

Diversity and Social Inclusion: Exploring Competences for Professional Practice in Early Childhood Education and Care



All children and adults
have **the right**
to evolve and to develop
in a context where there is
equity and **respect**
for **diversity**



Researched and developed by the Joint DECET/ISSA Working group on Professionalism”

DECET (Diversity in Early Childhood Education and Training), a European network that represents organisations working in the field of early childhood education and care in Belgium, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, the Netherlands, England, Scotland and Spain.

DECET members have common goals about valuing diversity in early childhood education and training. DECET aims to promote and research the principle of democratic early childhood education and care (ECEC), acknowledging the multiple (cultural and other) identities of children and families. The Network views early childhood provision as a safe place where people can learn from each other across cultural and other borders and as a public space where prejudices and discrimination can be effectively addressed.

DECET works to achieve their goals by:

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

Further information: www.decet.org

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ISSA (International Step by Step Association) connects professionals and organisations working in the field of early childhood development and education. ISSA represents 29 non-governmental organisations (NGOs) based in Central and Eastern Europe, Central Asia and the Caribbean: Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Estonia, Georgia, Haiti, Hungary, Kazakhstan, Kosovo, Kyrgyzstan, Latvia, Lithuania, Macedonia, Moldova, Mongolia, Montenegro, Romania, Russia, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Tajikistan, Ukraine and Uzbekistan.

ISSA's overarching goal is to promote inclusive, quality care and education experiences that create the conditions for all children to become active members of democratic knowledge societies. ISSA does this through: raising awareness of the importance of quality care and education; developing resources; disseminating information; advocating; strengthening alliances and building capacity to create conditions where all children thrive. Further information: www.issa.nl

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Exploring Competences
for Professional Practice for
Early Childhood and Care



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Foreword

The development of the Early Childhood Education and Care profession is an ongoing process that has recently begun to gather momentum. Professional associations are being developed in several European countries. Other countries can learn from their journey. One of the first tasks in defining a profession is agreeing shared values. What do Early Childhood professionals stand for? What competences are needed in the many roles undertaken by those working with children? The sector has to have these conversations so that it can establish the way forward.

The early childhood workforce and the quality of early childhood practice is determined by many factors including the competences of all those involved in the sector. One of the key competences needed in ECEC is linked to the goal of achieving social justice through actively addressing diversity, equality and social inclusion. However, for some countries there is a huge barrier in asking Early Childhood workers to engage in social justice work in their practice when they experience inequality in their profession. The continuing development of the profession must go hand in hand with the wider work of achieving social justice for all children, families and communities.

This publication is an important step in this work of defining the competences needed in supporting diversity and social inclusion and in working as a professional in Early Childhood Education and Care. The inclusion of quotes from practice is illuminating. Those working in ECEC seem to have an openness to grow and learn with the children and families in their services. These competences challenge the profession to explore personal and collective values and holistically embrace diversity and social inclusion.

As the ECEC sector grows in confidence across Europe the journey towards respect for diversity is essential for training and practice. There will be arguments and discussions which should be encouraged in a healthy profession. By putting forward the competences outlined in this publication the DECET and ISSA Networks are to be congratulated in leading this dialogue.

Warmest wishes to all those who will engage with this document in the journey of our profession.

Kathryn O’Riordan,
Association of Childcare Professionals (Ireland)

Introduction

Equity and respect for diversity from a professional perspective

All children and adults have the right to evolve and to develop in a context where there is equity and respect for diversity. Children, parents and educators have the right to good quality in early childhood education services, free from any form of - overt and covert, individual and structural - discrimination due to their race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national, ethnic or social origin, property, disability, birth or other status (Article 2, UN-Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989)

The work of DECET and ISSA is framed by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Both networks advocate for 'high' quality early childhood provision which acknowledges and respects diversity and promotes equality for each child. This booklet was created to highlight the need for professional ECEC communities to recognise, respect and embrace diversity and equality as part of their ECEC professional engagement. DECET and ISSA recognise the complexities of embarking on a journey which actively promotes diversity and equality to the 'highest' standards.

Acknowledging that ECEC practitioners are at various stages on their journey in this area, DECET and ISSA invited a variety of ECEC practitioners working with diversity to participate in completing a questionnaire and interview process focusing on their practice and experience. We asked them what they thought was important for meeting the needs of diverse communities with respect and recognition, love, care and solidarity, alongside the challenge of addressing discrimination and inequality. We further explored what practitioners thought was significant for practice. Our aim was to draw on the collective expertise and experience of practitioners internationally, and in so doing, highlight not only the complexity but also the possibilities within the ECEC sector in addressing diversity and equality issues. By crossing borders and learning from each other, ECEC providers can enhance ECEC provision throughout Europe and beyond.

What do we mean by competence?

Words have different meanings or definitions in different languages and contexts. Concepts such as diversity, equality, critical reflection, for example, are complex. In this booklet we define these terms and in particular draw attention to the word *competence*. Here, *competence* means having the ability to demonstrate professional qualities. (see Working Definitions pg 33)

The quality of ECEC depends on competent practitioners like the ones who have contributed to this booklet. Quite often, we associate the term 'competence' with the qualities of an individual practitioner, something that can be acquired through training and professional preparation. The difficulty with this concept is that it is rather narrow. Especially in the English language context where 'being competent' (a fully human attribute) is often reduced to 'competencies' – a series of discrete skills and pieces of knowledge that individuals are expected to 'possess' in order to perform a particular task. In this booklet we use the term 'competence' in a much broader, systemic understanding. It includes individuals and teams, the institutions they work in and the pedagogical and political support systems around them. At the level of the individual practitioner, being and becoming 'competent' is a continuous process that comprises the ability to *build on* and contribute to a body of professional knowledge, acquire both practical and reflective skills, and develop a professional *attitude*.

From the beginning of our discussions in this working group, we have looked at 'competence', not only from the perspective of individual practitioners, but from a systemic, 'bigger picture' point of view. Our perspective is supported by the recent CORE study (competence requirements in early childhood education and care) that has shown that the quality of the early childhood workforce and the quality of early childhood practices is determined by many factors, including the competence

of individuals at all levels of the early child-hood system (practitioners, managers, trainers, policy makers...) and a whole range of systemic criteria.

