

School leadership attitudes towards EAL/D students and their commitment to professional learning for diverse contexts

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Abstract: Due to the increasingly diverse nature of classrooms in Australia, a great deal of attention has been understandably dedicated to the pedagogical approaches, resources and conditions needed to cater for the needs of English as an additional language or dialect (EAL/D) learners in mainstream settings (see Dobinson & Buchori, 2016; Taplin, 2017). However, research has demonstrated that while the practices that take place within the classroom are essential to supporting EAL/D students, the institutional practices of the school community driven and underpinned by school leaders' positionings, views on and attitudes towards diversity are fundamental to the creation and facilitation of opportunities for teachers across the curriculum to support a socially-just environment for all learners, including EAL/D students (Brooks et al., 2010; Theoharis & O'Toole, 2011). To better understand the views of school leaders, this article reports on a study into principals' perceptions about the diverse needs of EAL/D learners in mainstream settings. Grounded in the premises of qualitative research methodologies (Stake, 2010), data was collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews that explored (i) principals' views on diversity, (ii) the perceptions and positioning of EAL/D students in schools, and (iii) the role of suitable pedagogical approaches and their commitment to opportunities for professional learning to enhance responsiveness to EAL/D learners' needs in mainstream settings. Thematic analysis of the interview data revealed that principals' views on diversity acknowledged the pervasive presence of Anglophone teaching and leadership staff in school communities which contributes to colourblind perspectives on and deficit framings of

EAL/D students and of their needs. To address these systemic and structural issues which heavily impact the classroom, principals indicated that suitable pedagogical approaches are needed along with effective avenues for professional learning (PL) to support EAL/D students in mainstream classes. Though small scale in design, this study also contributes empirical data to this under researched area of principals' attitudes towards EAL/D students.

Key words: EAL/D students, principals' perceptions, deficit views, leadership attitudes, professional learning

Introduction

Australia is an increasingly multicultural and multilingual nation. Fuelled by forces of globalisation, increased transnational mobility, and well-sustained refugee and resettlement programs, the country has become home to thousands of international students, temporary and permanent residents and a wide range of refugee communities (Elias et al., 2021). As Taplin (2017) points out, “as Australia’s multicultural society continues to become more diverse, increased EAL/D student numbers are inevitable” (p. 48). The super-diversity (Vertovec, 2007) of Australian classrooms, especially characterised by a significant presence of English as an additional language or dialect (EAL/D) students, requires that teachers and principals know who these students are, what kinds of language support is needed for them to develop Standard Australian English (SAE), which pedagogies are most suited to cater for their needs, and what plans, actions and processes need to be in place to foster a culture of equity and social justice for EAL/D learners.

The need for equity and social justice pedagogies is vital in a context such as Australia where pervasively dominant language ideologies and practices continue to marginalise the rich cultural and linguistic voices of EAL/D students. Such suppression is evident in education, and society at large, and on multiple levels. Firstly, the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership [AITSL], 2011), which outline what teachers should know and be able to do, make only tangential reference to the needs of EAL/D learners, what they know, and how they should be taught (Nguyen & Rushton, 2023). Secondly, a prevalent “monolingual mindset”

(Clyne, 2005, p. xi) in which monolingualism is regarded as the norm, has been described as one of the greatest impediments to recognising and valuing the diverse cultural and linguistic repertoires of EAL/D learners. The impact of this ideology is a deficit discourse that positions these students as lacking “the requisite knowledge and skills to engage with intransigent school curricula” (Alford, 2014, p. 71) and continues to perpetuate monoglossic practices towards EAL/D learners. As Slaughter and Cross (2021) point out, this monolingual mindset is deeply engrained into the Australian education system as “policies that inform curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment are predicated on English-only assumptions” (p. 42), something which often renders invisible the broader range of cultural and linguistic resources that EAL/D learners bring to the learning experience.

