

# Young children and their services: developing a European approach

A *Children in Europe* Policy paper

principle ⑥

## Diversity and choice: conditions for democracy

This dossier is elaborating on one of the principles in the *Children in Europe* Policy paper 'Young children and their services: developing a European approach'.



## Diversity and choice: conditions for democracy

This principle says: “All services should recognise, respect and positively value diversity in its many dimensions and forms as a fundamental element and value of European culture. They should support diversity of language, ethnicity, religion, gender, sexual orientation and disability, and challenge stereotypes and discrimination. This should be expressed in their openness to all children and families, in their practice and in the composition of their workforce, which should reflect the diversity of the local community; this will include 40 percent male workers in the longer term and 20 percent by 2020. Services should be encouraged and supported to explore and experiment with diverse paradigms, theories and practices, to contest dominant discourses and to create new thinking and ways of working. Services, therefore, should be places where diversity is not just reproduced but is actively created, supporting the co-construction by all participants, children and adults, of new and different knowledges, values and identities.

Recognition, respect and valuing of diversity – of people, practices and perspectives – and of choice understood as participatory and inclusive collective decision-making (the *democratic exercise of choice*) are conditions for democracy in services for young children, another essential value that should underpin all aspects of these services.

Parents and children should have some choice about which services they can access.

But this *individual exercise of choice* is only one meaning of choice and is one of many values. It should not be prioritised over other values.”

## What does this principle mean?

Underlying this principle is a belief that democracy should be a fundamental value of early childhood education – indeed of all education. Democracy presumes diversity and choice; diversity and choice, in turn, require democracy if they are to flourish. What do we mean by democracy, diversity and choice? And why are they inter-related?

### DEMOCRACY: A FUNDAMENTAL VALUE

Democracy, in our understanding, is a multi-dimensional concept, ranging from ‘electoral and procedural democracy’ through ‘activism and civic participation’ to democracy in public services, the workplace and the family. Modern democracies must “be rooted in a culture in which democratic values and practices shape not just the formal sphere of politics, but the informal spheres of everyday life: families, communities, workplaces, and schools and other public services” (Skidmore and Bound, 2008, p.9). In short, public services, including not only schools but also early childhood services, lie at the heart of democracy.

So while formal and representative democracy – democratic governance – is vitally important, democracy has a more pervasive presence: as an approach to the conduct of everyday life, as a way of thinking, relating and living together, as a quality of personal life and relationships. This is democracy, in the words of the American philosopher and educational reformer John Dewey, as “a mode of associated living embedded in the culture and social relationships of everyday life”; and as “a way of life controlled by a working faith in the possibilities of human nature... [and] faith in the capacity of human beings for intelligent judgement and action if proper conditions are furnished” (Dewey, 1939). This is democracy, as the political theorist Hannah Arendt sees it, as a form of subjectivity expressed as a quality of human interaction (Biesta, 2007). This is democracy as a relational ethic that can and should pervade all aspects of everyday life, a way of “thinking of oneself in relation to others and the world” (Rinaldi, 2006), a relationship of solidarity and respect, mutual affection and care for one another.

We can also say what we don’t understand democracy to be. It is not a process of aggregating individual preferences and the ensuing competition between different private interests, epitomised in systems of parental school choice. Democracy is certainly agonistic, recognising a

“dimension of antagonism inherent in human relations” (Mouffe, 2000, p.101). But it involves “public deliberation and contestation about the common good” and “the translation of private troubles into collective issues” (Biesta, 2010, pp.54, 100).

Nor is democratic education primarily about teaching courses on citizenship. Rather, it is about experiencing and living democracy, for instance in schools and early childhood centres that are democratic in ethos and practice.

