

European network DECET¹

Networking to strengthen respect for diversity and to improve quality in early childhood education

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Introduction

The problems of exclusion, of cultural and/or social segregation and of unequal opportunities challenge the educational system in all European countries as well as educational practice on all levels, but particularly the early childhood education.

The European network DECET (Diversity in Early Childhood Education and Training) has been established to challenge the issues of Diversity and Equity. The European DECET Network promotes equity and celebrates diversity in early childhood education services and in training, in the spirit of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. The network exists since 1998 and at the moment partners in the UK, Ireland, The Netherlands, Germany, France, Belgium, Spain and Greece actively promote its goals.

The organisations in the network represent the diverse occupational fields in Early Childhood Education. Some are organisations connected to Universities or institutions in the University structure itself (i.e. Berlin, Gent, Glasgow and Birmingham), others are private agencies working as NGO's in the field of ECD (The Netherlands and Greece), schools for Teacher Training (France), associations of teachers (Spain) and organisations representing the issues of parents and educators and / or minorities (France, Ireland).

DECET's mission statement and legal framework

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and the EU Treaty of Amsterdam are (among many other international and European laws) clear policies concerning exclusion and discrimination. Many European countries have national or regional legislation concerning discrimination and diversity in education. Beside that the European Commission Network on Childcare published 40 targets in "Quality Targets in Services for Young Children" (1996) to be achieved by 2006. A number of targets are concerned with access to services "which positively assert the value of diversity: i.e. language, ethnicity, religion, gender and disability and challenge stereotypes" as well as providing for diversity and equality training and provision.

DECET's mission statement based on the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child (art. 2) , is:

'All children and adults have the right to evolve and to develop in a context of equity and respect for diversity. Children, parents and educators have a right to good quality in early childhood education services, free from any form of – overt and covert, individual and structural – discrimination due to race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national, ethnic or social origin, property, disability, birth or other status.' Therefore the DECET Network will strengthen knowledge, skills and attitudes to enable children and adults together to build early childhood education services and communities where everyone:

- feels that he/she belongs;
- is stimulated to develop the diverse aspects of his/her identity;
- can learn from each other across cultural and other boundaries;
- can participate as an active citizen;
- actively addresses bias through open communication and willingness to grow;
- works together to challenge institutional forms of prejudice and discrimination.

¹ This presentation is based on the following articles:

- Anke Krause. *Presentation of the DECET network*. In: Diversity and Equity in Early Childhood Training in Europe. DECET network, in press.
- Anke van Keulen. *The European network DECET. Common goals, different approaches*. In: Young children aren't biased, are they?! Amsterdam, SWP, 2004.



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Network goals

The European network DECET promotes equity and celebrates diversity in early childhood education services and in training. Steps towards accomplishing the aims stated in the mission statement include:

- Networking with trainers, practitioners, researchers and policy makers throughout Europe;
- Actively and critically promoting quality in early childhood education services, which includes equity, accessibility and respect for diversity;
- Developing new knowledge and insights in this field;
- Working in collaboration with other networks in and outside Europe.

Benefits and commitment

The benefits of networking on a European level are clearly recognised by all partners in the DECET Network. The DECET network promotes its goals in a number of ways, resulting in many benefits for the partners.

It facilitates exchanges among trainers, practitioners, researchers and policy makers throughout Europe. Examples of such actions are:

- the DECET partner meetings twice a year;
- transnational projects in which two or more countries collaborate on development in training and methodology;
- the contributions DECET members make to training sessions in each other's countries and institutions;
- a strong basis for promoting the issue of diversity in countries where there is, as yet, little awareness of this concept. Inviting network partners to national conferences and meetings with professionals and policy makers -- thus broadening the national perspective towards a European context -- is a highly valued feature of the European network. (from 1998 till 2005 there were DECET partner conferences in: Gent, Paris, Dublin, Brussels, London, Lyon, Amsterdam, Athens, Berlin and Glasgow).

The DECET network also promotes its goals by developing new insights and knowledge in this field. Examples of such actions include:

- a train-the-trainers week for all members, workshops and seminars;
- the mutual development of new resources within the framework of the network, which is seen as equally rewarding for the national context. The special focus of the DECET network, which emphasises the transnational cooperation to produce transnational resources-for example, materials, videos or training approaches and theory development -- gives the network a special strength and stability.

Last but not least, the DECET network promotes its goals by working in collaboration with other networks inside and outside Europe.

There are for example connections with the International Step by Step Association (ISSA) which represents 30 countries in Eastern and Middle Europe, with the European network 'Men in Childcare', with networks in Australia and Latin America.

No benefit without commitment

Each partner commits himself to appropriate actions to implement the mission and the goals of the network in his or her country. Partners benefiting from the work in the network are those who clearly see the added value they gain for the work they do on a national level: they define the cooperation as a strengthening of capacities at the individual and institutional level. It is clear that this network structure does not benefit partners without commitment.

