

however, it should be kept in mind that it is a fundamental right for *all* children to receive the best quality teaching possible.

Research has shown that an overall positive emotional climate may support high quality one-to-one relationships, however more supportive interactions at individual level are crucial (Rucinski, Brown, and Downer, 2018). Spending quality time with individual children could be an effective strategy to challenge stereotypes and prejudices, on both sides, and lead to a more inclusive learning environment (Reddings, 2019). Therefore, further well-designed studies are needed to observe deeply what goes on in classrooms to make context-based recommendations on how to manage diversity effectively. This would help which approach, or approaches, can be tailored for students from diverse ethnic backgrounds. To achieve this, teachers need to be enabled to take time to reflect on their own attitudes. This should become part of professional development. Identifying, challenging, and changing these attitudes is essential to provide a fair and equitable approach to learning for all students.

What is learnt from literature is that teachers may have prejudiced attitudes, as all humans do. However, it is important to be aware of how these attitudes may affect communication with children and to know that they are a crucial factor in determining the well-being of children. Making time to get to know each other to help make connections with individuals and to overcome potential biases should be a priority. For this reason, school is an important resource that can be utilized not only by children but also by families and teachers in order to better understand each other, to respect diversities and to find a way for living in harmony and peace.

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