### DIVERSITY, CHOICE AND DEMOCRACY

Democracy, in our view, is not about maximising individual choices. Nor is it about achieving rational consensus by democratic deliberation, based on a belief that there is always one right answer. We value, instead, a democracy of *modus vivendi*, built on “the belief there are many forms of life in which humans can thrive... (and underpinned by) value-pluralism” (Gray, 2009, pp.24, 25). This is an agonistic or adversarial democracy, believing it is impossible to eradicate differences and undesirable even to try. This, though, is not a cause for despair for “[i]n a democratic polity, conflicts and confrontations, far from being a sign of imperfection, indicate that democracy is alive and inhabited by pluralism” (Mouffe, 2000).

This is a democracy, therefore, that places the highest value on diversity. It presumes – but also welcomes - a world of complexity and multiplicity, of multiple perspectives and value pluralism, which cannot be reduced to one right answer to any question or one universal set of laws and principles. It resists what Roberto Unger calls ‘the dictatorship of no alternative’, insisting there are always alternatives.

The diversity at the heart of the democracy of *modus vivendi* can be expressed through group identities based on shared positioning, experience and interests – such as language, ethnicity, religion, gender, sexual orientation and disability. But there is diversity, too, within groups – femininities and masculinities, for example, to be found among women and men. Each individual has many, varied and complex identities, he or she is a unique assemblage. Diversity, in short, is not just about group difference; it refers also to the absolute otherness or singularity of each individual. Nor are differences essential and immutable.

New identities can be constructed, for example in early childhood centres and schools in relationship with others and through encounters with diversity. These institutions should respect existing identities, but it is not their task to reproduce them: and as public spaces, places of encounter, they provide opportunities for individuals to construct new identities and to make and re-make the common.

So a democracy, in our understanding, recognises and welcomes, depends on and sustains all forms of diversity, including plurality of values and perspectives. It respects the alterity of others, not trying to make the 'Other' into the 'Same', and multiplicity of perspectives.

'Choice' also plays a central role in our understanding of democracy, but carefully qualified. The word is often used today as if it only had one meaning: *individual* choice, the independent consumer expressing his or her preferences in the market. But it has another meaning: *collective* choice, where citizens come together to deliberate on the common good and seek to make choices that forward that goal – what might be termed collective decision-making or the democratic exercise of choice. Choice, therefore, refers to both individual and collective choice. Both are important in their right place. Collective choice is essential for the public sphere, for the common good, and for democratic politics; indeed, arguably the challenge facing us today is to extend opportunities for citizens to make collective choices.

Diversity and choice are, therefore, important conditions for democracy. While, in a virtuous circle, respect for diversity and the exercise of choice are important for democracy.

## WHAT IS THE BASIS OF PRINCIPLE 6

Democracy, respect for diversity and enhancing choice are principles of Western liberal and social democratic politics. More specifically, there is a long tradition of holding democracy to be a fundamental value of education, in Europe and beyond: for example, it is one of five recurring themes in progressive education; it is a founding principle of the 'municipal school revolution' in post-war Italy, in places such as Bologna and Reggio Emilia; and it was central to the pedagogical thinking of John Dewey. Dewey argued that "democracy needs to be reborn in each generation and education is its midwife" and that a democratic transformation of society requires a democratic transformation of education:

Since, in a democracy, decision-making is no longer the preserve of an aristocratic elite, schools must become embryonic societies providing all pupils with opportunities to develop the social attitudes, skills and dispositions that allow them to formulate and achieve their collective ends by confronting shared problems and common concerns (Carr and Hartnett, 1996, p.63).

Early childhood services, too, should be democratic. Like schools, they too should act as 'embryonic societies', places where democracy is a lived experience. Both schools and early childhood services can play an important role in renewing and spreading democracy at a time when many are concerned about the health of democracy, whilst at the same time we face "challenges where we need to act collaboratively more than ever" (Shah and Goss, 2007, p.26).

