

## Diverse diversities

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First of all, let me say that whatever DECET may be saying, there is no such thing as a single European perspective on diversity. There are on the contrary considerable differences in contexts among European countries regarding policy and practice of diversity. We illustrate this by the French case and – to a lesser extent – the Belgian. French identity as a nation state is profoundly embedded in French revolution and what is called the “republican values”. In this vein, *égalité* – equality – is a constitutive value, with a strong separation of the public and the private domain. The nation is marked by a division between church and state and the concepts of *citoyenneté* (citizenship) and *laïcité* (lay state) are essential in this respect. This means that historically, public education is lay education and religion has no place in it, exactly in order to establish equality between different citizens. For an Englishmen it is quite difficult to well understand the recent political debates in France on the prohibition of the veil in French schools. From a British or an American perspective, this plea against the veil is often reduced to a conservative, old fashioned or even racist approach. In Germany on the other hand, the discussion on diversity is highly influenced by the diversity between former east and west since the German unification. In Belgium, diversity issues are discussed differently in Flanders, then in Brussels or in the Wallone part of the country and there are of course many examples to be given, that illustrate the different approaches of diversity in Europe. Quite confusing, isn't it. And it gets worse when we look at more countries.

Furthermore there are considerable differences in how early childhood education is organised. In European countries, preschool education is a “split system” where the care for infants, under the competence of Ministries of Welfare, family or social affairs, developed entirely separated from the Kindergarten, under the competence of Ministries of Education. According to John Bennet from OECD, this persistent gap leads to a devaluation of child care and less professional status as compared to education. But there are also important exceptions to this general rule, the Swedish being well known.

As far as the number of provisions is concerned, state policies in Western Europe regarding child care, could in the past be described as two distinct systems. Some countries including the United Kingdom, The Netherlands, Spain and West Germany have traditionally looked at childcare for young children as a private matter of the family and not as an area of state policy. This has resulted in a very low percentage of state funded initiatives, few general quality regulations and a child care system that is mostly private and operating as an autonomous market where parents negotiate places and fees. On the other hand there have been countries including Belgium and France and, to a lesser extent, Portugal, where child care has since the 1970's been regarded as a mixed public-private responsibility, resulting in higher coverage, higher state funding, central quality regulations and fixed parental fees.

In the last decades, however, this antagonism shifted. Some countries of the former group decided to invest in childcare for either social or economical reasons. In the UK, where only 2% of young children had access to provisions in the 1980's, new programmes resulted in much higher public investments. In The Netherlands a more market oriented approach is adopted since the 1990's, resulting in partnerships between state, parents and employers, paying for the massive investment that was needed in the Dutch society to create new provisions. Other types of policy can also be observed. The most well known is the Scandinavian policy regarding early childhood. Sweden and Denmark for instance have since long a very high coverage of state funded childcare provisions and in Sweden, every child from one year on has a legal right on child care. The other distinct case is former East Germany where traditionally twelve months fully paid parental leave were followed by almost universal provision for children up to the compulsory school age of six. However, after unification more than 300,000 places in early childhood services were lost. To make this even more complex, it would be inappropriate to focus only on differences among European nation states, since this would mask important differences *within* nation states. So, I think by now I have made my point that there is no such thing as a European perspective.



Consequently, for our work it is important to keep investing time and energy in understanding the different contexts. Another consequence is that we should be extremely careful when using terms as “examples of good practices” that do not take into account the diversity of contexts.

### **The construction of homogenous nation states**

Nevertheless, some generalities can be analysed in how the diversity debate is constructed in Europe, acknowledging that these general comments are inevitably superficial. Most European states have historically constructed an ideology of homogeneity, as if nation states had one people with one culture, which is of course an illusion. One example to illustrate this. During the nineteenth century period of industrialisation and urbanisation, there was a very strong cultural and economic gap between upper and working class, illustrated by these statues, one can find in France, Belgium and other countries, the bourgeois man on top, the labour class women down to earth. One of the major issues of public concern regarding young children, in this time, was child mortality in the labour class. When we analyse the official reports on this social problem, it is remarkable to see how child mortality never has been attributed to the precarious living conditions of the labour class or to their extremely low wages. On the contrary, child mortality was reduced to an individual and cultural issue. Mothers in the labour class in official reports were accused of ignorance and even of neglect of their children. Child mortality was either depicted as an individual offence of the mother or as a cultural habit of the labour class. Bourgeois groups organised philanthropic and charity institutions, including child care centres, to combat child mortality and to educate the masses as well as to prevent social uproar. There may be similarities with the recent French debate, Emanuelle will talk about in one of the discussion groups.