A network should be clearly distinguished from an organisation: in its structures as well as in its degree of flexibility and its capacity to react quickly to the demands of change and new situations. Networks



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are associated with the potential to gather forces from different areas to develop and achieve common aims. It is connected to a feeling of “common sense” to bring together projects and organisations working in similar fields and with similar aims to stimulate the exchange of knowledge, experience and resources and to use this potential to work together to promote a common quest.

Ownership – a key to network sustainability

Gathering forces to promote a common quest is one of the aims of the DECET network. A second goal is defined in the sustainability of changes and outcomes on the national as well as European level. The experiences in the past years have shown that the partners in the network need a strong identification with the network and its goals to achieve this aim. Personal as well as professional benefits need to be in balance to guarantee commitment. Working *within* the network and not *for* it has become a major issue when looking at partner commitment. It is crucial that each partner realises his or her commitment in taking on responsibility to ensure that the network’s business remains important, beneficial and well implemented.

Doing the right things in the right way - Network effectiveness and efficiency

Working towards mainstreaming equity and respect for diversity in the context of a network requires a regular evaluation of the strategies we develop as members of the DECET network. This includes determining the changes we have effected through our actions; i.e. the changes that result from the combination of efforts as well as those that result from individual activities. The question followed, is whether the network is fully realising its network advantage, promoting “added value” for the actors in the network: better informed research results and practice development, new knowledge and real influence – these criteria help demonstrate the real leverage of resources and influence through the commitment in the network.

Development and planning

After the first two years of the DECET Network, the network succeeded in creating a basis for future work. In the next networking phase (2001 – 2003) workpacks were established in accordance with promoting outcome-orientated transnational cooperation in the network. All partners in the network were engaged in at least one of the three work packs.

- Work pack “Training Approach Diversity and Equity in Early Childhood” developed a training publication with examples in the different European countries on equity and respect for diversity in early childhood education services. The manual describes the framework of the DECET cooperation and appropriate methods to work on equity and respect for diversity with practitioners. The training experiences were tested in different countries before composing a training manual. DECET partners are implementing the training manual in the mainstream initial training and in service training in the different countries. The training manual is available on the website: www.decet.org.
- Work pack “Best Practice” aimed to produce a dvd/video which could be used for training purposes, showing good anti-bias practices in different countries and explaining why practices can vary according to the contexts. The dvd ‘Lullaby for Hamza’ shows four examples in Ghent/Belgium, Aubry/France, Berlin/Germany and Birmingham/England. A journalist leads the spectators from one childcare provision to the other using the language of the country he is visiting.
The DVD is done in four different versions: in English, in German, in Flemish and in French and in the meantime has been translated in Spanish. A booklet is accompanying the DVD giving some more information about the four childcare provisions and their context.

In the current programme 2004 –2006 new workpacks are running

- **WP Improving and Disseminating Methods and Approaches:**



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This workpack focuses on improving and disseminating methods of working with practitioners and trainers (documenting the family in the child care centre) and with practitioners and children (artistic activities).

- **WP Training for Trainers** prepared and realised the “European Seminar and Training of Trainers on Equity and Respect for Diversity” Barcelona 15-19 May 2006). The work is based on the experiences of DECET partners and other experts in this field.
- **WP Participatory Research on Making Sense of Good Practice** aims to raise the common knowledge within the DECET network, to initiate a discussion on high quality issues in each partner organisation and to identify methods of involving parents and children in a discussion on quality of childcare provision. Results will be a common list of quality criteria according to the vision of Respect for Diversity and an instrument for quality development by internal evaluation for an exemplary complex of the criteria.

Strategic plans

Parallel to the involvement in the work packs, the partners worked -- and are still working -- towards developing the contours and structures of the network. During 2004-2006 the strategic plans of the network include:

- sharing responsibilities in the network to heighten the commitment of the partners and to strengthen the democratic structures;
- looking for and inviting new partners into the network;
- strengthening the national networks in each partner country: to promote its aim to be a network of networks;
- cooperating with international networks active in Early Childhood and Diversity issues;
- supporting each other on a national basis: to promote the development within the partner organisations towards including diversity in the mission of the organisation;
- working on policy: e.g. inviting policy makers to network conferences, to national conferences on diversity; establishing exchange groups between policy makers and professionals.

The network structure

All the organisations make up the DECET network and, at the same time, the members of the annual plenary meeting. In order to work, jointly, towards creating concrete products that promote diversity issues, the network decided to establish three projects for the network. Each partner participates in at least one of the three work packs. Each work pack is coordinated by a work pack manager (limited to the period set for the work pack) who, through this function, is also a member of the steering group. The work pack managers have the budget responsibility for the work pack and coordinate all actions within the work pack. One organisation within the network is asked to undertake the task of the overall coordination. The time period is limited to two or three years (this corresponds approximately to one working phase of the network) after which the overall coordination rotates to the next partner organisation. The overall coordination is responsible for all the administrative and so-called overhead tasks of the network.