These include, for instance, good working conditions that reduce staff turnover, continuous pedagogical support to document and critically reflect on one's own practices, and co-constructing pedagogy in a process of combining theory and practice. While it is important to have a 'body of knowledge' and 'practical skills', practitioners and teams also need reflective competences as they work in highly complex, unpredictable and diverse contexts.

A key finding of CORE is that 'competence' in the early childhood education and care context has to be understood as a characteristic of the entire early childhood system. The 'competent system' develops in reciprocal relationships between individuals, teams, institutions and the wider socio-political context. A 'competent system' requires possibilities for *all* staff to engage in joint learning and critical reflection. This includes sufficient paid time for these activities.

In this booklet, we describe core competences for professional practice in working with diversity and equality in early childhood education and care, suggest more detailed criteria for how to realise them in practice, and illustrate our suggestions with quotes provided by practitioners.

Do we need specific knowledge and competences to work with diversity and equality?

Practitioners sometimes perceive diversity and equality issues as relevant only when talking about working with new communities and cultures. In this booklet we see diversity and equality as relevant to the diversity in society, both majority and minority, and linked directly to individual and group identities.

When practitioners start working with children and parents of diverse cultures, backgrounds and abilities they can experience uncertainty, culture shock, fear and discomfort. They might think they are not adequately prepared, that they lack specific knowledge, skills and competences to address the situation. Or they might think that they don't need new skills or competences at all. They treat 'all people the same' and people just need to get on with it. Both types of situations arise in everyday practice. Practitioners in the same service may even have varying views as to how to address diversity and equality.

Examples:

- When a day care centre welcomes a child with additional needs and his/her family, practitioners often feel they need very specific medical knowledge and skills to deal with the particular special requirements of this child.
- If a pre-school wants to organise training on intercultural themes, they may think it is crucial to learn about new cultures and what are perceived as the challenging issues of culture or religion such as 'Islam'. Or perhaps they feel that intercultural training should focus on addressing how communities such Roma or Traveller need to adjust and fit into the society. They may perceive this as being the best option for Travellers and Roma in the long run.
- If issues arise regarding gender play, some practitioners may feel that addressing gender is a bigger societal issue. They may feel there is nothing that can be done about it in pre-school, as parents have their own views on such matters (boys dressing up in dresses when playing may be frowned upon in some families).

These examples give rise to the question whether specific knowledge, skills and competences regarding diversity and equality need to be acquired by practitioners as part of their professional development. What we know is that diversity and equality information is often perceived as 'expert' or 'specialist' knowledge on a given subject. Practitioners in ECEC settings can often feel they are ill

equipped or missing something and hence need specialist input. In reality, services are dealing with diverse issues, families and communities every day; therefore it is our view that, between handing over responsibility to external experts or simply ignoring the issue, we can find competence.

Recognising that practitioners can be confused or feel insecure in addressing diversity and equality in their new journey in ECEC, we wanted to find out what experienced practitioners think. Do they believe there is a need for specific knowledge and competences in order to work in a context of diversity and inclusion? Their views are provided here.

What do practitioners think?

Through the questionnaire and interviews carried out with experienced practitioners, we collected their reflections and opinions on working with diversity and equality. We found that practitioners recognised the need for competences that were generally respectful of all children and families and of good practice. However they also talked about the need for specific knowledge that was relevant to their context and not necessarily 'expert' led.

The practitioners we spoke to worked in different countries, varied political, social, economic and cultural contexts and diverse working conditions. Regardless of these circumstances and their various qualifications, backgrounds and identities, they outlined the following fundamental and essential competences for ECEC providers in addressing diversity and equality issues:

- **willing to accept diversity in society and respecting other ways of being**
- **being non-judgemental**
- **having an open mind**
- **having empathy and understanding**
- **showing flexibility and adaptability**
- **being sensitive (aware of children's and parents' needs) and responsive (act on this awareness)**
- **supporting a sense of belonging**
- **having enthusiasm: being engaged and motivated**
- **being creative in order to find alternative solutions and approaches**
- **showing warmth and being loving.**

These competences represent the baseline and preconditions for high quality practice and professional engagement. It goes without saying that to work in a diverse context, a warm and empathic professional attitude is vital. However, the question is: can we say an empathetic attitude is more important than mastering specific knowledge or skills? The practitioners we spoke with seemed to focus on the more conceptual and attitudinal qualities rather than the more practical skills. This is an important emphasis which *should not be taken for granted*. On the other hand, there may be a further message in this: the fact that practitioners are repeatedly talking about these qualities may well indicate that they represent a constant challenge, even for very experienced professionals.

The challenge extends to the process of producing this booklet; a co-construction in itself. We collected practitioners' views, discussed our findings in the working group, drew on research on professionalism in early childhood¹ and the DECET and ISSA frameworks. Often, we argued within a similar dilemma facing practitioners: are the competences needed for working with diversity and equality in early childhood *generic* or *specialist*? Is an empathetic, interested, respectful and generally *professional attitude* more important, or *specialist knowledge*? A combination of both is vital, the practitioners in our study strongly suggest. We agree.

¹ Moss, P. (2008). The democratic and reflective professional: rethinking and reforming the early years workforce. In L. Miller & C. Cable (Eds.), Professionalism in the Early Years (pp. 121-130). Hodder: Arnold.
Urban, M. (2008). Dealing with uncertainty: challenges and possibilities for the early childhood profession. European Early Childhood Education Research Journal, 16(2), 135-152.
Peeters, J. & Vandenbroeck, M. (2011). Child care practitioners and the Process of professionalization. In L. Miller & C. Cable (Eds.), Professionalization and Management in the Early Years (pp.62-74). London.

What do DECET and ISSA strive for?

The DECET network advocates for early childhood education and care services and communities where everyone:

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

The ISSA network supports professional communities in order to develop a strong civil society that influences and assists decision makers to:

- provide high quality care and educational services for all children from birth through primary school (birth - 10 years old), with a focus on the poorest and most disadvantaged
- ensure greater family and community participation in children's development and learning
- ensure social inclusion and respect for diversity.

The competences presented in this document, while drawn from the DECET and ISSA frameworks, are also informed by what practitioners think is important when working with diversity and equality in practice.

How can you use this document?