In short, in the so called homogenous states, there have always been distinct cultural groups in cities and in rural areas. But the very construction of homogeneity has masked the economic differences and power relations between these groups.

Colonial history has further contributed to the construction of homogenous nation states as a discursive regime. In the Belgian case for instance the confrontation with Congolese ‘primitives’ and ‘tribes’ has served as a mirror in the Lacanian sense, constructing the Belgian identity as civilized, Catholic and educated. It is well documented by Edward Saïd, how colonialism not only helped to construct the Western identity, but also influenced the image of the self of indigenous people in the colonies by Othering the Other.

The ideology of homogenous nation states is challenged since the 1960’s. In the years of economic boom, labour force is imported from Mediterranean countries in the industrial regions of Belgium, France and West Germany for instance, while southern European countries such as Spain, Portugal and Italy were exporting their labour force. Moreover, decolonisation has provoked migration from the former colonies to The Netherlands, the U.K., Portugal, Spain and other countries. Although migrations have been from all times, these recent migrations have troubled the discourse on homogeneity and prepared the way for another discursive construction: the multicultural society.

### **The construction of multicultural societies**

In the 1980’s and 1990’s the terms ‘multicultural society’ and ‘intercultural society’ became popular in early childhood education as well as in other fields. A research funded by the Van Leer Foundation in the 1990’s on how ‘multicultural child care’ operates, is illustrative. The researchers visited provisions for early childhood education that depicted themselves as multicultural, in The Netherlands and eight other countries. The researchers concluded by establishing a typology of four distinct approaches to multiculturalism in child care, leading to four models. The first is the *submersion* model, in which no special attempt is made to facilitate the integration of the home (minority) culture and the institutional (majority) culture or to facilitate children’s transitions between the two systems. The general idea is “same goals, same approach and same processes for all children”. The second is the *transition* model, where the goal is the same (assimilation) but the means are different: extra educational tools are put in



practice to facilitate the transition, including elements of home culture in the centre, culturally adapted decorations, extra meetings with ethnic minority parents, intensive language courses, etc. The third model is the *contact* model which also involves progressive educational tasks. The aim is to work towards cultural enrichment by having children learn from a variety of cultures, including multilingual education for all children. The focus is not on cultural differences among the children, but on including a variety of elements from different cultures in the curriculum for all children, including a multicultural human resources policy. The last model is the *cultural change* model that aims at the transmission of notions of mutual understanding, solidarity and respect to all children, irrespective of their background. Emphasis lies on the social interactions and prevention of prejudice. The idea is that eventually children will learn from each other and a common culture may arise from this 'melting pot'. The authors refuse to take an ethnic stand on this typology and claim that most child care centres can be described as adhering to one or a combination of some of these four models.

I make reference to this study, because I see it as a typical example of the construction of multicultural ideology and as a good example of why it became necessary to critique this ideology.

First the concepts of 'culture' and 'cultural identity' are, just as ethnic groups, often depicted as homogeneous within. Differences within cultural groups are not taken into account and concrete children and parents are more linked to their past than to their present or their future. This essentialist multicultural approach, with its shallow plea for respect for cultural belonging came up in a period of economic crisis and rising unemployment, affecting unskilled labour force and workers from ethnic minorities in particular. It is probably not a coincidence that the respect for diversity issue made its way to public discourse at the time that certain groups began to plea for a forced return of ethnic minority workers to their 'homeland'. It is an exercise I often do with my students: asking them to compare textbooks advocating for the multicultural society in the eighties and textbooks from actual far right racist parties. It is indeed striking to see that – however their ethical position is opposite - they nevertheless do share a common essentialist and static view on culture and tend not to focus on economic and social contexts in general and power relations in particular.