School principals are uniquely positioned to build a professional culture in their schools that is conducive to equity and social justice practices, and one which addresses the multifaceted needs of EAL/D students. As Pollock and Briscoe (2019) state, school principals play an important role in their school communities to “either promote or undermine equity” (p. 519) for EAL/D students. In countries such as Canada, the role of principals in creating equitable spaces in their school environments has been acknowledged (Berger et al., 2009; Pollock & Briscoe, 2019), and studies in the United States also suggest that principal leadership is central to the development of inclusive and socially just learning and teaching environments (Kose, 2009, 2011). In light of this, Theoharis and O’Toole (2011) have called for principals to employ and advocate for ‘social justice leadership’, that is, a type of leadership that “advocates for the needs of marginalized students” (p. 648). Yet, while it is recognised that one of the most critical attributes of effective education for EAL/D students is strong advocacy leadership (Anderson, 2009; Theoharis, 2007), previous studies in contexts such as Canada and the US have shown that principals may hold ambiguous beliefs about diversity and about the needs of EAL/D learners (Pollock & Briscoe, 2019) and may possess limited knowledge on how to implement programs for EAL/D students (Padron & Waxman, 2016). Apart from related studies that examined principal’s attitudes to racism in Australian schools (Aveling, 2007; Charles et al 2016), there is limited information available on Australian

principals' perceptions of EAL/D students. In response to this complex context, this study seeks to address the following research question:

What are principals' perceptions of EAL/ learners and what is their commitment to professional learning for diverse contexts?

Literature review

Australian schools have growing numbers of students for whom English is an additional language or dialect. These students, in the process of becoming plurilinguals (Ellis, 2013), bring a rich cultural and linguistic repertoire into the classroom which is not often accounted for by teachers in their practices or pedagogies. Despite the uniquely diverse range of experiences and funds of knowledge which EAL/D students possess while learning English, about English and through English, EAL/D students are often variously categorised as 'language minority' students (Byrnes et al., 1997), limited English proficient students (Lee, 1996), or even, at times, low-ability learners (Tangen & Spooner-Lane, 2008). While these labels are partly reflective of the emerging multilingual trajectories of EAL/D learners, they reinforce a discourse of deficit which not only capitalises a focus on 'student lack' (Dooley, 2012) or failure, but also risks silencing and impairing students from EAL/D backgrounds.

One of the repercussions of essentialising EAL/D students into deficit framing is marginalisation. Marginalisation of EAL/D students occurs at various levels. At national and international levels, research shows that students from language backgrounds other than English are often racialised (García et al., 2021; García & Torres-Guevara, 2021) and, in the context of racio-linguistic ideologies (Flores & Rosa, 2015, 2019), may be viewed as deficient learners. This view, largely framed by a monoglossic discourse of language learners and learning, silences and renders invisible the presence, voices, identities, and rich repertoires of culturally and linguistically diverse (CaLD) students. Similarly, various levels of marginalisation are evident in school contexts. For instance, previous studies (Artiles & Klingner, 2006; Brown, 2004) suggest that EAL/D students who are actively navigating complex social, cultural and linguistic environments may in fact be "misidentified by teachers as having learning difficulties" (Tangen & Spooner-Lane, 2008, p. 63). Marginalisation can also occur through lack of understanding of EAL/D students and their needs at school leadership and the macrolevels above this. In Creagh's (2016)

study on the problematic positioning of EAL/D students in Australian national testing systems, it is evident that a lack of a nuanced understandings of the diversity within this EAL/D category can have negative impacts on both these students and their teachers. So, while EAL/D and mainstream teachers carry a great deal of professional and pedagogical responsibility to address the needs of EAL/D students, this is largely facilitated or hindered by school leaders' views of, and attitudes towards, diversity.

Varying levels of marginalisation of EAL/D learners in schools can be prompted, or further entrenched, by 'colour-blind ideologies'; that is, the ideology that "allows whites to maintain white supremacy without pomp and without the circumstances of naming those it undermines and those it rewards" (Flores & Gunzenhauser, 2019, p. 964). While it is argued that [school] "leaders should become proficient at managing the dynamics of difference" (Lindsey et al., 2018, p. 189), difference can be obscured by leaders' colour-blindness, a phenomenon found to be widespread in schools in the US (Schofield, 2010). A 'colour-blind' approach purports to ignore group membership in favour of treating people solely as individuals in the belief that any consideration of group membership in decision making processes may lead to discrimination either against their interests or even reverse discrimination that would unfairly advantage them. This can be contrasted with what Mabokela and Madsen (2005) refer to as a 'colour-conscious attitude' that characterises the approaches of African-American school leaders in their roles as leading heterogeneous groups in order to meet the needs of all students. According to Mabokela and Madsen, these 'colour-conscious' leaders "appeared to be cultural integrators and consensus builders who had acquired a great deal of understanding about diversity of groups and were able to establish leader-member trust" (p. 204). In the Australian context, Aveling (2007) interviewed 35 principals in one Australian state over a four year period on their views of racism in schools. Not only did an overwhelming majority of principals state that incidents of racism were not a problem in their schools, but they tended to regard any incidents of racism as attributable to individual failings that should be managed through behaviour or bullying policies. This attitude, suggests Aveling, indicates that these school leaders "did not understand the nature and extent of racism and were ill-equipped to deal with the more covert expressions of racism" (2007, p. 69).