See in the appendix the current network structures.

The DECET Network is funded by the Bernard van Leer Foundation (BVLF). The network also aims at attaining supplementary funding (e.g. European Social Fund or other EU programmes, grants from other foundations).

Application and membership

The network developed guidelines and criteria for the application of new members, based on experiences during the years. The following criteria will be used when potential partners apply for membership:

- the organisation's commitment to work in accordance with the mission statement of DECET



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- the organisation's openness and willingness to construct knowledge and insights together with other DECET partners across national and institutional contexts and cultural boundaries
- the organisation's strengths and the challenges it identifies
- the organisation's capacity to undertake long term strategic actions
- the network of contacts the organisation has in its country and therefore the possible impact on practice, on training curricula and/or on policy
- the potential and opportunities the organisation has for disseminating and implementing the DECET work in its country.



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Appendix DECET Network Structures

The figure depicts the structures of the network in their current form in the networking phase 2004–2006.

Partners

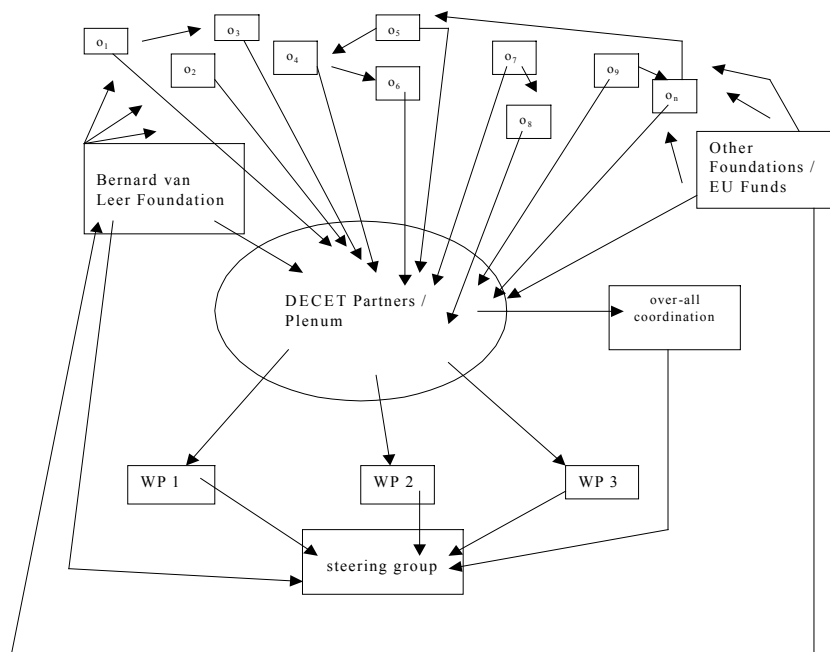
All organisations make up the DECET network and at the same time represent the members of the annual plenary meeting. O_1 to O_n represent the partners.

Workpacks

To work towards the joint creation of concrete products that promote diversity issues, the partners decided to establish three projects or Workpacks, which are labelled “WP 1”, “WP 2” and “WP 3” in the figure. Each partner participates in at least one of the three workpacks. Each workpack is coordinated by a **workpack manager** (limited to the period set for the workpack), who through this function is also a member of the steering group. The workpack managers take on budget responsibilities for the workpack and coordinate all actions within the workpack.

Overall coordination

One organisation in the network is asked to undertake the task of overall coordination. This period is limited to three years, after which overall coordination rotates to the next partner organisation. The overall coordinator and the workpack managers work together in the steering group, where they prepare meetings and develop and plan strategies to be presented and discussed at the plenary sessions.



Bernard van Leer Foundation

The DECET network is funded by the Bernard van Leer Foundation (BvLF). The network also works to obtain supplementary funding (e.g. European Social Fund or other EU programmes, grants from other foundations) in order to support project work in the network and workpacks.

Network Phase 2003-2006

Overall coordination team:



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Anke van Keulen (MUTANT, The Netherlands), Anke Krause (ISTA, Germany), Monique van der Kaa (MUTANT, The Netherlands)

Workpackmanagers:

- Workpack 1 'Methods' : Emanuelle Murcier (ACEPP, France), co-workpackmanager: Sissy Vafeas (Schedia , Greece)
- Workpack 2 'European training curriculum: Michel Vandebroeck (VBJK, Belgium), co-workpackmanager Myriam Mony (ESSSE, France)
- Workpack 3 'Research on Quality': Regine Schallenberg-Diekmann (ISTA, Germany).

Steering group:

Anke van Keulen (MUTANT, The Netherlands), Anke Krause (ISTA, Germany), Monique van der Kaa (MUTANT, The Netherlands), Emanuelle Murcier (ACEPP, France), Myriam Mony (ESSSE, France), Regine Schallenberg-Diekmann (ISTA, Germany).



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