Indeed, an important aspect of recent critique on the multicultural discourse is that the societal context in which relations between specific groups take place, is – again – not taken into account. Relations between groups – or more specific between languages for instance – are studied as if education would take place outside society. And power relations are often denied. Moreover parents are again excluded from the debate on what is good for children, since the new experts on multiculturalism take over from them. And finally a last point of critique is that many of the multicultural approaches focus on minority groups, ignoring that diversity is also a majority issue. They plead for tolerance towards the exception, but fail in challenging the norm by which the minority is made exceptional. But of course, you know all this.

Because of these critiques, grass root organisations as well as academics have been looking for new frameworks and began to embrace the anti-bias approach, developed in the United States. The publications of Louise Derman-Sparks (1989) and others found their way to innovative projects in child care in the U.K., Denmark, Ireland, The Netherlands, Belgium, Greece and later also in France, introducing clear anti-racist policy issues and methods such as the family wall or persona dolls. This anti-bias approach was constitutive in the formation of our DECET network. In spite of its merits, there are however also problems with the anti-bias approach, or better still, with the way it was "imported" to Europe. The concepts of ethnicity and culture (and how these concepts seemed to be interwoven) were difficult to apply in some European contexts, where distinct cultural groups do not necessarily have distinct physical features. Moreover, in some European countries, naming people by their group is often perceived as reducing citizens to their origins and therefore difficult to accept, especially in communities that have known Nazi occupation one generation ago. As explained earlier this is especially true in France and countries that like France and to a lesser extent Belgium, have a history that cherishes the 'republican values'. Some theoretical issues add up to these 'cultural' needs for adapting the anti-bias discourse to Europe. Power relations are acknowledged in the anti-bias approach and this has been a significant evolution, compared with the previous multicultural discourse. However, they are often described in a dichotomous way, defining victims (ethnic minority people) and perpetrators (majority people), resulting in (with all due respect) sloganeering that racism affects the (white) offenders as much



as its victims. This dualistic model does not allow us deep analysis of how power relations occur, nor does it help us in dealing with racism among ethnic minorities or in seeing how specific (economic poor) families – both black and white – are marginalised or subject to institutional discriminations. It also fails in analysing the subtleties and *reciprocities* of power relations. Power is not a property of a group, or an acquired privilege, but rather the general effect of strategic positions that is also influenced by the position taken by dominated groups as power also invests these groups. (vb MOCEF)

Another aspect in which the conceptual background of the anti-bias curriculum, as it was imported into Europe, is problematic, regards the concept of pre-prejudices. The struggle against prejudices is often justified by the idea that young children at an early age develop (pre)prejudices, that may eventually lead towards racism at a later age. It is a developmental approach also adopted by researchers like Aboud or Raundalen. Different post-structural authors (Singer, 1993; Burman, 1994; Canella, 1997) have rightly questioned the notion of linear development for how it constructed specific parental (or maternal) responsibility, as well as for the white middle-class values underpinning the research, that lead to the concept of developmental stages. They have also challenged the developmental approach as well as the concept of 'children's needs' for how it constructed images of fragile children, underpinning a discrimination of children on the basis of age. Gunilla Dahlberg & Peter Moss have done remarkable work in that sense. These critics of the 1990's, as well as recent societal developments, have urged us to review the theoretical framings of the work on diversity and equity in early childhood education.

### **Globalisation, Individualisation and De-traditionalisation**

During the 1980's and even more so through the 1990's, economy in general and labour in particular have ranked high on the political agenda. Yet at the same time, nation states feel less able to control these global concerns. The same situation holds for ecological issues, as the Chernobyl disaster made very clear in Europe. The day after the explosion of the nuclear plant in Chernobyl, children in European day care centres were advised not to play in the sandpit anymore. Events far beyond the reach of the individual nation states have strong effects on the intimacy of daily life.

Many scholars have recently looked at the effects of globalisation on early childhood policies in 'history of the present' research. Especially the work done in the Educational Department of Madison Wisconsin and by the Stockholm Institute of Gunilla Dahlberg, is very interesting. Although this takes quite different forms in different countries, in many European countries a withdrawal of the welfare state and a marketization of the social can be observed. It is clear that these evolutions are accompanied by changing understandings of the individual citizen and his or her identity, including cultural identity. They are also interwoven with changing power relations.