This booklet is not offering a standard list of competences that practitioners need to acquire in order to work in a context of diversity and inclusion. Instead we wish to present this booklet as a dynamic document that is open for discussion and critical reflection. We invite you to use it as a tool to raise issues of interest and challenge and explore the ideas, competences, personal testimonials and examples of good practice in your settings.

This booklet can be used to:

- engage in discussions in your team in the day care centre, family day care centre, out of school care centre and pre-school.
- support in-service training and pre-service training by using this tool to engage in critical reflection with students and practitioners on their professional role in addressing diversity and equality. It can support educational institutions during the development of their curriculum.
- inform interested policy makers, academics, practitioners and parents about how professionalism in the early childhood sector; with a focus on diversity and equality, can be addressed. It is also relevant for educational and social care situations.
- Inspire practitioners, educators, pedagogues and teachers in practice.

The booklet draws on the DECET principles and ISSA mission. For reference, please see the DECET booklet '*Making Sense of Good Practice*' (www.decet.org/makingsenseofgoodpractice) and the ISSA document '*Competence Educators of the 21st Century: ISSA Principles of Quality Pedagogy*'. (www.issa.nl/resources)

Working towards social change



Practitioners:

- are aware that services for young children are intrinsically linked to the broader society. Interactions and relations that emerge in services are a reflection of what is happening in that wider community.
- understand that society is constantly evolving. Children, parents and staff are products of their society and local communities, as are services for young children. Therefore practitioners cannot be static or complacent. They need to be vigilant and continually adapt their practice accordingly. This process is ongoing and in fact never ends.
- appreciate that some children, parents and colleagues have no voice in society and face discrimination. Professionals in services for young children work consciously to create conditions so that everyone has the right to be heard and experience respect, recognition, solidarity and care and a sense of belonging.
- feel comfortable about experimenting with and introducing new practices and ideas.

"The essence of our job is to be restless, daring, enterprising, dynamic and curious in tackling daily practice. Moreover we value and include new ways of working." (Spain)

"Educators are open to change in terms of adapting and learning, as the population of the daycare centre continuously changes." (Mexico)

"For me, as an educator, it is important to sensitise the broader community to the rights and needs of families living in disadvantaged communities. To mobilise, address human rights with a view to solving problems. Simultaneously we need to do it with respect for the privacy of each family and only if the family agrees." (Serbia)

"We have to be brave enough to question our own views and professional practices. In doing this we need to reflect on the role that day care centres play in society. We also need to be aware of the importance of equal opportunities for each child and family, and how we understand and implement that in our practice." (France)

"Professionals working with diversity need to have an awareness of the power and privilege of the dominant group and the difficulties faced by some minority groups in society. You should understand that there is a knock on effect on opportunities and experience." (Ireland)



"For educators it is a requirement to be in constant search for and to create innovation in the pre-school and local society." (Morocco)

"If I work with Traveller children, I try to learn about what the Traveller family chooses to offer about their culture. It is vital to have an ability to change your opinion and accept new viewpoints." (Ireland)

"In some cases (e.g. if parents speak a different language than the dominant language in a region), we as professionals need to work as advocates to help parents to access the appropriate services they are entitled to." (Scotland)

"I think it is important to reflect on how society influences the life circumstances of a parent; which means recognising that the situation some parents find themselves in is not necessarily of their making. Social engagement in terms of a willingness to break through the existing societal structures (e.g. discrimination) is a necessary approach in ECEC." (Belgium)

"The mission of a service and the staff team needs to take into account the societal shifts and changes that influence families where children are growing up." (France)

Open communication and dialogue



Practitioners:

- develop and enhance their practice through open communication and dialogue. Recognising the challenges, practitioners engage in a two-way process where everybody (children, parents, staff) has the right to express their ideas and feelings. Practitioners pro-actively nourish this dialogue, rather than dominating it with their own views or expertise.
- facilitate dialogue through active listening without judgement. Practitioners seek to ask appropriate and relevant questions and are not afraid to be challenged by the answers.
- create a safe environment where everybody feels free to express their views and opinions and to contribute to the development of services for the children. Practitioners recognise the need for trust and are able to build that trust through creating safety in interactions.
- are aware that some children and parents are denied their voice in society and consequently rarely experience respectful reciprocal dialogue. Practitioners consciously take the initiative to enable ongoing engagement. Some children and parents will not naturally tend to express themselves because of their cultural context or as a consequence of their experience in society.
- appreciate that dialogue consists of more than words and make adjustments so that they can communicate nonverbally.

"I try to be a good listener and take sufficient time to understand people. Therefore, I want to learn alternative ways of communicating and I ask multilingual colleagues and parents to help me in my communications with children and parents." (France)

"Curiosity can be positive, but it has its boundaries. When I first meet refu-gees, I prefer to take a 'waiting' approach. If people want to tell their story, they will. This goes for any situation. Moreover you can only take action when parents agree." (Belgium)

"Practitioners working with children with additional support requirements need to engage in dialogue with parents and other practitioners to develop an understanding of the ways to best support each individual child's development. It is really important to think of the child's rights as opposed to needs, and to feel confident to challenge the deficit model. The practitioner must feel confident enough to be an advocate for the child." (England)

"Open mindedness towards children, parents, colleagues from different backgrounds (e.g. cultural, socio-economic) is required; we should not be afraid of what we do not understand." (Serbia)



"If I work with families where the parents are divorced, it's necessary to work and talk with both parents in order to respond to the needs of the child. I maintain a certain balance between personal engagement and maintaining a personal distance and I avoid gossiping or making negative comments about the other parent or any parent." (France)

"In our team we discuss a lot of situations related to children and families. We consider the shared characteristics and the differences between each child and family. For instance, for Mothers Day, we suggested to Robert, who has two mothers, that he makes two presents; one for each of his mums." (The Netherlands)

"I take the initiative and always try to communicate with parents in a way that is understandable. Starting out, I look for the best way to make contact with parents. This can require a lot of creativity while communicating. It is not something found in books; you just have to do it. It doesn't matter if the language you use is not perfect." (Belgium)

"Sometimes, for instance, Traveller families don't want their children's identity known in the setting. Taking the time to explore and support their understanding of why and how to support a child's identity is useful. Sometimes this takes a lot of time and reassurance because Traveller parents are afraid their child will be singled out and discriminated against in the setting." (Ireland)