This can partly be attributed to an aversion to recognising the manifestations of racism in Australia (Nelson, 2013), a denial that, as with the colour-blind approach, can actually reinforce and perpetuate the systemic discrimination and marginalisation of some EAL/D students.

Due to the central and strategic role of principals in schools, their views of and attitudes towards ‘difference’ and diversity can either facilitate social justice or perpetuate marginalisation. Pollock and Briscoe (2019) point out that “how principals frame notions of difference within student populations is important, because although educational institutions can produce societal change and transformation, they can also generate and maintain social inequalities and inequities” (p. 519). Informed by Ladson-Billings’ influential writings on culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2014), Pollock and Briscoe (2019) examined how principals in over fifty Canadian primary and secondary schools made sense of student diversity and how this meaning-making influenced their practices and behaviours. The authors argue that these understandings of diversity can shape decisions made in a wide range of areas including how resources (funds, staffing and professional learning support) are allocated, how they engage (or not) with culturally inclusive leadership practices, and how principals seek to foster diverse community involvement in and with the school. The key finding from their study was that the principals’ understandings of student difference are influenced by their own personal experiences, beliefs, and values. Those who have a more nuanced understanding of student difference are more likely to create a more inclusive and supportive environment for all students. In addition, principals who were open to challenge their own biases and assumptions about student difference were more likely to advocate for resources and support for students from marginalised groups.

Study context

This study grew out of a conversation between the first author and a school principal at a Victorian secondary school. While the original intent of the conversation was to discuss matters relating to professional learning (PL) opportunities for teachers in their school, it promptly shifted to a reflective dialogue about principals’ commitment to PL as a possible avenue to enhance teachers’ and school leaders’ awareness of diversity, and of the strategies, mechanisms and practices that are needed to support both

EAL/D learners in mainstream classes. This reflective conversation turned into a research idea as it was further discussed informally with academic colleagues and teachers in schools. As the idea was refined, the researchers became interested in examining principals' opinions, attitudes, and beliefs about the diverse needs of EAL/D students in mainstream settings, the support systems required to nurture them, and the role of opportunities for PL to support teaching staff working with EAL/D learners.

Methodology

The methodological underpinnings of this study are grounded on premises of phenomenological inquiry. Phenomenology seeks to understand “a phenomenon from the perspective of participants who have experienced it” (Bonyadi, 2023, p. 1). Phenomenological inquiry stresses on the uniqueness of individuals and that “each human is radically singular in their being” (Zigon et al., 2021, p. 9). This study examined school principals' beliefs about and attitudes towards EAL/D students in mainstream settings, their views about diversity, and their commitment to PL as an avenue to equip teaching and leadership staff for diverse contexts.

Participants

A total of nine school principals at Government secondary schools in Victoria (N= 4) and New South Wales (N= 5) participated in this study. Principals were recruited through an email invitation which was sent to a total of 17 schools across Victoria and NSW. These 17 schools were purposefully selected as the population of students from language backgrounds other than English was 40% or greater as per school profile data accessed via the My School website, a publicly accessible national database of Australian schools (ACARA, 2015). The email invitation contained an information sheet that outlined details of the study, ethical considerations such as matters of confidentiality, data storage and withdrawal from the study. Interested participants were asked to submit an expression of interest (EoI) via email to the first author. Of the 17 participants that were contacted, 10 sent an EoI to be considered for interviews. Due to personal and professional circumstances, one principal withdrew their EoI, thereby leaving us with nine participants in the study. Due to the rich depth and breadth of data gathered from participants, data from six participants is reported, three from Victoria and three from NSW. To maintain participants' confidentiality, pseudonyms are used to

refer to principals. An overview of participants' profiles is provided in Table 1 below:

Table 1. Overview of principals' profiles

Name	Years of (school leadership) experience	Country of birth	Languages spoken
Jeff	13	Australia	English (only)
Andrew	10	Australia	English (only)
Paul	9	Australia	English (only)
Shawn	17	Australia	English & basic Bahasa Indonesia
Ella	21	Australia	English (only)
Ben	19	Australia	English (only)

Participants were also asked about their ancestry. Three (Jeff, Paul and Shawn) reported British ancestry, two (Andrew and Ella) Scottish, and one (Ben) Irish. Information about country of birth and languages spoken was considered potentially relevant in relation to their views about and attitudes towards diversity. This was also premised on findings from a study done in the US into leadership for inclusion and diversity which found that white male leaders tend to be less engaged with diversity than their culturally and linguistically diverse colleagues (Shelton & Thomas, 2013). As shown in Table 1, all principals were born in Australia, are of European descent, five of whom are males, and only one speaks a language other than English at a basic level.

Data collection and analysis

Data for this study was collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews with school principals. Interviews were conducted via Microsoft Teams at a time that was most convenient to participants. When interview dates and times were organised, principals were sent Teams meeting invitations along with interview questions in preparation for the interview meeting (Appendix A). Prior to the interview meeting, participants were also sent an information sheet that contained details of the study, and of their voluntary right to participate in the interview protocol and to withdraw at

any time with no consequences.

The analysis of interview data was methodologically driven by the premises and processes of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), which allowed for the systematic identification and analysis of recurring patterns and themes within the data. The themes that have been identified in the analysed data are as follows:

1. Principals' perceptions of diversity within teaching and leadership
2. Implications and consequences of a deficit view of EAL/D learners
3. Principals' views on suitable pedagogical approaches for EAL/D learners
4. Principals' commitment to professional learning for diverse contexts

To achieve greater consistency and accuracy in the analysis of interview data, participants were, first and foremost, sent a copy of their transcribed interview to ensure a verbatim account of the recorded interview was maintained. Participants were also given access to a password-protected folder that contained the recorded interview. Participants were asked to confirm their approval of their transcriptions within a week or raise any questions or concerns about them as soon as practicable. The coding process was undertaken by one of the researchers who identified possible themes and selected some representative quotes. These were then discussed with the second researcher. Upon discussing the possible themes and representative quotes, some modifications were made such as changes to theme labels and a further search for additional quotes. Once both researchers were satisfied with the themes and selected quotes, they proceeded with the analysis.

Analysis and discussion

The exploration and examination of principals' commentaries under each of the identified themes illuminate the complex multifaceted dimensions that interweave into the research question of the study. Before uncovering principals' views of EAL/D learners and their needs in schools, our focus was first on understanding their attitudes towards diversity within the spheres of teaching and leadership which unveiled aspects of colour-blind

ideologies. As Pollock and Briscoe (2019) assert, a possible avenue to mitigate educational disparities is by first gaining an understanding of principals' perspectives of diversity in education.

Perceptions of diversity within teaching and leadership

When asked to describe the overall profile of teaching staff, the perniciousness of colourblind ideologies was evident in some principals' responses. These exposed not only limited diverse representation in schools but also a tendency to diminish the presence of racial differences where these exist. Ben, for instance, notes that:

not a lot [of] diversity exists at our teaching staff level, which is somewhat problematic because some teachers are colour blind.

The concern about the lack of diversity among teaching staff, while mentioning that some teachers are "colour-blind" also raises questions about the effectiveness of 'colour blindness' as a strategy for promoting inclusivity and equity.

There're only two staff from backgrounds other than English, but they have always adjusted brilliantly into the school community (Paul)

With a focus on seemingly successful integration into the school community, Paul's perspective downplays the significance of cultural and racial differences by emphasising the seamless assimilation of these individuals into the existing environment. Alluding to aspects of social justice leadership (Dantley & Tillman, 2006), Paul also observes that the role of principals is pivotal in creating 'safe spaces' for teachers and students of diverse backgrounds to be a part of the school community.

While I believe that diversity in teaching and leadership has a significant impact on students' learning and positive outcomes, but we have external authorities, like VIT and NESAs, and internal systems in schools which don't see the uniqueness of international teachers and their potential contribution to the system (Shawn)

While acknowledging the value of having a diverse teaching and leadership workforce, Shawn's observation also points to a

potentially colour-blind perspective by focusing on external authorities (such as VIT and NESAs) and internal school systems as barriers to recognising and appreciating the uniqueness of international teachers. Even though Shawn seems to appreciate diversity, he appears cognisant of the systemic issues in and out of school which not only minimise the role of race and ethnicity but also perpetuate structural inequalities.