As many researchers have showed, individuals in the post-traditional society have multiple belongings and thus construct their autobiographies themselves. This evolution is sometimes labelled as the dynamics of identity, multiple identities, hyphenated or hybrid identities. Today individuals can adhere to many different reference groups, including ethnic and language groups, professional groups, gender, political, religious groups, gay or lesbian groups and many others. This may very well be one of the most important effects of globalisation on the individual's level: that adherence to one reference group (e.g. ethnic or gender) does not automatically entails a belonging to other 'cultural' groups (e.g. language, profession ...). Important decisions in life, such as choosing a specific job, marry or not, stay married or not, live with a person from the same or the opposite sex, have children or not, vote for this or that party at the elections, are not dominated anymore by the belonging to a specific cultural subgroup in society, but are now *perceived* as individual decisions, influenced by a personal mix of multiple belongings. It is less the history and the tradition that moulds our decisions – at least in our perception – but rather the present and the personal future in the de-traditionalised society. Consequently this evolution profoundly affects family relationships, since households consist of individuals, making their individual choices and having thus to negotiate continually with other household members and to compromise for instance between their commitment to the family, their duties as parents or children or spouse, their professional ambitions, their personal emotional development, etc. Many contemporary authors welcome this evolution for the degree of individual freedom that it brings, when the old



Ericksonian concept of identity is replaced by the concept of “writing one’s own autobiography”. From the point of view of diversity and equity, this seems however to be a too simple analysis, as it gives rise to new concerns, I think we should be debating in our network.

The question is: does individualisation and de-traditionalisation really entail more freedom or, on the contrary, does it merely signify a shift in power relations. Let me give one example. Cunningham (1995) showed that to a much greater extent than in previous centuries, child-rearing has become a matter of negotiation between parents and child, with the state and other agencies monitoring and inspecting the process. In this process, ideas about childhood that exist in the public domain, act as a framework, within which adults and children work out ways of living. Individualization – and consequently: negotiation as an educational norm and participation – do not just act as a higher degree of freedom, but may also act as a new framework that includes as well as it excludes. As a matter of fact, research commissioned by governments in different European states, indeed closely monitors the process of negotiation within families. In the early 1990s for instance, Du Bois-Reymond et al. (1992) studied negotiation in families under the authority of a Dutch governmental organization. Similar ethnographic research was undertaken in the same period in several Scandinavian countries, also in close connection to government. Also in Belgium, the governmental organization produced a large survey of families on this topic, concluding that negotiation is generally accepted as the norm for education. Recently, the Flemish Children’s Rights Commissioner ordered a large-scale study on negotiation within the family, interviewing children as well as their parents. Following the research a campaign was launched to persuade parents that negotiating with their children is the right educational approach. We can observe a problematic historic continuity in this discourse on negotiation as the educational norm. The central continuity is about the *decontextualization* of children and families. In many of the publications around this issue, negotiation is depicted as the ultimate ‘good’. The normative aspect is made explicit by linking negotiation to the child’s development and even to explicit developmental outcomes in adulthood such as wellbeing and autonomy. Negotiation is desirable for the experts, regardless of the social, cultural, economic and other context of the family. Individualization and negotiation as an educational norm, however, place children in a normative system favoring individuality, as well as verbal competences to manifest this individuality. However cross-cultural research (by people such as Tobin, Göncü and Canella) has shown that other forms of interaction can be more accurate and functional in specific socio-cultural contexts. These researchers indicate that dominant ideas about negotiation as the educational norm are cultural constructions. We should be aware of the fact that the focus on participation, negotiation, self-expression and verbalization of the self are a white, western, middle class norm. It is a discourse taught in middle class educational settings that may be more familiar and attractive to some children than to others. This makes Tobin (1995) conclude that the pedagogy of self-expression works to privilege an already privileged group of children. In this sense, one can observe a continuity in the history of childhood: middle class values and norms are decontextualized and naturalized, and consequently perceived to be universally ‘good for all children’.

### Education is politics

As said earlier, it is important to contextualize educational discourse and to look at the broader social, economic and political context in which education takes place. It is probably no coincidence that the discourse on participation, negotiation, individual freedom and its values such as autonomy and self-expression, started to make way in Europe at the end of the 1970’s, namely at the beginning of a long lasting economic crisis. Unemployment rose in all Western European countries to a stage where states had to acknowledge they could not provide jobs for all citizens anymore. It is a period of budget problems and consequently of revision of the welfare state in the direction of neoliberalism.