"In my opinion it is important to create spaces where parents feel welcome and safe. By inviting parents to participate in the centre and sharing things together, you consequently create spaces for reciprocal dialogue with parents." (Belgium)

"You always need to be open and try to find out why parents are not engaging with the service or communicating their issues. If you have been oppressed and discriminated against in society it is hard to trust the dominant group. Building trust is everything; it helps you as a practitioner to ensure that the marginalised child in society has a voice and space in your service." (Ireland)

competence 3

Critical reflection: exploring complex issues from various angles



Practitioners:

- understand that every child, parent, colleague has his/her own history and experiences, norms and values. They recognise and appreciate that families have different beliefs, ideas and approaches to situations.
- are aware of how their own experiences, norms and attitudes affect how they deliver their service. Hence practitioners are able to 'critically' reflect (see Working Definitions) on how their background and perspectives influence the way they perceive, acknowledge and work with different people from various cultural contexts and backgrounds.
- know how to build empathic relationships with children, parents and colleagues. Through their own personal exploration they learn to understand and appreciate the feelings, needs and opinions of others even if they are in conflict with their values and they disagree with the views expressed.
- show a genuine interest in the perspectives of others while respecting their privacy. They actively seek out the opinions of others and explore different viewpoints in order to improve their practice.

"As a professional you have to ask yourself about the deeper meanings in life, and explore what it says about yourself as a person and then the other as a person." (The Netherlands)

"It is useful for practitioners to have knowledge of asylum seeker and refugee status in Ireland: having empathy and being aware of the stresses and difficulties facing families in a new culture and language. Also being sensitive to their distance from their extended family is important for working with respect and recognition and in solidarity with people." (Ireland)

"When you work with blended families, it's helpful to have knowledge of the judicial regulations, parental authority, the right of the legal guardian and especially, be well informed about the family situation." (France)

"I know for a fact that social networks for single mothers are often limited. As a practitioner, I try to verify if this is the case for a particular mother and then offer information and support." (Belgium)



"It's vital that we know why we do certain things and what's more, that we put the wellbeing of each child at the centre of our thinking. In so doing we deepen our skills and knowledge, our professionalism, and continuously adapt our methods of working." (France)

"In my opinion the training of future professionals should pay attention to the precept: what you don't know is more than what you do know. Nothing in our profession is black and white, which underlines the need for curiosity. No quick judgments; the intention and the effect of any action are important." (The Netherlands)

"I think these areas of sexual orientation and gender are made more difficult because there has not been as much attention to exploring our attitudes and unspoken values; there is a sense I have that these areas are more "testing" for staff to discuss. They seem to bring feelings of discomfort which are not easy to be open about in a group, as they can feel quite personal." (Ireland)

"To create an open and thorough communication with both the parents and the team, I learned how to say what I am actually thinking respectfully. This goes for anything, both positive situations and more complex matters." (Belgium)

"OK, I would accept same-sex parents, but I'm afraid that my tradition and upbringing would affect my behaviour. We would have to talk a lot as a team in order to share feelings and biases and explore how we all feel about same sex parents." (Serbia)

"I come from a disadvantaged family. In team meetings I use my experience to start discussions with my colleagues about how to deal with situations with disadvantaged families. For instance when they have 'forgotten' to bring nappies, I look deeper into their situation and challenge team members to look beyond the nappies." (Belgium)

Learning from disagreements



Practitioners:

- are aware that disagreements represent a natural part of life and can easily occur when people from different backgrounds meet.
- are not afraid of disagreements and have the capability to work with the situation in a constructive way without taking the conflicting view personally. When practitioners face situations, norms and values which are new and unfamiliar, they recognise the challenge but they are able to react without frustration or hostility. As professionals, they deal constructively with ambiguity and uncertainty.
- realise that a confrontation is not about who is right or wrong. They look for common understandings so compromises and mutually agreed solutions can be achieved.
- when faced with their own strong emotions, can share their feelings and reflect on their reactions with their colleagues and team without fear of reprisal.
- know their own limitations and strengths. Humour and self-awareness are important qualities in any work situation. Practitioners know not to take themselves too seriously.
- know that they don't have all the answers.
- value disagreements as learning opportunities for improving practice.

"Good communication with children, parents and colleagues means being able to listen and talk, being at ease with words and having the capacity to negotiate." (Mexico)

"I start by respecting what each person has to offer and I make sure that the roles of all are validated. A willingness to listen and to be open, to discuss issues that arise, is crucial." (Ireland)

"In order to promote father and male carer participation in a female dominated ECEC environment, we need practitioners who are willing to preserve their sense of humour. Practitioners who are thick skinned enough to accept when their efforts might not be successful." (Scotland)



"Sometimes families think they are being discriminated against because of their background and culture when they are not. This can cause conflict. Being diversity aware in the development of your mission statement and in your policy development is essential. Equality proofing your admissions procedures etc. will make sure you are not inadvertently discriminating against a family trying to access your service." (Ireland)

"In working with diverse families I need to put things into perspective. This requires perseverance." (Belgium)

"Sometimes staff don't want to discuss diversity for fear of showing some personal prejudice. They feel such a discussion may jeopardise their position in the job or cause other staff to be critical of them." (Ireland)

"It's necessary to think and be clear about what can be transformed and what cannot. Adopting a healthy balance between personal engagement and professional distance is my professional attitude. I then can always remain calm and analyse the risks before acting." (Spain)

competence 5

Co-constructing new practice and knowledge with children, parents and colleagues



Practitioners:

- can be researchers. By seeking out common understandings and compromises via dialogue, practitioners continuously develop in how they work with children, parents and other colleagues. Moreover they are better able to share the knowledge gained.
- are aware that knowledge does not only come from books. Professionals are capable of constructing new ways of working by combining knowledge created with children, parents and colleagues, together with socio-pedagogical, psychological, anthropological, economic, political and environmental knowledge acquired through literature or training.
- are willing to give parents, children and workers a chance to voice their ideas
- know that the western view on early childhood is not the only view of childhood in a world of increased globalisation.
- are willing to learn from children, parents, colleagues and their community.
- rely on the involvement of others to help develop new practice, so that everybody feels recognised and respected and involved in the process. Co-constructing new knowledge and enhancing the practice is not a solo activity.
- can deal with uncertainty. They feel comfortable exploring unknown paths and know that a process can lead to something worthwhile.