A democracy of *modus vivendi* also enables our societies to respond positively and constructively to increasing diversity and complexity, seeing them as a potential not a threat. But too often, today, we see other, repressive responses:

(T)he more we seem to know about the complexity of learning, children's diverse strategies and multiple theories of knowledge, the more we seek to impose learning strategies and curriculum goals that reduce the complexities and diversities of learning and knowing. The more complex things become the more we seem to desire processes of reduction and thus control, but such reduction strategies might simultaneously shut out the inclusion and justice we want to achieve (Lenz Taguchi, 2010, p.8).

## WHAT IS THE EU POSITION?

Democracy, together with human rights and the rule of law, are ‘core values’ of the European Union ([http://eeas.europa.eu/human\\_rights/index\\_en.htm](http://eeas.europa.eu/human_rights/index_en.htm)). *In varietate concordia* – ‘united in diversity’ - is the official motto of the European Union ([http://europa.eu/abc/symbols/motto/index\\_en.htm](http://europa.eu/abc/symbols/motto/index_en.htm)). A goal of EU policy, on competition, is more choice – used in an individual consumerist meaning of the word to enable consumers to “select the product that offers the right balance between price and quality” ([http://ec.europa.eu/competition/consumers/why\\_en.html](http://ec.europa.eu/competition/consumers/why_en.html)).

Democracy as a core value is not, however, translated into European policy documents on education. A search of EC communications on early childhood education and care and on general education and training, over the last five years, shows no reference to democracy.

‘Choice’ appears in relation to teaching as a ‘career choice’, in the more general documents (European Commission 2006, 2008). In the EC Communication on Early Childhood Education and Care (2011), ‘choice’ appears once, referring to individual choice in a market context: “market-based services have the potential to limit public expenditure and allow greater choice and control for parents” (p.6).

‘Diversity’ appears in both the EC Communication on Early Childhood Education and Care and the EC Communication on Improving Competencies for the 21st Century. In the former document, diversity is held to “require constant reflection on pedagogical practices, as well as a systematic approach to professionalization.” Growing social diversity is also considered to make transitions, for example from home to ECEC, increasingly important. An indirect reference on diversity is acknowledgement of “a pressing need to make a career in the ECEC sector more attractive to men in all EU countries”, an acknowledgement of the highly gendered workforce, also apparent in the earlier years of the compulsory school system.

The second EC Communication on Improving Competencies highlights how “every classroom is a place of diversity: of gender, socio-economic groups, ability and disability, mother tongues and learning styles”. This emphasises the need to teach learners “in a more personalised style”, so “tailoring teaching to each child’s needs” (p.6).

Overall democracy is absent and choice only briefly appears in relation to marketisation. Diversity receives most attention, but without being placed in a democratic context.

## HOW DO WE WORK WITH DEMOCRACY, DIVERSITY AND CHOICE?

Democracy is multi-dimensional. It should operate – as a value, as a relational ethic and as a practice – in many settings and levels, from the largest-scale (e.g. the European Union or the nation state) through to the smallest-scale (e.g. the classroom or group of children and educators). Democracy also allows the expression of collective choice and values diversity.

At the largest scale, democracy as a fundamental value is not just a matter of formal governance, how laws and policies are arrived at and by whom. It is also a matter of rejecting ‘the dictatorship of no alternative’, recognising instead that working with a democracy of *modus vivendi* there are always alternatives. This means nurturing a democratic politics of education, starting with political questions: these questions are “not mere technical issues to be solved by experts... [but questions that] always involve decisions which require us to make a choice between conflicting alternatives” (Mouffe, 2007, np). Some are ontological and relate to our assumptions about the nature of existence. What is our understanding, or image, of the child, the educator, the pre-school? How do we understand education? Some are epistemological and relate to our theories of knowledge. What is knowledge? How do we learn? Some concern other issues. What paradigm do we choose? What theoretical perspectives? What are the purposes of education? What should be its fundamental values? What ethics? It is these questions and our democratically determined answers to them, that should frame policy, provision and practice in early childhood education.