The pedagogical focus on the autonomous child and its attention to self-expression are typically linked to the liberal, free market oriented society in need for autonomous, entrepreneurial individuals Erica Burman (1997) shows that the attention for the autonomous child is to be linked with the rational, unitary subject that is so central in psychology because it is the self-regulating, responsible citizen in late industrialized society: the individual tax payer, the bearer of legal responsibilities, the rational individual of the free market economy.



Social services (e.g. allowances) in this context are no longer simple entitlements, but entail personal responsibility and self-sufficiency on the part of the individual. The individual is supposed to commit his or herself to lifelong learning; and he or she is in this (Third) way partly responsible for the – individualized – risk of unemployment. As a consequence marginalized groups in West European societies, and this includes ethnic minorities in particular, are in part made personally responsible for their exclusion.

In short, late modernity changes the concepts of (cultural) identity and belonging and also affects the way how power relations occur. But late modernity does not fundamentally interfere with a continuity since the human sciences occurred in late nineteenth century, namely that expert knowledge on children creates a specific power relation that excludes parental ideas. On the contrary, a parallel can be drawn between what Beck calls the ‘ecological shock’ of Chernobyl and the expert discourse on education. The explosion of the nuclear reactor in Chernobyl deprived us from our senses: it made clear that we cannot judge for ourselves what is good for us: the reindeer meat in Scandinavia after the explosion, did not taste differently, but had an unacceptable amount of radioactivity. In the same way, parents cannot judge about what is good for their children, since the outcomes in later development can only be measured by experts. These education researchers construct what is good for children in a universal way, still based on white middle class values, just as they decontextualized child mortality in the nineteenth century. The fundamental shift lays therefore *not* in the power imbalance, silencing parents from minority groups, but only in *how* the power relations are expressed and how individuals are invested by the expert’s knowledge on what is good for them. The expert is not the one who holds power over the passive parent anymore, they are now mutually tied to each other in reciprocal dependency.

### **Diversity and equity**

These evolutions in European thinking and in the societal environment, force us to rethink the frameworks of diversity and equity in early childhood education. But they also open up some new possibilities. A withdrawal of the State in welfare and educational matters can be observed in different European countries, influenced by globalization and neo-liberalization. Indeed decisions are less taken by the traditional decisional centers of policy, mandated by traditional democratic structures. Yet at the same time new grassroots organizations are constituted, attempting to fill in the political vacuum. In European early childhood education, many small scale organizations have mushroomed with an agenda that – next to action research – explicitly aims at policy. Also transnational networks are formed in this field, stimulated as they are by new streams of funding on the European level such as the European Social Fund, or by international foundations, such as the Bernard Van Leer Foundation. These networks, including our (DECET) network, are a recent product of globalization. They break with the tradition of international organizations in Europe, such as OMEP and form flexible and dynamic networks, with loose organizational structures. They can be viewed as examples of what Beck (1994) calls *sub-politics*, meaning direct politics or incidental participation to political decision making, outside of the institutions that are formally representative, through informal organizations often even without any legal framework. Recent history shows that sub-politics have growing influence on the political agendas, nationally as well as internationally. Beck (1994) claims that the themes of the future now on everybody’s lips did not emerge from the cathedrals of power in business and science. They have been put on the agenda against the resistance of institutionalised ignorance by the efforts of often muddled, moralizing and doubt-ridden splinter groups; democratic subversion has won a very unlikely victory.

Examples from organizations such as Greenpeace, the peace movement and ATTAC (anti-globalization movement in a.o. France and Belgium) show that their issues follow a similar path: at first the issues are marginalized, then made ridicule, and eventually placed on the European public agenda.

Child care in this vein, is a transitional space between the public and the private domain. It is not a space of ‘civil disobedience’ and far from being anarchistic, child care that is a co-construction of knowledge, culture and identity (Dahlberg et al., 1999) is indeed an place of dialogue between parents, professionals,



experts and the local community. This means that childcare – in addition to its traditional economic role as facilitator of employment for parents – defines its educational and social position in society.