"We ask the parents for pet words or nicknames that they use with their child. We try our best to say these words in the child's native language so that they hear familiar sounds when they are with us. We also search for things that are recognisable for the child, such as music from their native country. This is extremely important to support the child to adjust and to give the child a sense of belonging." (Belgium)

"Most importantly, I'm aware in the work with all parents and children that I don't know all the answers. I know that I need to build the most appropriate practice in collaboration with parents and children so it respects different perspectives." (England)



"In order to promote father and male carer participation in a female dominated ECEC environment, it's essential to be flexible and willing to try alternative methods." (Scotland)

"When I work with children with special requirements I acquire knowledge about the identity of the child from their parents in relation to what supports their child's needs." (Ireland)

"In my opinion practitioners are creative and have energy to search for compromises. For example there was a child that needed to be held all the time. This was not always practical in the setting. After several conversations with the parents, we came up with an idea to install a hanging cradle so that the child was comfortable and safe." (Belgium)

"I changed my practice thanks to working side by side with the pedagogic assistant (Roma teaching assistant). The biggest change was that I started listening and hearing before making decisions or hastily passing judgements. I see now that we don't always want to see the important things around us." (Serbia)

"I realised I was not recognising the qualities and knowledge of the Traveller child. His experiences were not present in the setting. Then we did the Family Wall and the other children saw his horses and he began to name the various types of horses and share his knowledge. I changed the environment to ensure his interests were evident and he could express himself." (Ireland)

"The intense collaboration with parents starts with the intake procedure when the parents show us how they deal with the important issues for their child. In the past, we only explained how we were working in the setting, now we ask the parents: how do you want us to care for your children?" (Belgium)

Voices from the field

Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) is a both a challenging and reward-ing profession. Practitioners who contributed to this booklet highlighted the dilemmas, challenges, rewards and joys they face in their work to support the diversity and complexity of the children and families they seek to serve. They also shared their dreams and vision for their work through the interviews.



Our hopes and dreams

- The child should always be the focus
- Have love for working with children and parents
- Passion for the job
- Curiosity and hunger to learn
- A vision for society
- Practitioners should be proud of this important work
- Empathy is vital
- Social engagement is important and for challenging power issues
- Being an activist: a readiness to take action
- Developing democratic consciousness
- Giving the silenced a voice
- Being enthusiastic: an idealist
- When professionals are treated with respect they start to believe they can make a difference

“As a professional I see myself as the ambassador for the child and I hope that all professionals see themselves in this role.” (The Netherlands)

“You need to have love for the job, working with children, parents and the local community. Often I try to think consciously about the meaningful role we have in a child’s life and how we can give added value.” (Belgium)

“As a practitioner you can learn a lot of knowledge and skills in school. Still you need to integrate these within yourself and really believe in them to be a professional.” (Belgium)

“I want to see change within the profession. I want to see diversity and equality as an integral part of pre and in-service training. Many practitioners still do not understand that power and discrimination have a negative impact on many children’s lives and that they can play their part in ECEC to support the development of society.” (Ireland)

“I think it’s important for practitioners to never stop wanting to learn.” (Morocco)

“Hopefully other professionals will discover and recognise the richness of diversity and see it as an opportunity to develop democratic principles in the broader population.” (Spain)

“My experience is that, as I work in a variety of settings, I am open to diversity and that doors have opened for me as well. If you are not open to diverse children and families, you can’t really progress in your work.” (Belgium)

“It is necessary to dignify the ECEC profession. To recognise it as a profession.” (Spain)

“It is important for a professional to be enthusiastic when working with disadvantaged families and communities; to be an idealist.” (Netherlands)

“As a professional I want to feel part of the community and context I work within. I want to be engaged and work towards a clear goal: to support and to enhance a positive development which benefits the entire community.” (Spain)



Challenges

- Don't be afraid to make mistakes
- Have the courage to ask for personal support rather than only structural support
- Learn how to challenge the power of strong traditional-dominant values
- Adopt the right professional balance between being personally engaged and maintaining a professional balance with families
- Learn how to maintain your professional identity while at the same time acknowledging the contribution of parents
- Build confidence in your capacity and power to make a difference
- Understand when to intervene versus interfere
- Cope with feelings of helplessness, fear, loneliness, anger
- Learn how to define what is right and wrong and what to develop in children and parents. Confusion: shaken values system
- Meet the high ECEC policy expectations as well as the full daily work-load
- Discover how to feel sure enough to be unsure
- Show empathy instead of sympathy and pity
- Discover how to constructively challenge discrimination and bias
- Overcome the fear of asking the wrong question rather than ask no question at all
- Make sure each child's identity is supported
- Challenge our own assumptions about a particular community





“A professional facilitates shared tasks with parents without interfering with the educational role of the parents.” (Spain)

“For me it is vital that I do not feel alone, in the sense that I can share reflections with other professionals, working in teams and in a network.” (Spain)

“The professional growth of the educator depends a lot on the support of the organisation. It is important that the institution stays with us, so that we can support the development of our competences in our practice.” (Mexico)

“It may be difficult to maintain a professional distance with disadvantaged families, but if not you cannot keep going. Guard your boundaries. You don’t want to be the relief worker. A certain toughness is necessary.” (The Netherlands)

“I realise that sometimes practitioners are afraid of parents.” (Ireland)

“You may find it hard to let go of the child because of your involvement and engagement.” (The Netherlands)

“Supporting a parent with material things (e.g. offering toys or clothing) and at the same time not damaging their self-esteem can be challenging.” (The Netherlands)

“The first time I went to work with the Traveller community I was very nervous. I remember I had a pain in my stomach. I didn’t know what to expect actually. I learned so much from this community that shattered my assumptions. It was a reciprocal relationship.” (Ireland)



Being part of a professional system

One of the principles that emerged from the questionnaire and interviews centered on 'working a team'. Professionalism cannot be limited to the re-sponsibility of the individual but needs to be seen as part of the broader societal context. The ECEC professional/professional team should have a stimulating, positive learning and working environment in order to support their empowerment and their motivation to grow in their diverse roles. The competences outlined in this booklet should be fostered at all levels within the ECEC system including:

- Individual professional – professional team
- Organisation of the centre and local community
- Content of in-service and pre-service training
- Policy and research.

