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*This article is based on a verbal presentation given to the Quality of Childhood Group in the European Parliament. Notes taken during the presentation were formulated into the article below, which has been checked and approved by Professor Michel Vandebroek.*

## 'Diversity and Equity in Early Childhood Care and Education'

by Professor Dr. Michel Vandebroek

### SUMMARY

#### *Early Childhood Care and Education as a Place of Learning:*

- *Early childhood education has become important primarily from an economic point of view because of the demographic trends in Europe. The Lisbon strategy, which advocates the employment of increased numbers of those eligible to work, increases the need for early childhood education.*
- *The gender gap in education has become an inverse problem in many countries where girls are doing better than boys in all educational fields. The gender gap in the labour market still exists, and must be reconciled through family and work life.*
- *That the new educational divide occurs along socio-economic and cultural lines is apparent in preschools and widens as children enter public school.*
- *A study in the UK showed that educational achievement runs along socio-economic and cultural lines, but that there are many children who are socially disadvantaged who still do quite well. It showed the importance of the home environment and of the quality of the preschool.*
- *A child will not learn if s/he does not feel safe or welcome. When children receive negative answers to questions like, "Who am I?" and "Is it okay to be whom I am?" they cannot do well in a learning environment.*

#### *Early Childhood Care and Education as a Place of Multiple Belongings*

- *Today, one belonging does not determine who a child will become. Instead, children are shaped by many different identities. A major belonging for young children is their family. However, a child's belonging should not be wholly shaped by the history of their parents.*
- *Educators need to find a balance between the "colour-blind" and the "tourist" approaches. They need to avoid treating all children as exactly the same, and also to avoid treating diversity in class as a tour.*
- *Educators should fight prejudice by teaching children about social cohesion. They should be able to explain differences, like the difference in skin colour, to a small child.*

## *Structural Inequities*

- *Structural inequalities include the issue of inaccessibility to education and childcare. Research shows that children of lower economic status are almost always in centres with lower quality care. It also shows that parents cannot do anything but be content with whatever childcare is available.*
- *One key to the quality of childcare is access to information.*
- *There are at least two distinct approaches to childcare policy in the EU. One, chosen by the UK, the Netherlands, and the United States, is the liberal approach. Early childhood care education is provided by private enterprise. Governments intervene with voucher systems for those who cannot afford the fees. The voucher system is disadvantageous to the poorest of the poor and to the lower middle-classes. The other approach, chosen by Norway, Sweden, Denmark and Iceland, considers childhood education to be the state's public responsibility.*
- *Structural aspects play a key role in determining how much diversity there will be in a childcare centre.*

### *Key points:*

- *Accessibility should be a key factor in achieving diversity and quality in day care centres*
- *Enabling policies are more likely to have positive long-term effects than corrosive policies towards parents.*
- *The EU should set targets for attaining standards of quality, not just the Barcelona targets, which are minimal standards.*
- *Professionals are needed who are skilled at managing issues of diversity in the center or the classroom.*

## Introduction

In Europe, early childhood education has become more important primarily from an economic point of view. Professor Vandenberg demonstrated, based on research, how the average age continues to rise in Europe and what the resulting economic impact is and will be on European countries. There are fewer and fewer people of working age to support those who are eligible for or are already claiming their pensions.

The EU designed the Lisbon strategy to tackle these problems. One of the central themes of the strategy is to increase the number of people entering employment, who are eligible to work. An obvious result of this policy is the need for increased early childhood education. There are two gaps that affect this initiative, the gender gap in the economic market and the educational gap. These are very important gaps to bridge. We live in post-industrial societies based largely on knowledge and education. It might be strange for an educator to talk about early childhood education by first addressing economic issues. However, economics is the main driver in our post-industrial society.

The gender gap in education has largely been bridged. However, we may have the inverse problem. In many countries girls are doing better than boys in all educational fields. Conversely, the gender gap in the labour market is not solved at all. Horizontal and vertical gender gaps in employment and wages remain. Obviously, increasing workforce numbers mean more people, in particular more women, at work. This is not a matter of education. It is, however, a matter of the reconciliation of family and work life. That is the key to investing for future economic growth. We need to invest in policies that enable this reconciliation to take place. In this period of economic difficulty, many countries are investing in early childhood services. This holds even for those countries that believe that childhood issues are the responsibility of the family rather than of the state.

Also of great importance in many countries is "the new educational divide," which occurs along socio-economic and cultural lines. Children from minority and/or lower socio-economic classes simply do less well in school. The divide is apparent in the first year of primary school. In fact, it is apparent in childcare centres and pre-schools. There are studies showing that children at age three from poor families have 50% less vocabulary than children from rich families. The divide widens as the children enter school.