But instead of nurturing a democratic politics of education, with its political questions and conflicting alternatives, we have left it to wither and fade. Citizens and governments have allowed experts and markets to take the place of democratic deliberation and decision-making, technical questions (‘what works?’) to supplant political questions, and the political and social to collapse into the economic. So government and other institutions of formal democracy, at all levels, need to regain their appetite for a democratic politics of education. They need to rediscover a relish for diversity of perspectives and values, deliberation (including argumentation) about substantive alternatives, and an appetite for making collective choices from among these alternatives.

Governments, at all levels, who commit to democracy, collective choice and diversity (in all its complexity) as

fundamental values, also seek to promote and sustain them, not only in their own dealings, but in early childhood centres. This starts with the (collective) choice of a democratic image of these centres: for example, as public institutions and spaces; as forums or places of encounter between citizens young and old, where all citizens can come together for an important part of their lives; and as collaborative workshops full of potential and possibilities, which are capable of many collective purposes and projects of common interest and benefit, including democratic practice.

Within centres, democracy, collective choice and diversity can find expression and be practiced by children and adults, parents and practitioners in many ways, including:

**Decision-making:** this can range from small issues in daily life to larger matters such as designing the environment (see, for example, Clark, 2010) and deciding about project work (see, for example, Vecchi, 2010). Participation in formal governance bodies is more likely to be confined to adults in early childhood centres and the first years of school, gradually extending to include older children in schools. But all children can be active participants in other forms of decision-making, as too should be educators and parents – too often they are treated, like children, as passive and lacking competence.

**Learning:** pedagogical ideas and practices that presume predetermined, standardised and correct outcomes are, whatever the methods used, not conducive to democracy and diversity. Fortunately, we now have other ideas and practices to draw on that are conducive, because they see knowledge as produced through processes of co-construction and they value diverse perspectives and new and unexpected outcomes. For example, educators in the municipal schools for children from 1 to 6 years in Reggio Emilia speak of a ‘pedagogy of listening’ in which children create knowledge through processes of constructing, testing and reconstructing theories, in relation with others. Learning, as Rinaldi says,

does not take place by means of transmission or reproduction. It is a process of construction, in which each individual constructs for himself the reasons, the ‘whys’, the meanings of things, others, nature, events, reality and life. The learning process is certainly individual, but because the reasons, explanations, interpretations, and meanings of others are indispensable for our knowledge building, it is also a process of relations – a process of social construction. (Rinaldi, 2006, p.125).

**Evaluation:** this can be democratic when participatory forms are used, with evidence - documentation - subjected to interpretation, public deliberation and co-construction of meaning in forums that recognise and respect multiple and diverse perspectives. Experts have a role in this process, but do not regard themselves as having a privileged position “from which the final truth can be told and further discussion arrested”; instead they acknowledge that their science is “based on interpretation and is open for testing in relation to other interpretations and other research... no one voice, including that of the researcher may claim final authority” (Flyvbjerg, 2005). Such democratic, participatory evaluation involves a wide range of citizens who come together to make meaning in context and in relation to agreed values and goals. This ‘phronetic’ or common sense approach to evaluation rejects the key assumptions underpinning the cult of ‘evidence-based practice’, with its delegation of meaning making to experts.

**Contesting dominant discourses:** everyday democracy creates opportunities for contesting these discourses, which seek to shape our subjectivities and practices through their universal truth claims and their relationship with power. This democratic activity works at making core assumptions and values visible and contestable. Yeatman (1994) refers to it as ‘postmodern politics’ and offers examples such as a politics of difference, which contests those groups claiming a privileged position of objectivity on a contested subject. But we could extend the areas that are repoliticised as legitimate subjects for inclusive democratic dialogue and contestation, for example: the politics of childhood, about the image of the child, the good life and what we want for our children; the politics of education, about what education can and should be; and the politics of gender, in the nursery and the home. Facer (2011) takes this further by envisaging schools as places where communities can contest dominant discourses about the future – in particular the idea that more of the same is inevitable – and come together to imagine and build sustainable futures:

The local school, then, needs to act as a powerful democratic resource and public space that allows its students and communities to contest the visions of the future that they are being presented with, and to work together through the spaces of traditional and emergent democratic practice, to fight for viable futures for all (Facer [2011] p.15)

*Opening up for change:* it is through developing a critical approach to what exists and contesting dominant discourses that a fifth democratic activity can emerge: envisioning utopias and using them to provoke utopian action. Facer, with her idea of the school as a place “to fight for viable futures for all”, provides one example of such opening up for utopian change. (Facer 2011) Experimentation – with different paradigms, theories and practices – can play an important role in this process through realising the potential of diversity and working with new thinking, understandings and relationships. The Brazilian social thinker, Roberto Unger, argues for experimentation being imbued with democracy, or as he calls it ‘democratic experimentalism’:

The provision of public services must be an innovative collective practice, moving forward the qualitative provision of the services themselves. That can no longer happen in our current understanding of efficiency and production by the mechanical transmission of innovation from the top. It can only happen through the organisation of a collective experimental practice from below. ... Democracy is not just one more terrain for the institutional innovation that I advocate. It is the most important terrain.” (Unger, 2005a, pp. 179, 182)

For Unger, experimentation is an essential element of what he terms ‘high energy democracy’, which should include “vastly expanded opportunities to try out, in particular parts of the country or sectors of the economy, different ways of doing things” (Unger 2005b: 78). Government and early childhood centres can work together here if the former sees its democratic remit as promoting democratic experimentalism in the latter, believing (as Principle 6 says) that “services should be encouraged and supported to explore and experiment with diverse paradigms, theories and practices, to contest dominant discourses and create new thinking and ways of working.”

All forms of democracy – from formal democratic politics to democratic relationships among a nursery group - are important and welcome; it is not a case of ‘either/or’ but of ‘and... and... and’. For ultimately, the different levels and forms of democracy are inter-related and interdependent. A healthy democracy needs to be healthy in all its parts, with democratic government supporting everyday democracy in the nursery or school, and everyday democracy sustaining a healthy formal democracy.

## SOME EXPERIENCES OF DIVERSITY, CHOICE AND DEMOCRACY

### THE SWEDISH PRE-SCHOOL CURRICULUM: NATIONAL GOVERNMENT TAKING A LEAD ON DEMOCRACY

“Democracy forms the foundation of the pre-school. For this reason all pre-school activities should be carried out in accordance with fundamental democratic values”. This national commitment to democracy is not confined to Sweden. Wagner (2006) argues that democracy is central to the Nordic concept of the good childhood: “official policy documents and curriculum guidelines in the Nordic countries acknowledge a central expectation that preschools and schools will exemplify democratic principles and that children will be active participants in these democratic environments”.

### REGGIO EMILIA: AN EDUCATIVE COMMUNE WITH A DEMOCRATIC PROJECT

The world-famous early childhood services in this Italian city were founded on and continue to practice participatory democracy as a fundamental value. The Mayor at the time the city’s educational project began in the early 1960s speaks of a reaction to fascism which “had taught them that people who conformed and obeyed were dangerous, and that in building a new society it was imperative... to nurture and maintain a vision of children who can think and act for themselves” (Dahlberg, 2000, p.177). The project has been borne along by a vibrant democratic politics of education, based on political questions, the first and most important of which has been: what is our image of the child? The city’s answer has been the ‘rich’ child – “rich in potential, strong, powerful, competent and, most of all, connected to adults and other children” (Malaguzzi, 1993, p.10) – and the child as citizen and subject of rights.