The lack of diversity and, more specifically, the prevailing presence of individuals from Anglophone backgrounds in positions of leadership is a notable observation in the following reflection by Ben who reminisces about a professional event he attended:

I was recently at a conference in Canberra – a school leadership conference. The majority were males, and probably over 90% of them, us, White, Caucasian of some European background. What does that say about our schools and society at large? (Ben)

That anecdotal observation by Ben on the lack of diversity within school leadership at that gathering is supported by data from AITSL on the demographics of the Australian teaching workforce and school leadership (AITSL, 2019). Though the data available on diversity with school leadership is not comprehensive, the limited statistics available on those who identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander shows only 2% of teachers identify themselves within this group, with an even smaller percentage at the level of school leadership (AITSL, 2019). This contrasts with the 6.3% of students who identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Inlander (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2023). As Pollock and Briscoe (2019) have suggested, principals' understandings of student difference is heavily influenced by their own personal experiences and beliefs. If only a very small fraction of school leadership in Australian schools have some lived experiences of what it means to not be a part of the dominant White, Anglo majority, then it seems inevitable that there has been slow progress towards those in the majority actually becoming aware of the implications of this lack of diversity among leaders in schools.

Implications and consequences of a deficit view

A reoccurring theme through the discussions was how EAL/D students were seen predominantly through a deficit lens. This is most commonly linked to how these students are positioned as

less capable due to insufficient English language proficiency, as evident in the following two remarks:

...well, because they don't usually have the solid language foundations to say what they want to say (Shawn)

As noted earlier, a 'deficit perspective' primarily stresses student lack (Dooley, 2012). This deficit framework appears to shape Shawn's views of EAL/D students who capitalises on 'the lack' of "solid language foundations". Shawn's observation reflects the common stereotype that EAL/D students lack "solid language foundations," implying a deficiency in their linguistic skills. This deficit perspective assumes that these students are inherently disadvantaged and struggle to express themselves effectively (Tangen & Spooner-Lane, 2008). Such a viewpoint may inadvertently undermine their intellectual capabilities, perpetuating the notion that their linguistic challenges hinder their overall cognitive abilities.

All our systems, protocols, avenues for success are all the same for everyone. The only thing is that sometimes we may think that EALD students cannot do certain things because they don't have full proficiency (Jeff)

In addition to this, EAL/D students may be viewed as lacking the initiative and willingness to make the most of what is on offer. While Jeff's observation below highlights the availability of opportunity for all students, it is a viewpoint that places the responsibility and agency solely on EAL/D students for not "taking up" opportunities.

I think the opportunities are always there but either they don't take them up or get quickly taken up by the Aussie kids (Jeff)

The fact that opportunities "get quickly taken up by the Aussie kids" implies a sense of competition where EAL/D students are portrayed as being outperformed or overshadowed by their Australian peers. This perpetuates a deficit narrative by positioning EAL/D students as inferior or disadvantaged compared to their "Aussie" counterparts. It overlooks systemic barriers, linguistic challenges, and cultural differences that might impact EAL/D students' ability to access and capitalise on opportunities in the same way as all other students.

In contrast to Shawn and Jeff's focus on the student as the sole cause of the issue, some principals were more aware of various systemic factors that contributed to this situation. Andrew commented that:

There's a repeated pattern in every single school. Students and teachers from other backgrounds tend to be seen as inferior by their peers, and that's a challenge for us as we have to battle those mental structures (Andrew)

This perception that EAL/D students and teachers from diverse backgrounds are somehow lacking or deficient in comparison to their peers who come from dominant linguistic and cultural backgrounds can lead to lowered expectations, reduced opportunities, and limited support for EAL/D students and teachers, ultimately hindering their educational experiences and outcomes.

