

*Networking for respect for diversity*

# *Experiences in the Diversity in Early Childhood and Training European network*

**Peter Lee, Director, Childhood and Families Research and Development Centre, Glasgow, Scotland,  
and Anke van Keulen, Developer and Partner, MUTANT Change Agents – Respect for Diversity, Utrecht,  
The Netherlands**

*“It is important that wider societal interests are reflected in early childhood systems, including respect for children’s rights, diversity and ... to extend the agency of the child and to support the basic right of parents to be involved in the education of their children.*

*Starting Strong II: Early Childhood Education and Care (OECD 2006)*

The early years are logically and practically a good place to start fostering and strengthening children’s identities, and to raise positive awareness of diversities. It is a time when children are learning about their world from everything that is around them – their families, their peers, other people they meet, the media, their toys, books and other resources that they play with or encounter. Practitioners will need to ‘look, listen and note’ in fostering these aspects of children’s diverse identities in order to offer experiences that effectively support them in their development of positive knowledge and understanding of the world. Early years and childcare settings that positively include children from a range of different social backgrounds, cultures and religions and embrace diversity as a part of life, help children to grow in understanding, respect and appreciation of the diverse society in which we all live.

In many countries throughout Europe, governments, policy makers, decision makers and service-provider managers are seeking to give emphasis and priority to respecting diversity and valuing the multiple identities of children, families and communities. As a result, many stakeholders are interested in developing policy and strategy documents that

support and promote more holistic views of a child within a family, a family within a community and a community as part of a national strategy.

As part of the drive towards achieving respect for diversity and social inclusion, the Bernard van Leer Foundation funds a European network which promotes equity, celebrates diversity in early childhood education services and responds to the deep interest in increasing the knowledge base, acquiring practice-based help, developing training developments and elaborating policies and strategies. Diversity in Early Childhood Education and Training (DECET), is a European network of networks. It has existed since 1998 and has grown to have an active membership from Belgium, Denmark, England, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, the Netherlands, Portugal, Scotland and Spain.

In DECET there is recognition that research evidence is clearly indicating that racial, gender and class inequalities are institutionalised within our structures and that national policies need to be created to inform and influence practice on the ground (MacNaughton 2000). Across Europe, poorer families and children from minority ethnic groupings (especially recent immigrants) are

suffering from low self-esteem, prejudice, racism and sexism (Bernstein 1996). DECET contributes to creating more integrated and socially cohesive societies by advocating that within member countries and transnationally all relevant people take 'real steps' towards achieving specific goals. These steps are aimed at national policy makers, managers, childcare providers, trainers, college teachers and practitioners, as well as students in universities and training colleges. DECET achieves this by bringing together academic, research, policy making and service-provider organisations and projects, all of whom have established a set of common goals for valuing diversity in early childhood education and training. The network aims to promote democratic childcare and acknowledges that children within their families and within their communities have multiple identities.

#### **Shared vision**

All partners in DECET view the core of early childhood education and care services as one that is sensitive to meeting the needs of all children and families, irrespective of background. Centres for children and families are viewed as dynamic meeting places where diverse people can learn positively from each other. They are also places where we should challenge and address all forms of prejudice and discrimination. In this sense early childhood education and care establishments make a clear contribution to the construction of European citizenship.

"The staff of the daycare centre where I'm working reflects the diversity of our city. There is: Enna, who is Tunisian; Badella, Moroccan; Annie, Lebanese; Santie, Spanish and Dominique and me, French. We share aspects of our culture through communication with parents and children. As a professional this is a real help to fight against bias and to respect each person, both service users and staff." – Karine, Educator.

*Making sense of good practice (DECET 2007)*

All DECET members have agreed a mission statement and set of principles, which guide Europe-wide programmes. Any activities for children and parents, promoted by staff under the banner of DECET follow these principles. The mission statement is informed by Article 2 of the United Nations' Convention of

the Rights of the Child and includes the statement that "all children and adults have the right to evolve and to develop in a context where there is equity and respect for diversity". This mission statement is elaborated through objectives which include the promotion of activities on respecting diversity that aim to ensure all children and families feel that they belong/are empowered to develop the diverse aspects of their identities.

