

Professional development of teachers of Spanish for immigrant students: Achievements and pending challenges

El desarrollo profesional del profesorado de español para estudiantes inmigrantes: Logros y retos pendientes

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Background

Teaching Spanish to immigrant pupils as a vehicular language in schools has been ongoing in Spain since the 1990s. Initially on an experimental basis in Andalusia, it was subsequently generalised to the rest of Spain due to the continuity of migratory flows and the stable schooling of immigrant pupils of foreign origin. From the outset, this work has been carried out by a new educator: the teacher of the so-called “special classrooms for immigrants” or “temporary classrooms for linguistic adaptation” (hereinafter ATAL). Throughout this time, their functions, access, profile and working conditions have varied, and not always in a similar way in the different regions. In Andalusia, they were regulated in 2007 to, among other things, encourage inclusive support. However, research analysing these units reveals numerous discrepancies between what is regulated by law, with its well-intentioned declarations, and its actual implementation and inclusive practices. Despite this, the work of ATAL teachers has been widely acknowledged and praised by the educational community and they are currently one of the key figures in the care of immigrant students. After 25 years, their role has become institutionalized, but some issues related to their professional development remain worthy of analysis.

Aims

The main purpose of the research was to investigate the professional development of Spanish teachers who teach immigrant pupils of foreign origin in state schools in Andalusia (Spain). We were interested in analysing the elements that influenced the daily work of these teachers, assessing their professional status, the opportunities that arose in relation to their professional promotion and the impact that their work had on cultural diversity management. To this end, the main study objective was specified in the following research questions: Which factors affect the professional development and status of Spanish teachers? What options do they have for professional promotion? and How does their work affect cultural diversity management?

Method & procedures

Qualitative research and the use of techniques such as interviews and focus groups were chosen in order to explore the thoughts and perceptions of ATAL teachers. Specifically, 28 Spanish teachers participated, from three Andalusian provinces: Cadiz, Granada and Huelva. The research was part of a broader project (CSO2013-43266-R) on trajectories of Spanish teachers, immigrant students and ATAL units.

Results & discussion

The research carried out has highlighted the enormous efforts made by Spanish teachers during all this time to achieve recognition of their work inside and outside the school. However, further progress still needs to be made towards achieving their professional development and status. Among the main conditioning factors are the itinerancy of teachers, who have to work in several schools in the same area, the loneliness they

experience in many schools, and the scarce resources and poorer spaces to which they have access. Similarly, the lack of a truly inclusive culture in schools and the grudging collaboration of the rest of the teaching staff have a significant impact on the implementation of educational practices that are more compensatory and assimilationist than intercultural. Teachers are delegated the task of attending to immigrant students and their overload reduces the possibilities for the design of more systemic and inclusive actions. Likewise, the outcomes highlight the scant use made by the educational administration of the experience of Spanish teachers in the management of cultural diversity. Their experience and skills in working with immigrant students, in mediation with families, in school-home-community coordination and their knowledge of multiple contexts and educational realities are barely valued. There are few options for their promotion and their good work does not always have the impact it should on the educational community. So, opportunities for the academic success and educational inclusion of immigrant students and thereby for the intercultural and inclusive school are lost.

Conclusions

The educational community and the administration should support the efforts of ATAL teachers to be recognized inside the school organization because they are a positive influence on cultural diversity management. It is urgent to define new guidelines for normative regulation of their institutional role and the improvement of their working conditions. Likewise, it is necessary to encourage exchange, interprofessional collaboration and the involvement of these teachers in positions of responsibility, in order to promote a truly inclusive culture in schools. In this sense, it may be advisable to undertake future research to analyze the possibilities of educational binomial or co-teaching, formal or intermediate leadership positions, or the role of more experienced ATAL teachers as trainers of other teachers in cultural diversity.

Keywords: immigration, professional development, Spain, Spanish teachers

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