“Bringing children’s knowledge about social diversity to the fore can challenging us to think more deeply about how they come to know about social and cultural diversity and about connections between this knowledge, prejudice and work for equality in early childhood education”

Glenda Mac Naughton

Examples of good practice in Europe

Below you will find a collection of examples from international colleagues. These examples include a collection of successful methodologies that support the 5 competences which have emerged from this project. These examples encompass both individual and team suggestions, as well as ideas for the service, local community involvement, in-service and pre-service training, research and policy. While each example comes from a particular cultural, social, political and economic context, nevertheless they offer ideas for reflection and adaptation which can enhance individual contexts.

In-service

The Netherlands – MUTANT

Action-training/research project to improve the professional quality of early childhood organisations through critical reflection.

The model for 'Sustainable learning in a professional learning community' is a practical approach that early childhood professionals and their coaches have recently adopted in order to develop a 'critically' reflective attitude to their knowledge and practice. The model was developed as part of a two-year action research project conducted by Bureau MUTANT (2007-2008). MUTANT is a small Dutch independent agency that supports professionals and institutions in early childhood, welfare and health care through innovative methods, training and consulting.

The project places emphasis on the educators' critically reflective process, shifting the focus from individual to collective learning and the need to involve all personnel within each early childhood organisation, including management and staff at central level.

Eight learning methods were co-constructed and developed:

1. Naming qualities: Valuing, reflecting on and naming the professionals and parents core qualities.
2. Asking critical questions: Valuing critical reflection and asking critical questions.
3. Keeping a learning process diary: Documenting the personal and team professional learning process.
4. Reflection on thinking, feeling and willingness: three sources of knowledge.
5. Mapping the context of the childcare centre: Encouraging and supporting contextual thinking/ reflection/knowledge about the context of their own childcare centre and the context of families.
6. Formulating a personal challenge: Fine-tuning personal and professional goals with the objectives of the ECEC organisation.
7. Co-operation with a colleague: Carrying out assignments and co-operation with a colleague as a critical professional partner.
8. A contract for a learning community: Developing concrete defining principles which describe how the team members want to communicate with each other.

Key elements of the method:

1. Improving learning from 'within': valuing qualities, personal motivation, experiences and the feelings of the professionals.
2. Developing a collaborative attitude where each voice is valued and heard.
3. Nurturing an inquiry-oriented ethos: asking critical questions and discussing experiences and views.
4. Using conflicts as a source of new knowledge.

Experiences and Results

The co-construction of learning methods in the training and in practice contributed to strengthen the learning process in teams and led to more pleasure and enthusiasm in the educators' work and increased commitment. The critical reflective capacity improved at different levels in the ECEC organisations.

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Central and Eastern Europe / Central Asia - International Step by Step Association ISSA

Learning together, building shared understanding and mutual respect - Pre-school and school teachers and Roma Teaching Assistants - example from Serbia

Very few Roma children in the Central and the Southeastern region of Europe will ever have the opportunity to have a pre-school or school teacher from their own cultural-ethnic or language group. The Roma community rarely have the opportunity to enroll in higher education, much less become teachers.

ISSA member NGOs are working to address this issue through the creation of a Roma Teaching Assistant (RTA) position to work in education settings. This is considered a first but interim step to ensuring that Roma children and families can bridge the cultural and linguistic gap between the culture of the educational institution and their community. To avoid mirroring existing power relations in society and the real life experience for Roma, the RTA's position, from the outset, was regarded as an equal partner with pre-school teachers and teachers in the educational setting. This was to counter the more traditional view of the teaching assistant.

In Serbia, the CIP, Centre for Interactive Pedagogy, developed and implemented a training model in which RTAs and pre-school/school teachers attended Social Justice training and mentoring meetings together. This approach provided a safe space which allowed both sides to participate, have an honest exchange and break down barriers. People could name problems, give their perspectives and voice their concern for Roma children, mothers and families. It also allowed for the Roma to be more visible in the institution. As a consequence, RTAs began to form strong alliances between themselves and the pre-school/school teachers, which in turn was of benefit to children and families.

As part of the training, pre-school/school teachers and RTAs began to reflect on their value systems, the biases on both sides and the external and internal obstacles they faced when working together. They also exchanged their personal experiences on discrimination and injustice and started to critically examine the institutional behaviours that perpetuate discrimination within systems.

By coming together, both communities were able to openly engage and in so doing:

- improved cross-cultural communication among the different groups
- gained new knowledge on how to build alliances among groups to work against injustice and oppression
- enhanced their capacity for empathy; they learned how to learn from each other just by listening and understanding
- reduced stereotyping and prejudices toward each other and groups they belonged to

Through this project it became obvious to the participants that very separate groups can work together when they come together with a common question such as “how can we mutually benefit the children?”

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France – ESSSE Lyon

Training Tool: Variations for adult and children's voices.

Diverse Disciplines Shared Competences

This film, led by the ESSE training department EJE (Early childhood education), was produced in collaboration with Eric Ferrier (Arfrips Lyon) trainers and practitioners from a variety of disciplines. The project was funded by the Bernard van Leer Foundation. The aim was not to show a catalogue of techniques, but to highlight the results of a dynamic process with service providers, where each situation in the film demonstrates particular competences such as:

- daily rituals of welcoming and saying goodbye with the children
- educational routines of children such as: eating, sleeping and playtime
- meetings and interactions with parents, both formally and informally, individually and in groups.

These situations offer the viewer opportunities for reflection and for asking questions within their own professional practice. Viewers will also find a framework for learners to reflect on in their professional situation. This film presents a variety of scenarios which include parents, children and professionals from five different contexts: residential care, daycare centers, pediatric hospital, pre-school, services for children with special requirements.

The film is accompanied by a workbook for use in training. This film aims to demonstrate the many competences which are required for working with parents, children and colleagues within a diversity of contexts.

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Scotland: Men in Childcare

The Lone Fathers Project

In Scotland there are very few services which consider very carefully the needs of fathers who are separated from their children. One such example is The Lone Fathers Project, or the 'Dads' Club. The Dads' Club is an activity-based group for single and contact fathers (that is, those who have contact with their children only on a limited basis) in Edinburgh. The group is a partnership of Gilmerton Child & Family Cen-tre, a local authority setting for under-fives from families experiencing difficulties, and One Parent Families Scotland, a voluntary organisation. The group has been running for ten years, is well known in the Edinburgh area, and referrals are now received from solicitors, sheriffs, social workers, and health visitors, in addition to fathers applying on their own.