Democratic participation – of children, parents, educators, other school staff, and other citizens – is “a value, an identifying feature of the entire experience, a way of viewing those involved in the educational process and the role of the school” (Cagliari et al, 2004, p.29). Learning (a pedagogy of listening) and evaluation (pedagogical documentation, see below) exemplify a democratic approach that respects and welcomes diversity and complexity. More generally, pedagogical practice has been based on “challenging and deconstructing dominant discourses; realizing the power of these discourses in shaping and governing our thoughts and actions... having the courage to think for themselves in constructing new

discourses... (and) building a new pedagogical project, foreground relationships and encounters, dialogue and negotiation, reflection and critical thinking” (Dahlberg et al., 2007, p.122). For more information, see *Children in Europe* No.6.

### GERMAN DEMOKRATIE LEBEN (DEMOCRACY LIVES) PROJECT: A LOCAL PROJECT TO PROMOTE DEMOCRACY IN CENTRES FOR UNDER 3S

This project was conducted in day nurseries in an east Germany town, working with very young children. At the heart of this project was respecting the autonomy of one and two-year-old children in everyday relationships and activities, for example feeding, changing nappies and planning activities for the day. What does respecting autonomy look like in practice?

Before changing a child’s diaper, one has to establish contact with the child and ask – if it is age appropriate – whether one should change his diaper now. This is not solely a yes/no question, it is rather used to talk the child through it and explain why changing the diaper is necessary from a certain point in time for hygiene. Children often don’t want to relinquish the content of their diapers immediately... (and then) there should be an agreement with the child, when the diaper will be changed. This point in time is accepted by the child and a postponement – even if it’s only a matter of minutes – is often enough to grant a child his autonomy and possibly gives him the opportunity to finish a game or an activity. This also lets the child feel included in the diaper-changing situation (Priebe, quoted in George, 2009, p.12)

Democratic relations involve developing negotiating skills:

The teacher negotiates with the children what they should do in the afternoon. This shows that negotiating means more than just voting. When the vote decides, the majority is always content but in a worst case scenario almost half the group is unhappy or – like in this example – only two children. But two discontented children are already two too many. The goals of negotiation processes are that nobody is left behind or sidelined... Negotiation until a consensus is reached is, naturally, a perfected art. But it is always worth trying (ibid., p.14).

The conclusion of the project’s evaluator is “that the basis for a democratic everyday culture can indeed already be formed in the day nursery” (ibid).

### THE MOSAIC APPROACH: GIVING YOUNG CHILDREN A VOICE

This approach offers a way of working that can support participatory democratic practice with even the youngest of children, enabling them to contribute to processes of collective decision-making. Inspired by pedagogical documentation, the Mosaic approach has been used for a range of purposes, including to understand better how children experience life in the nursery (the main question being ‘what does it mean to be in this place?’) and to enable the participation by young children in the design of new buildings and outdoor spaces (Clark, 2010). It uses a range of verbal and visual tools (e.g. cameras, tours, mapmaking, observation, child conferencing) to generate documentation with children: these methods include observation, child interviewing, photography (by children themselves), and tours and map making. The documentation so generated is then subject to review, reflection and discussion by children and adults – a process of interpretation or meaning making. The Mosaic approach is premised on an image of the ‘rich child’ – experts in their own lives, skilful communicators, active participants and meaning makers.

### PEDAGOGICAL DOCUMENTATION: DIALOGUING EVERYTHING WITH EVERYONE

In pedagogical documentation, practice and learning processes are made visible. Visibility can be achieved in many ways: through notes or observation of children’s work, videos or photographs, taped conversations, children’s drawings or constructions – the possibilities are almost endless. These are then subject – in relationship with others - to discussion, reflection, interpretation and, if necessary, democratic evaluation and decision making: so key features are visibility, multiple perspectives, dialogue and the co-construction of meanings (for fuller discussions of pedagogical documentation see Dahlberg et al., 2007; Rinaldi, 2005). Originating in early childhood centres in Northern Italy, particularly in the city of Reggio Emilia, pedagogical documentation has since been taken up in many countries, both in Europe and beyond. Pedagogical documentation has a central role to play in many facets of the early childhood centre: planning pedagogical work; evaluation as meaning making; professional development; research by children and adults; and ensuring that new knowledge created from evaluation, professional development and research is shared as a common good. Cross-cutting these particular

uses, is the contribution of pedagogical documentation to democratic practice in the early childhood institution.