Defining the *educational* position entails a dialogue with parents as well as professionals on what is good for children. This can enable parents from different backgrounds to participate in the co-construction of pedagogy. Our experiences in the DECET network in this field learn us that parents and professionals are looking at a proper balance between individual values (such as autonomy, self-expression, individuality and freedom of choice) and social values (such as solidarity, empathy, tolerance and respect). The issue of debate is therefore not whether we should either focus on individual or on social competences in early childhood, as is often believed, but the dialogue will rather be on how these values are spoken into practice and how a proper balance between both dimensions can be safeguarded. Parents also are looking for bridges between their home culture and the institutional culture and often do not want to choose either/or. This also means a fundamental shift in the task of pedagogy. It is not anymore the duty of educationalists or of networks such as ours to define educational norms or outcomes, but rather to look at who defines them, how the dialogue is constructed, who it serves and what power relations occur in this debate. Just one example to illustrate this shift of paradigm. In the traditional concept of homogenous nation states, ‘immigrant’ children were supposed to learn the dominant language by submersion as well as by submission. In the concept of intercultural societies bilingual education became more prevalent and in many anti-bias programmes bilingual education for majority as well as minority children has been developed. When effectively involving parents and children in the educational debate, it occurs that minority parents sometimes do not wish multilingual education for their child, but prefer a more ‘traditional’ submersion programme. The question therefore shifts from “what is the best language education for minority children” to “who says so? How can I understand this point of view? And how shall we manage to reconcile these different opinions?” It is clear that the task of the pedagogue in a complex and diverse society is not to reach consensus as soon as possible, but to work with the heterogeneity of diverse and complex viewpoints. This means a shift in professionalism for child care staff, from expertise on children’s wellbeing, to expertise on empathic discussions.

Defining the *social* position, means that European child care curricula urgently need to be recontextualised. We cannot discuss quality anymore, without looking at *who* the children in preschool are. A striking example is that three Dutch senior researchers published a report that makes a state of affairs on quality in child care in The Netherlands. They review all existing Dutch academic literature of the last decades, including leading international work. They claim that child care in The Netherlands is of sufficient quality, without touching on the subject of its accessibility. It should however be clear that educational quality cannot be discussed without taking up the ethical discussions on the place of early childhood in actual society. In our opinion, child care is an integral part of the educational as well as the welfare system and therefore the issue of social justice is an integral part of the curriculum. In 1995, the European Commission Childcare Network published a document with 40 quality targets for early years provisions. In this excellent document, experts from all EU countries participated in establishing these targets, including social quality aspects such as accessibility. My own research in all child care centres in Brussels, shows that when accessibility is left to the autonomy of the provisions in the Belgian case, this leads to exclusion of ethnic minority families as well as to native Belgian deprived families. Recent evolutions in The Netherlands show that there is a tendency to overestimate the economic function of childcare, reducing its social function to (middle class) women at work. In this way they not only reinforce the traditional gendered prejudice that the care of the young child is a female business, but they also contribute to the exclusion of the unemployed. It is a tendency that may be growing in “Third Way” Europe as an effect of globalisation, where nation states wish to have a direct and visible economic return for their investments in social welfare. It is obvious that educational quality can not be studied in a vacuum, as is often done, but that it should be preceded by the social question: who does it serve?

### **Let me now come to a conclusion**

I started by claiming that there is no such thing as a European perspective. However, globalisation and travelling discourses on individuality and autonomy have affected visions on children, families and the



role of the state in most late industrial societies. This does not necessarily mean that European child care evolves towards a unified approach. In the history of child care there have always been projects that *challenged* mainstream evolutions. Today we observe the emergence of novel child care provisions in many European countries. Many of these examples network together in the DECET network and some of these actions were made possible by the support of the Bernard Van Leer Foundation. There are of course many more of these examples of “pockets of resistance”. Transnational networking and even transcontinental networking is welcome to elaborate on these local projects, to conceptualise their innovative work and to sustain them in the advocacy work in order to give voices to the silenced. There lays an important task for trainers, but also for educational academics, (as I wish to stress in the first week of my new job) academics who wish to leave their offices and go into the field, where pedagogy is constructed. It is after all not in the universities but out there that children learn who they are, in contact with the diversity of our world.