The DECET approach emerged from debates on multi- and inter-culturalism. The term 'multi-cultural society' became popular in the 1980s and 1990s in early childhood education and other fields (Vandenbroeck 2004). Critics of multicultural ideology highlighted the concepts of 'culture' and the depiction of ethnic groups as homogenous. This is a static view of culture that lacks focus on economic and social contexts in general and on power relations in particular. Because of these criticisms many DECET partners started to focus on the anti-bias approach that was developed by Louise Derman-Sparks (1989) in the USA, and inspired DECET to develop a unique contextual European approach to diversity and equity.

#### **Network of networks**

In developing new frameworks for diversity and equity in early childhood education, many national and trans-national networks were formed, among them DECET. These networks – a recent product of globalisation (Vandenbroeck 2004) – broke with the tradition of formal European organisations to form flexible, dynamic networks with loose organisational structures. They can be viewed as examples of what Beck (1994) calls sub-politics: they involve political decision making; are outside the institutions they formally represent; work through informal organisations; and are often devoid of legal framework.

Networking and developing local and networks are central to DECET's programme, whose overall aim is to mainstream its principles into the infrastructure of each member country. Each partner commits to actions appropriate to implementing the mission and goals of the network in their country. Partners benefiting from working in the network are those who clearly see the added value they gain from the work they do on a national level. They define

the cooperation as a reinforcement of capacities at individual and institutional levels. This network structure clearly does not benefit non-committed partners (Krause 2004).

A network should be clearly distinguished from an organisation, both in its structure and in its flexibility and capacity to react quickly to the demands of change and new situations. Networks are associated with the potential to bring forces from different areas together and to develop and achieve common aims in a synergy, which is impossible to achieve as individual organisations. A feeling of 'common sense' is linked to bringing together projects and organisations working in similar fields with similar targets. Stimulating the exchange of knowledge, experience and resources and using potential to work together to promote a common quest are perceived as connecting factors.

### Constructing knowledge together

The construction of new knowledge is an important objective of DECET. Most of the DECET partners have direct or indirect connections to universities and are involved in research on all aspects of diversity. Partners link with one another to produce material for dissemination across Europe. A group of partners (from Belgium, Denmark, England, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, the Netherlands, Scotland and Spain) have produced *Diversity and equity in early childhood training in Europe* (DECET 2004). This manual gives insights, ideas and guidelines for managers, trainers, consultants and college teachers and gives examples on the training practices and approaches on:

- initial training (France);
- in-service training (Belgium, France, Ireland);



Photo: Courtesy DECET

Practitioners should 'look, listen and note' in fostering the aspects of children's diverse identities in order to offer experiences that effectively support them in their development of positive knowledge and understanding of the world

- post-academic training (Belgium);
- training of trainers courses (the Netherlands);
- training tools and packs on families, art and drama, 'persona dolls' and intercultural communication.

Transnationally, a group of partners undertook a major research programme covering Belgium, England, Germany, Greece and Scotland, to gather information on 'making sense of good practice in equity and respect for diversity'. The results have already produced documentation on developing good practice and will lead to a self-evaluation toolkit (DECET 2007).

"We offer focus group discussions to our parents, to encourage a dialogue with staff to identify any specific needs and to ensure that our environment, ethos, resources and day-to-day practice reflect the local community."

