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Promoting EAL Teacher Professionalism

The education environment is constantly changing. Schools are expected to serve an increasingly diverse population in the context of shifting policy priorities. In these circumstances the professionalism of the EAL specialist teacher has to be regularly reviewed in the light of different circumstances and an updated knowledge base. Building on The EAL Teacher: Descriptors of Good Practice(2002), we now update and extend our statement on professionalism. The effectiveness of our professional work requires a clear and accurate understanding of how EAL is continuously evolving. We welcome your comments.

A specialist EAL teacher has to know and to make use of an up-to-date body of knowledge and skills in the following areas in a context-sensitive way:

Patterns of complex additional language development and bilingualism

There are many different types of EAL/bilingual pupils in school. Pupil-oriented EAL teaching strategies have to take into account a whole host of considerations such as stage of English language development, type/s of English language learning needs, home/first/other language development, age/phase of education, social and educational background, and inter-ethnic/race relations in the learning environment.

English as a complex linguistic and communication system

Pupils need to learn both formal rules of grammar and pervasive (often invisible) social rules of use. Well-informed EAL teaching requires accurate diagnosis of pupil English language development needs in terms of vocabulary, sentence grammar and discourse organisation in both spoken and written modes for personal, social and academic purposes. Responsive EAL teaching has to enable pupils to understand and develop the ability to use everyday informal English and more formal academic English to meet their communication and academic learning needs at every stage of their schooling.

Language as part of social, cultural and multimodal practices

Language-based meaning-making in school (as elsewhere) tends to occur in culturally-patterned ways and in conjunction with other modes of meaning-making, e.g. gestures, role play or graphic displays. Competent and knowledgeable EAL teaching will enable pupils to understand and develop the ability to learn ways of participating in institutional practices in context, for example, in class discussions, the rules governing the what, the when and the how. Such knowledge will also assist pupils to develop their own social space, identity and voice in English through effective social participation.

Classroom (school) as a language ecology

The classroom is a complex and active ecosystem comprising multiple participants (teachers and pupils), their beliefs, teaching/learning styles and histories, institutional rules and memories, local community and national policy influences. Skilful EAL teaching has to navigate around and through these constantly shifting influences to provide the optimal teaching, learning and support opportunities for EAL pupils.

Teaching as community building and resource management

Schools as communities offer specific opportunities and constraints. Effective EAL practice has to explore and exploit the available human (teacher and pupil) expertise and curriculum provision to maximise the quality of EAL teaching and learning opportunities. For instance, the specific form of partnership teaching, i.e. the way/s a subject/class teacher and an EAL specialist work together, in a school has to take into account past practices and current policy, staff attitudes and expertise, and curriculum arrangements. The skilful EAL teacher also has to articulate the reasons for their actions and initiatives in professionally recognised terms.