Paul's observation acknowledges the potential contributions of EAL/D students in terms of their "wealth of knowledge and experiences", but states that "their knowledge is often not accounted for in what teachers actually do in class" implies that EALD students' expertise is not being effectively integrated into the learning process:

EAL/D students bring a wealth of knowledge and experiences to the mainstream classroom, but their knowledge is often not accounted for in what teachers actually do in class. Also, there continues to be stereotypical views about these students, which we have to fix (Paul)

While Paul's perspective seems to tacitly call for the need of educators and institutions to adapt their approaches, curriculum, and pedagogy for a full integration of EAL/D students' knowledge and experience, it does not explicitly address the broader systemic issues that perpetuate their limited integration in the classroom (Windle & Miller, 2013). However, a critical self-reflection was extended further by other principals who regarded this as a much broader societal issue, and that what was occurring in schools was a merely a reflection of wider systemic problems. As Ella commented:

Our society, and school alike, have underlying systems that invisibilise students from diverse backgrounds.

This also happens in leadership positions, government offices, etc. In our school, EALD students and Aboriginal students are often seen by some people through deficiency lenses.

A similar remark was made by Ben, who noted that:

I think there's a lot of dumbing down of EAL/D students in our society. They don't have enough English, not enough local knowledge, not enough literacy skills, therefore they can't think. This is in our society and in our schools.

A more complex manifestation of this deficit view, and a reoccurring theme evident in how some principals positioned EAL/D learners in their schools, was the contrast between what was regarded as an egalitarian desire to see them as just like every other student and to therefore to treat them no differently, and a more deficit-orientated approach in which EAL/D are viewed first as students whose English language proficiency levels defined their learning needs. This contrast is encapsulated in this remark from Shawn, who believed that:

EAL/D students have to be treated like all other students with full abilities. They tend to be seen as children with disability because they have a different worldview, different behaviours, manners, and low language skills (Shawn)

While Shawn's observation, for some, may stand as a rather democratically inclusive attitude towards EAL/D students, for others, it may come across as a colour-blind infused statement (Flores & Gunzenhauser, 2019) which, despite its intention to treat everyone equally, may fail to identify and cater for the unique, diverse needs of EAL/D students. Though not explicitly stated in Shawn's commentary, the inference is that there is a shared and dominant worldview and set of behaviours within the school and school community, and this is the standard against which EAL/D students are referenced. The pervasiveness and strength of this view is evident in how some participants stressed the need to 'convince' themselves that not belonging to the dominant group within the community was not necessarily a

barrier to accessing similar opportunities. A one participant mentioned:

I see my students as being all the same. I want to see them this way to convince myself that they can achieve the same outcomes, access the same opportunities... yeah, they have different needs, but with a bit of support...(Jeff)

The potential issue with this approach, which closely aligns closely with the overall premise of colourblind ideologies (e.g. Mabokela & Madsen, 2005) is that the lack of knowledge and misguided aim to treat everyone equally ignores the disparities in social capital EAL/D learners may experience such that thinking this can be overcome with un-systematic efforts to offer a 'bit of support' are likely to be insufficient to address the significant needs. Moreover, where an educator or school leader grounds their approach in the rationale that they are treating everyone equally, then that may see that as the endpoint of their responsibility.

Views on suitable pedagogical approaches

When discussing pedagogical approaches, some principals were clearly aware that supporting EAL/D students in mainstream classes requires a systematic and well-informed approach that does not transfer all the responsibility to the student to 'catch up' and 'keep up' in terms of English language proficiency. This awareness is made clear in the following comment:

There's a lot of work we need to do at school to include EALD students in mainstream classes. There's a view that just by speaking more slowly to them, they will pick up the things that are students taking in (Ben)

Acknowledging the work yet to be done in schools to fully integrate EAL/D students in mainstream classes is an attribute of what Mabokela and Madsen (2005) call a 'colour-conscious' leader. However, Ben's observation alludes more specifically to the need for more effective and inclusive pedagogical approaches that go beyond surface-level adjustments, a concern also shared by Ella who notes that:

High challenge and high support are important strategies to help EALD students in mainstream

classes. Classes are already challenging but teachers have to give them a lot of support to get them over the line.

Andrew's observation suggests that the existing educational system may not prioritize the personalised attention necessary for effective teaching and support of EALD students.