The specialist Worker in the Dads' Club is a qualified Early Childhood professional which enables him to support both the dads and the children. Managed by the Centre, he works from the setting 3 days a week and has the use of its minibus and driver for outings. A number of fathers who use the Centre are supported by the project, as well as other fathers in the wider community.

The Child & Family Centre has a key focus on vulnerable families. The Dads' Group enables them to look at the needs of the dads as part of the overall service. The Centre also supports a range of services, including group care for families in difficulty and supported parenting groups in the community, which include a young mothers group.

The lone fathers' project is provided so that both men and women can receive support. The Child & Family Centre also has a number of male early childhood staff who are able to support the fathers. The fathers tell us that the group gives them an opportunity to spend real quality time with their children, something they value enormously. It also gives them the chance to interact with other men in similar situations and to talk things through with the Fathers' Worker. This is very important in helping them to resolve difficulties without feeling the need to resort to litigation.

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Pre-service projects

France - ESSSE Lyon

Reflective methodology 'analyse de pratiques', (analysing practice)

The Department EJE (Early Childhood Education) of ESSSE, Health and Social School of the South-east training college in Lyon, uses 'analyse de pratiques' as a reflective methodology for students. The school has applied this practical analysis within a module 'Culture et Education' to work with diversity in the services for young children.

The tutors at ESSSE make use of individual and group discussions for analysing the practical experiences of students from different perspectives. By analysing and reflecting on their practice within the group, the students construct new competences to consciously develop their professional identity. Through this methodology the students are challenged to engage in a more creative way of thinking: 'to find the uniqueness in each situation'. This requires the conscious engagement of the student in any given situation. This method supports students to continually rethink or critically reflect on their course of action and in so doing to question their own values.

All students during their internship undertake an assignment which involves implementing a pedagogical or social project based on a practical question. This approach helps students to make a connection between their personal commitment and their professional demands.

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Belgium – VSPW Adult Educational Institute, Ghent

In search of 'critical' self-reflection in pre-service early childhood training

Six years ago, VSPW, an adult educational institute in Ghent, Belgium, introduced a pre-service childcare training programme to the sector (birth-3 & out of school care). The VSPW institute has a strong pedagogical tradition. Questions like 'Who am I as an educator?' are considered the most important for those working in pedagogical or social work. Hence 'critical' self-reflection is crucial in the development of the educator.

Recently the focus in the programme has changed from self-reflection as a personal quality to self-reflection as an ability. Previously self-reflection was seen as a professional quality that the student naturally possessed or would gradually develop. To date, experiments with foundation level students in VSPW have shown that critical self-reflection should be promoted as a necessary competence in ECEC training and development.

Together teachers and students begin by exploring the use of creative methods as one possible pathway to enhance the learning process of self-reflection. The choice of creative methods comes from the idea that self-reflection is not just a verbal skill but can be stimulated through non-verbal activities. By stimulating and challenging students in the group through methods such as dancing, visual constructing, drawing, drama, the students begin to investigate their own thinking and behaviour. The first experiments with creative methods have been intense but have proven very satisfying. Students have reacted enthusiastically to this new way of reflection; as their confidence grows through the use of creative methods, they begin to feel more able to verbalise their reflections.

The Institute also developed a competence profile (BinK) which focuses on children, parents, the team, the institution, the local community and the world. By connecting all these dimensions and accentuating 'working with diversity' as a key skill, critical self-reflection becomes a part of a collective activity and not just an individual activity. The BinK profile is implemented in all the pre-service training courses, and as a consequence trainers create spaces for critical reflection in their programmes.

Further Information: www.vspw.be en www.vbjk.be

Research and policy

Belgium – Flemish Community: VBJK

Social function of childcare

Despite the fact that Flanders has for many years reached the Barcelona targets, different studies have shown that places in childcare (0-3) are not only far too scarce, but that accessibility is unequal. Thanks to these studies, a dialogue started between policy makers and representatives of the sector. Further, there had been a growing awareness that the organisations of Flemish childcare may contribute to existing social inequalities and may be one of the pathways through which poverty is reproduced.

As a first attempt to overcome this early educational gap, the Flemish government agreed that they would fund, from 2004 onwards, small and flexible community-based childcare centres in disadvantaged neighbourhoods. By 2006, 18 of these centres were established, and they succeeded in reaching the targeted populations and in developing a partnership with the parents. However, they did not manage to influence the access policies of mainstream provision as policy makers had hoped.

In response to the observation that accessibility cannot solely be addressed on the level of individual provision, an experiment started in 16 pilot regions in 2007. In each region different childcare providers worked together to develop new knowledge about a common social policy and a common competence policy in a context of diversity and inclusion. They also explored a more transparent common access policy aimed at taking into account the needs of various populations. After two years, the structural effects on accessibility for marginalised families were still very limited.

In 2009 the Flemish government took further steps to enhance social inclusion. A new policy directive required that all funded childcare centres and some private centres reserve 20% of their capacity for single-parent families and families living in poverty and crisis situations. As a consequence the governmental agency responsible for childcare, Child & Family, set up a system for professional development within the contexts of diversity and inclusion. The agency created critical learning communities (under the supervision of VBJK: The resource and research centre for early childhood education and care) for pedagogical coordinators from various umbrella organisations. The coordinators engage in a learning process on how to empower day care centre professionals to build their own skills and competences within a context of diversity and social inclusion.

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Practice-based evidence

Looking at competence from a systemic point of view has consequences not only for professional practice. It challenges dominant ways of generating knowledge and the hierarchy between theory and practice. It is no longer academics alone who, through their research, provide evidence for 'what works'; the influential concept of evidence-based practice. All actors in the professional system contribute to building professional knowledge.

Research with, as opposed to on, practice can bridge the gap between ways of being and ways of knowing in the professional system and 'embraces difference, diversity and the messiness of human life rather than seeking, in the first instance, to resolve it.' (Schwandt 2004).