Loris Malaguzzi, one of the great pedagogical thinkers of the last century and the first director of the early childhood services in Reggio Emilia, saw documentation in this democratic light, as his biographer Alfredo Hoyuelos writes:

Behind this practice, I believe, is the ideological and ethical concept of a transparent school and transparent education... A political idea also emerges, which is that what schools do must have public visibility... Documentation in all its different forms also represents an extraordinary tool for dialogue, for exchange, for sharing. For Malaguzzi it means the possibility to discuss and to dialogue “everything with everyone” (teachers, auxiliary staff, cooks, families, administrators and citizens... [S]haring opinions by means of documentation presupposes being able to discuss real, concrete things – not just theories or words, about which it is possible to reach easy and naïve agreement (Hoyuelos, 2004, p.7).

Carlina Rinaldi, Malaguzzi’s successor as director of Reggio Emilia’s services, similarly speaks of documentation as democratic practice: “Sharing the documentation means participation in a true act of democracy, sustaining the culture and visibility of childhood, both inside and outside the school: democratic participation, or ‘participant democracy’, that is a product of exchange and visibility” (Rinaldi, 2006, p. 59).

#### BABOES: A PLACE OF ENCOUNTER IN BRUSSELS

The main idea of Baboes is to create a meeting space for parents and their children where they can simply ‘breeze in and out’ and meet each other in an informal way. For the children there are safe and stimulating play possibilities, and they can get in touch with other children. Parents can have a cup of coffee and talk, sharing their experiences with other parents. Baboes is open for all parents and presents opportunities to meet people from other cultures and backgrounds. It does not only provide support for parents and for the development of the children; it also serves to create more connections within the neighbourhood, generating social cohesion as well. A fundamental working principle is ‘free dialogue’: there is no set programme, no list of issues to discuss. The parents themselves decide if they wish to talk and if so, what they talk about and can get some guidance from the staff when they want. There is

no set agenda and it is not targeted at a certain group of parents or at specified problems. Baboes operates in the space between the private and the public sphere and takes up a mixture of functions: parenting support, stimulating children’s development, as well as community building. This meeting space shows how children can be the binding element between parents.

#### SHEFFIELD CHILDREN’S CENTRE; DIVERSITY ‘THE NORM NOT THE EXCEPTION’

Started in a northern English city in the early 1980s as a local community initiative, the Centre has grown to provide a wide range of services for hundreds of children and young people from infancy to 18 years, as well as their families, in an inner city area of economic disadvantage. The Centre, run as a co-operative, provides a range of ‘core’ services, including early childhood education and care and free-time and play services for school-age children, but also a variety of other services for families in its local community and beyond, many of whom are from minority ethnic backgrounds: health services, language workshops, a contact centre where children can meet parents from whom they are separated, support for terminally ill children and parents, adult training opportunities, an advocacy, welfare rights and legal support service, and many more besides. As well as more formalised services, the Centre’s workers provide important support by ‘walking alongside’ families in difficulty, as this family vignette illustrates:

I came to the centre for help with domestic violence. They found us a refuge and went back to the house to get our things. My husband left the country after this and they found us a house in Sheffield and helped us furnish it. They got us school placements and gave us a baby place at their nursery and got me a place on an access course in college. My children go to the violence support group. Everyone knows it’s the place to go for help. They never turn anyone away. The centre has kept us alive and safe and it has helped get over the violence. He would have killed us. In our community there is no escape and it is expected women stay with their husbands. The centre gave us a different path to escape and the centre’s cultural workers made it OK with our community. (Broadhead, Meleady and Delgado 2008: 36–37; see this reference for many other family vignettes and a fuller description and analysis of the work of the Centre).