We have to be upfront in saying that failing to really know the needs of EAL/D students comes down to a matter of time. Teachers should develop individual profiles of students, have one-on-one consultations, etc. but they are time poor (Andrew)

The fact that the issue "comes down to a matter of time" highlights the systemic constraint of limited resources, particularly time, faced by teachers. The reference to developing "individual profiles of students" and conducting "one-on-one consultations" stresses the ideal approach to supporting EALD students, which involves tailored instruction and close guidance. Harper and Feez (2021) point out that one avenue for getting to know every student in class is by "preparing a profile for all students, of all cultural and linguistic backgrounds" (p. 29). While the time barrier is one rooted in the current educational system, Andrew's comment highlights the critical need for targeted professional development to address the systemic challenges hindering suitable pedagogical approaches for EAL/D students.

Principals' commitment to professional learning for diverse contexts

Bearing in mind the associated problems inherent in the 'egalitarian' and 'deficit' approaches to viewing EAL/D learners, the transformational power of quality PL, whether formal or informal, or internally or externally led, was viewed positively by these principals. As one participant remarked, "There's a lot of power in professional learning in enhancing teacher knowledge about best practice for diverse students. It can not only improve their skillset but also their practice" (Ella). The benefits of this type of PL, according to one principal, cannot be assumed to occur just through attendance and participation alone. Before encouraging their staff to engage in PL, one principal tries to "make them aware of the 'what', 'how' and 'why' of PL. What do they need? Why do they need it? Why do they want to do it?"

(Ben). This type of critical reflection and purposeful undertaking of PL has potential benefits not only for those individual teachers in their own classroom practice, but potentially to empower them to share this knowledge within the school. As (another) principal commented in relation to the flow on benefits that external PL can have within the school, “those teachers that have a lot of professional learning under their belt are now facilitating professional learning in school, especially for early career teachers, and specific subject specialists to better equip them with strategies for EAL/D students in their classes” (Andrew).

This type of collaboration is particularly important for teachers of subjects in which the language and literacy needs of students have traditionally received minimal attention (Davison & Ollerhead, 2018; Ollerhead, 2020). The benefits of this were noted by one principal who reported that: “We’ve had some team teaching going on this year that has allowed our EALD specialist to visit maths and science classes, for example, and then create joint lesson plans for their classes. Science teachers have said that it’s been useful as they can now modify their language in science classes” (Shawn).

Besides principals’ perceived benefits of PL for their staff and the broader school community, they expressed a strong commitment to intentional PL opportunities for themselves and leadership teams in their schools. It was acknowledged that PL is central to not only the professional growth of teachers but also of the development of leadership capabilities to promote equity and inclusion. While Andrew’s observation appears to foster a democratic stance on EAL/D students, he believes that PLs can “equip everyone” with knowledge and skills for more effective functioning of diverse schools:

I think PLs are for everyone in the school community. I mean there are some for teachers only, or leaders, etc. but what I’m trying to say is that we should all embrace them to develop new skills to better function in contexts with students and staff from different backgrounds (Andrew)

Some principals’ commitment to utilising PLs as avenues to enhance their own knowledge, skills and dispositions to better support students and staff was evident in Paul’s remark:

I support EAL/D students because of their needs, the experiences and great knowledge they bring to our

communities. EAL/D teachers or teachers from diverse backgrounds should deliver PDs to us, Anglo leaders across Australia (Paul)

Not only does Paul highlight the highlight the rich diversity of knowledge and experiences of EAL/D student but also suggests that professional development sessions should be conducted by EAL/D teachers or teachers from diverse backgrounds. This is a crucial point because teachers with expertise in EAL/D education have a better understanding of the specific challenges and needs of these students. They can provide insights and strategies that can be particularly effective for EAL/D students, which may shape or re-frame principals' views and attitudes towards diversity and enhance their awareness of and commitment to the support systems needed for EAL/D students in schools.

The need for effective PL is reinforced from studies that have examined the learning outcomes for EAL/D students, particularly in areas where they are in schools that have higher proportions of students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. As Windle and Miller (2013) have discussed, in these environments there is often an understandable emphasis on attending to the wellbeing since it often presents the most immediate attention. This, however, can lead to less emphasis on the literacy and language learning needs of the students. The unfortunate consequence of this can be students who are not as well prepared as they might be for progressing in their further education. (Windle & Miller, 2013)

Conclusion

In a multicultural and multilingual nation like Australia, the increasing diversity fuelled by globalization, transnational mobility, and resettlement programs has led to a significant presence of EAL/D students in classrooms and across the curriculum. Although EAL/D learners should not be categorised as lesser or superior students in comparison to their mainstream counterparts, prevailing societal narratives perpetuate negative views of EAL/D learners. Amidst this context, school principals emerge as pivotal figures with the capacity to create equitable and socially just spaces for EAL/D students. Furthermore, they are also responsible and accountable for cultivating professional culture that prioritises fairness, inclusion, and social justice for EAL/D learners across the curriculum. As Pollock and Briscoe (2019) assert, principals

have the power to either bolster or undermine equity for EAL/D learners. However, as attested in this study, principals may possess uncertain, and rather ambivalent, beliefs about diversity, which are, to a large extent, framed by systemic, structural schemas that sustain monoglossic, White-supremacy ideologies.