What are the implications of such a reciprocal understanding of research and practice? First and foremost it is necessary to recognise that evidence, i.e. professional knowledge, is continuously produced by all actors in the professional system – which brings into the picture a new focus on practitioners' everyday experiences in working with young children and their families. Policy can provide an alternative and secure framework (in terms of funding, resources, recognition) to gather, document, disseminate and theorise practice – a concept referred to as practice-based evidence (Urban, 2010). Successful examples differ in their contexts, aims and approaches (e.g. the Centres of Innovation in New Zealand, the 'éist' project in Ireland, the Bildung:elementar project in Germany).

However, three key messages can be drawn from all of them:

1. They are not limited to the individual practitioner, but pay attention to the relationships between individuals and teams, practitioners and families, the early childhood setting and the wider societal context. Professionalism develops as an attribute of the entire early childhood system.
2. They encourage asking critical questions, and systematically create spaces for doing so, and they value the multitude and diversity of possible answers to these questions. New understandings develop out of different viewpoints. Early childhood practice is embedded in the political and cultural context of society, and shaped by its economy and history. Becoming critically aware (conscious, as Paolo Freire has put it) of these influences is a key feature of a professional learning environment; research and practice go hand in hand to create an 'ethos of inquiry' (Urban, 2007).
3. They build on a notion of hope. Paolo Freire (2004) reminds us that educational practice is there for a purpose and implies change. But what we hope for has to be debated. Research and the-

ory take part in this debate. They are no longer limited to providing evidence for 'what works?', but engage in dialogue about meanings, values and purposes of early childhood practices. What should it work for, for whom, and who takes part in, or is excluded from, determining what the outcomes should be?

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Ireland: Pavee Point, EDENN - Equality and Diversity Early Childhood National Network

Diversity and Equality Training in the Irish sector

The Early Years Education Policy Unit in the Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs is funding a national Diversity and Equality Initiative (2011). This project is being headed up by Clare County Childcare Committee and being delivered through the county and city childcare committee structures. This is a major initiative where 160 ECEC services (5 in each of the 32 counties) will receive accredited diversity and equality training, mentoring hours to support implementation and appropriate resources to meet the needs in their service. The initiative will be evaluated. This initiative is built on the work of the 'éist' project and EDENN Network.

Over ten years ago, Pavee Point, recognising the need for a diversity and equality focus in ECEC, developed a diversity and equality training programme for the Irish context - the 'éist' project. This project consisted of piloting and evaluation. This process revealed considerable knowledge gaps, highlighting a real need to engage in personal reflection, attitudinal work and anti-discrimination work, together with very practical engagement with children and parents in relation to diversity and equality issues. The participants showed a willingness to reflect on and evaluate their own practice, and over the duration of the course identified their individual learning needs and embraced change.

The results prompted the Bernard van Leer Foundation and a cohort of County and City Childcare Committees in Ireland to support the implementation of a national Training of Trainers programme (2006). Trainers were selected through an interview process. The training programme consisted of 165 direct training hours. This programme is accredited by the National University of Ireland (NUI) Maynooth. It is the first ever university accredited diversity and equality ECEC training programme in the Republic of Ireland.

The training programme places emphasis on the trainer's own journey of change: how they understand diversity and equality concepts, how the societal and historical context influences thinking and practice, exploring power issues and how prejudice, discrimination, racism, sexism etc. operates in society, engaging in critical reflection on issues of practice, and how to contextualise practice in each individual ECEC service. The methodology embraces collective rather than individual learning and supports team engagement both through the training practice and the delivery of training to practitioners.

Working in tandem with these initiatives, the 'éist' project was successful in supporting a diversity and equality focus in key ECEC policy documents - *Síolta: National Quality Framework* (2006); *Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* (2009) and *Diversity and Equality Guidelines for Child-care Providers* (2006).

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Working definitions

Concepts such as diversity, equality, critical reflection and competences are complex and their meanings can be different depending upon the language and context. For this document, we use following working definitions.

Diversity

Refers to the diverse nature of society. For example, social class, gender, disability, family structure, gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender (GLBT) people, family status, minority groups, minority ethnic groups including Roma and Travellers and the majority/dominant group. Diversity is about all the ways in which people differ and in how they live their lives. It is about appreciating that differences are a natural part of life. No two people are the same and this means that many different elements make up the community you belong to, work and live in. Diversity is something which should be recognised, accepted and respected and many elements can be celebrated. There is a 'shadow side' to diversity: stereotyping, prejudice, discrimination and racism, sexism, classism etc.

Equality

Refers to the importance of recognising and accepting diversity and supporting individual and group needs. Equality is about ensuring equity in terms of access, participation and outcomes for all children and their families in Early Childhood Education and Care. Equality of participation is particularly important when working with children and parents. Equality is not about treating people the same but understands that needs are met in different ways. Equality is also not about political correctness. It is about making sure that people are treated fairly, without discrimination, and are given support to access real opportunities for self-development and quality outcomes.

Competence

The quality of ECEC depends on the people working with children, families and communities. We expect practitioners to be qualified, skilled and competent. We usually associate the term 'competence' with qualities of an individual practitioner, something that can be acquired through training and professional preparation. But this individualist concept is rather narrow. 'Being competent' (a fully human attribute) is often reduced to 'having competencies' – a series of discrete skills and pieces of knowledge that individuals are expected to 'possess' in order to perform a particular task. In this booklet we use the term 'competence' in a much broader, systemic understanding. It includes individuals and teams, the institutions they work in and the pedagogical and political support systems around them. At the level of the individual practitioner, being and becoming 'competent' is a continuous process that comprises the ability to build on and contribute to a body of professional knowledge, acquire both practical and reflective skills, and develop a professional attitude.

Critical reflection

Critical reflection is the process of analysing, reconsidering and questioning experiences within a broad context of issues (e.g., issues related to social justice, curriculum development, learning theories, politics, culture). Developing your reflective practice can be seen as a personal journey, but one that should perhaps not be taken alone. Other people, their insights, questions, ideas, are valuable in supporting and guiding the journey. Critical reflection adds depth and breadth to personal reflection by analysing meaning through asking questions about, and relating meanings to, a spectrum of personal and professional issues. Critical reflection is enhanced by engaging in critical learning communities with your team.



For more information visit the websites of DECET and ISSA

www.decet.org

www.issa.nl