– Jenny, Senior Educator

*Making sense of good practice (DECET 2007).*

## Members of DECET

Belgium:	Expertisecentrum voor Opvoeding & Kinderopvang (VBJK), Ghent
France:	Ecole Santé Social Sud Est (ESSSE), Lyon; Association Collectif Enfants Parents et Professionnels (ACEPP), Paris
Germany:	Institut für den Situationsansatz der Internationalen Akademie (INA) an der Freien Universität Berlin
Greece:	Schedia ('raft'), Athens
Ireland:	Pavee Point Travellers' Centre, Dublin
Netherlands:	MUTANT Change Agents – Respect for Diversity, Utrecht
Spain:	Associació de Mestres Rosa Sensat, Barcelona
UK:	Centre for Research in Early Childhood (CREC), Birmingham, England; Childhood and Families (CAF): Research and Development Centre, Glasgow, Scotland

### Training professionals

DECET's comprehensive training and development approach of has enabled early years practitioners to understand their roles. First, in dealing with their own biases and prejudices through self-reflection, and second, in recognising that parents may have differing values that can be transmitted to children. The multiple identities of children are recognised and celebrated, enhancing their self-esteem and well-being and their sense of belonging. These perspectives are embraced as a means for developing such pedagogic activities as 'persona dolls' and 'family walls'.

Three member countries (Germany, France and the Netherlands) chose the theme 'Documentation of Families' and produced a series of training programmes, piloted them in their own countries and documented results for dissemination to all members. In each country this training programme resulted in parents, professionals and trainers from six childcare centres developing innovative work on the development and use of 'family walls' in early years establishments. The aim is not only to alter practice through increased knowledge, but also to really respect diversity by challenging different notions of what should be valued and which values should be transmitted.

"What of a girl of 11 who plays a major role in raising her younger brother and who comes and fetches the baby herself from the crèche? However unacceptable some practices may seem to us, we always try to create a climate in which each

parent can talk in confidence about the meaning of his or her actions. This often results in our views being broadened and enables us to place each parent in context. In other words, working with parents from different cultures is also working on yourself."

*(Van Keulen 2004)*

### Impact

All the above activities mean nothing if they do not have impact on the staff, parents and children in early childhood education and care centres. All work by partners within DECET is geared towards informing and influencing either: the policy makers who create the frameworks for services for children and families, or the trainers who develop courses for staff working with children and families, or work with children and families directly.

An example of major impact was when DECET organised a conference in Barcelona in 2006 at which policy makers, researchers, service providers and trainers from throughout Europe (and beyond) met to exchange and share information on all aspects of promoting respect for diversity.

One major future challenge for the network is to balance inclusivity with exclusivity, i.e., to continue to grow and develop while sustaining the aims and principles of the current membership. As with any network group, it is accepted that there will be movement of people. However, DECET has been organised to ensure that members are aware of what is expected of them before full membership

is agreed. In addition, to guard against exclusivity, DECET organises open seminars and national and international conferences. It also links to other networks, e.g.,:

- Men in Childcare (members include: Great Britain, Hungary, Norway, Poland and Sweden)
- International Step by Step Association (an international association of 30 early childhood NGOs in Central and Eastern Europe, Central Asia, Asia, and the Americas)
- Early Childhood Education Research Association (ECERA)
- Grupo de Trabajo Infancia Indígena y Educación (a network in Latin America)
- Centre for Equity and Innovation in Early Childhood (Australia).

DECET has had substantial impact across Europe by:

- bringing depth and quality to debates at national and international levels;
- launching its website;
- presentations at numerous seminars and conferences;
- forging links with new strategic partners;
- developing informal and formal training programmes supported by high-quality manuals.

Internally, members have been able to reflect on their work with children and families and have generated many local innovative programmes, which have been documented and disseminated. It is these children and parent programmes that illuminate best practice and give 'real' examples of the types of environments that provide positive approaches to respecting diversity. It is also on these examples that DECET members continually rely to drive towards extensive economic and social reforms coupled to structural and cultural changes in our society.

The DECET journey has been an exciting and unique form of networking. To start a network based on the foundation of challenging the existing perceptions of multicultural approaches was difficult. To continue the network by aiming to replace those approaches with new perspectives was stimulating. The future challenge is to ensure those new approaches and perspectives are mainstreamed into all services for children and families.

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