Though the findings from this study align with aspects of previous research into the perceptions of principals towards EAL/D students in other contexts (e.g. Pollock & Briscoe, 2019), the findings also serve to highlight attitudes towards English language learners that beliefs that are prevalent in Australian society. Upon critically exploring principals' perceptions of diversity, and of the diverse needs of EAL/D students across the curriculum, a recurring and disconcerting theme emerged about a prevailing tendency to perceive EAL/D students through a deficit lens. This limited perspective is often entrenched in the perception of these students as less capable, primarily due to their perceived inadequacy in English language proficiency. Furthermore, EAL/D students find themselves subject to misperceptions, and even viewed as lacking the initiative and readiness to embrace available opportunities. Yet, a more nuanced perspective also emerged, championed by certain principals who recognised systemic factors whereby societal patterns and structures are inferior by their peers, highlighting the need to address deeply ingrained mental structures.

In light of the intricate challenges posed by both a seemingly 'democratic' and 'deficit' approaches to understanding EAL/D learners, the principals' collective perspective capitalises on the transformative potential of quality professional learning (PL). This transformative power, whether arising from formal or informal, internally or externally led avenues, emerges as a beacon of hope within the educational landscape. The resounding sentiment that resonates is encapsulated by one participant's assertion that professional learning possesses the inherent capacity to enrich teacher knowledge, amplifying best practices for diverse students.

Even though the focus of this study was not primarily on the role of participants' ancestry, country of birth, or language spoken in their attitudes towards diversity, it is of particular interest to note that the demographic data collected in this study on categories of gender, ancestry and language background lay the foundation for further exploring how these categories may influence principals' perspectives on diversity and inclusion of

EAL/D students. Given the limited amount of data on these categories, and the small sample of participants, rather than drawing any unfounded conclusions on possible relationships, we stress the need for further research that aligns with, for instance, the findings of research in the United States which highlighted differences in engagement with diversity between white male leaders and their culturally and linguistically diverse counterparts (Shelton & Thomas, 2013).

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Appendix A: Interview questions

Demographic questions:

Could you please tell us your name?

What's your nationality? Country of birth? Language background?

Do you speak any languages other than English? Which one(s)?

How many?

How many years of school leadership experience do you have?

Diversity:

How cultural and linguistically diverse is your staff body in the school?

What nationalities or languages are represented among staff?

Could you please tell us about diversity (cultural and linguistic) in the leadership team in school?

How important do you think it is for schools to have cultural and linguistically diverse teaching staff?

How important do you think it is for schools to have cultural and linguistically diverse school leadership teams?

Do you think school leadership in Australian schools has an adequate representation of diverse cultures and languages?

What are the implications of this (presence or absence of diverse cultures and languages) for EAL/D students in schools?

Are there any benefits or challenges in having teachers from diverse backgrounds in mainstream classes?

EAL/D students in schools:

Do you have EAL/D students in your school? How small or large is the EAL/D student population?

What are the benefits of having EAL/D students in schools and mainstream classes?

What are challenges of having students from diverse backgrounds in schools and mainstream classes?

Do EALD students have the same opportunities (e.g. academic, recreational, etc.) as other students in mainstream classes?

What areas of school life, structure, organization, or leadership do you think reinforce deficit mindsets about EALD students?

Do you think EALD students feel supported by teachers, school protocols and activities, and leadership?

Pedagogical approaches and professional learning:

How prepared do you think your teachers are to respond to the needs of EAL/D students

in schools and mainstream classes?

What kind of pedagogies do you know think are needed in schools to support EAL/D students?

Do you think professional learning is an avenue to support teachers with EAL/D students in mainstream classes?

What are some reported outcomes of professional learning activities in support of EAL/D students in mainstream classes?

What else do you think needs to be done to support teachers, and support EAL/D students?

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