Underpinning this work is a strong commitment to diversity (most unusually, it has a mixed-gender workforce with almost equal numbers of men and women,

but diversity covers many other dimensions including ethnicity, language, sexual orientation, age and disability, see *Children in Europe* no.2); to children's rights; to equal opportunities; and to democracy, building on its original and continuing co-operative status.

[The Centre's identity] reflects the desire of ordinary people to influence social change based on local demands. The centre began because local people expressed concerns about the cultural inappropriateness of a mainstream provision close by and it grew because its aim was to reflect diversity in all its practices. This aspiration has been its strength and its greatest challenge and locates the centre, as described by Dahlberg and Moss (2005: 171) as 'a site for democratic practice and minor politics' (Broadhead, Meleady and Delgado, 2008, p. 3)

## NEXT STEPS

### POLITICAL COMMITMENT

The EU and member states should recognise, celebrate and actively support democracy as a fundamental value, and the importance of diverse traditions, diverse perspectives and diverse practices in early childhood education and care. Policy and other official documents should address political questions, adopt critical thinking, acknowledge the existence of alternatives, and resist treating early childhood education and care as an essentially technical subject to which experts can supply right answers. Respecting and responding to diversity requires turning away from pursuing a pedagogy of standardisation and a technology of normalisation.

Policy documents should explicitly discuss social constructions or images of the child, the educator and the early childhood centre, choosing constructions or images that are supportive of democracy and working with diversity.

### DEMOCRATIC EXPERIMENTALISM

The EU and member states should give active support for democratic experimentation and innovation in early childhood education and care, including pedagogical work with new theoretical perspectives, the development of democratic practices (including learning and evaluation), and approaches that welcome and work with diversity.

### ACCESS

The EU and member states should adopt universal access to early childhood education and care (Principle 1) as a right of citizenship. To make universal access a meaningful reality, services should be responsive to the needs of all children and families and should be able to welcome and work productively with all children and families (i.e. diversity is the norm). This is incompatible with making attendance compulsory; high levels of attendance should be derived from making services responsive and welcoming.

### CURRICULA

The EU and member states should work to develop curricula that support democracy and diversity. As a starting point, curricula should explicitly acknowledge democracy and diversity as fundamental values. A curriculum for a democratic and community-oriented early childhood education should also include substantial scope for local input and design, what the Royal Society of Arts in London has termed an 'Area Based Curriculum', which uses "the local area to illustrate curriculum content, and [uses] local stakeholders (including young people) to co-design the curriculum... supporting schools to partner with organisations or groups from the local area to design aspects of the curriculum utilising the local area as a resource" (Thomas, 2011 p.298). Such thinking underlay the approach to curriculum in the municipal Citizen Schools in the Brazilian city of Porto Alegre, where curriculum transformation was deemed "a crucial part of Porto Alegre's project to build 'thick democracy' and where "the starting point for the construction of curricular knowledge is the culture(s) of the communities themselves, not only in terms of content, but in terms of perspective as well" (Gandin and Apple, forthcoming).

### WORKFORCE

The EU and member states should work to develop basic and continuing education for early childhood workers that introduces them to democracy as a fundamental value and practice, and to the importance and potential of diversity (of people, paradigms, theories and understandings).

Early childhood workforces should, as far as possible, reflect the group diversity of the populations they serve, while emphasising also the singularity of group members and the complexity of individual identities. For instance,

there should be a short-term goal of 20% men workers (for 2020), rising to 40% - but without the language of *the* male role model, which denies the diversity of masculinities.

#### RESEARCH AND EVALUATION

The EU and member states should support research to gain a better understanding of how to create an early childhood education based on democracy as a fundamental value, with the capacity to make collective choice, and diversity enacted in all aspects of pedagogical work. One important component in such research is the identification and study of critical case studies – countries, communities and services that have sought to work with democracy and diversity. Methods of evaluating systems and services for democracy and diversity are needed, which incorporate these values in the ways they operate.

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