## Early Childhood Care and Education as a Place of Learning

The bad news is that education is failing in its social mission. The good news is that early childhood education can make a difference. There is an interesting longitudinal study on this issue in the UK. Some 2700 children have been followed from a very early age to their 10th and 11th years. The results suggest educational achievement runs along socio-economic and cultural lines. Yet, not all children follow the same pathway. There are children who have all of the statistical characteristics that raise concerns, being, for example, from poor Pakistani backgrounds. Yet, they thrive at school. The study looked at

the pathways of children who are socially at risk yet who still do quite well. There were quantitative and qualitative tests with huge numbers of children. Early childhood services were examined.

This study highlighted the importance of the home environment. Researchers also found that most early childhood education can make a difference. The quality of the preschool is the key factor. It is not enough that the quality of provision in the pre-school is simply average. The study shows some interesting things about quality. For example, when using the standard, well accepted, well-recognized quality measurements, used worldwide, the most useful scale for predicting childhood success is diversity. This scale examines the degree to which diversity and a child's background are taken into account in the educational process.

This is rather surprising. However, on closer scrutiny, the results are not quite so unexpected. Diversity is a core quality criterion. Another factor revealed in these studies is the importance of staff qualifications. Other studies on the quality of early childhood and education have produced the same result. One of these studies was produced by UNICEF, and it titled Childhood in Transition. It is a very well written, interesting study, which gives a good account of the effects of early education on the child from an international perspective.

Many studies show that the number of years of experience in early childhood education which a staff member has does not increase the success of the staff member in the workplace. The nature and quality of one's preparation and training is the deciding factor. Being qualified does make a difference. That applies to childhood centres, training centres, kindergartens and other forms of early childhood care centres. High quality qualifications mean taking a holistic approach to the child's education and developing social needs.

Why is diversity such an important issue? There are very good reasons. A child can be in the richest environment with the nicest professionals available, however will do nothing if he/she does not feel safe, does not feel welcome, and does not feel like he/she belongs. He/she simply will not learn under these circumstances.

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An examination of daily practice in early childhood education shows that many children already feel welcome in the school. Approximately 15 years ago Professor Vandenbroeck began working on cultural and group identity construction issues. An event in the east of the country triggered his involvement. He was attending a meeting and discussing the

issue of diversity with parents of the children at a particular centre. After the meeting, a mother who had a Turkish background approached him. She said her child was three years old. He came home from school one day and said to his mother, "We're not Turkish are we?" She replied that they were Turkish. The boy became very angry and yelled at her, saying, "No, we are not Turkish!" She asked him why he thought that. He said "because we are not dirty". Then she asked Dr. Vandebroek what she should do to help her child.

He was shocked and did not know what to say. She asked why he did not know what to do since he was a pedagogue. He went back to his university where there is large developmental psychology library. He could find no answers to this woman's questions. Fifteen years ago, there was little if any documentation on what cultural identity means in the development of a minority child. Nevertheless, things have changed.

A colleague of Dr. Vandebroek's from Morocco had the same experience. Her three-year-old daughter came home from school one day. She put her hand on her mother's mouth and said, "Don't speak Arabic anymore, Mother, where the other children can hear you."

These stories tell us that these young children are hurt at a very young age. They wonder about these most existential questions: Who am I and is it okay to be who I am in this environment? These are important questions for us all, including children. "Who am I?" and "Is it okay to be who I am?" When children receive negative answers to these most existential questions, they cannot do well in the learning environment. It is destructive to them when they get the message that it is not okay to be who they are.

### **Early Childhood Care and Education as a place of Multiple Belongings**

Children are members of many groups. In our globalized society, one no longer belongs to only a single group as one did two generations ago. Dr. Vandebroek's grandfather was born the son of a farmer, 30 km north of Brussels. As the eldest son of a farmer in that village, his specific "belonging" shaped him in many ways. It was already clear at birth what he would be, where he would go to school, what his religion would be, what his language would be, what kind of woman he would marry, and what his profession would be. All these things were assumed at his birth.

Today when a son is born into a farmer's family, who he marries, what language he speaks, and what profession he pursues are not fixed at all. One belonging does not determine who he will be. Many belongings determine and shape the lives of children today. Different authors use different names for these identities but all these concepts mean the same thing; we are all shaped by many different identities. These "belongings" may change over the course of a lifetime.



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One of the major areas of belonging for young children is their family. If children are hurt in that sphere of belonging, they are hurt in who they are. This pain can be translated into the day care centre environment. This existential question, "is it okay to be who I am?", must be translated into an educational question. We must ask the educator to be aware of and create multiple identities. The child must not be forced choose between, for example, "Am I Turkish or Belgian?" They can be both. While this is not a big problem for some children, it is a problem for many who feel like they are not welcome in the new group because of the group they come from. The problem begins when a child picks up negative feelings from another important group such as the family. We must learn how to build bridges. For children it is about building small bridges, cultural bridges. It is about the place of the mother tongue in the institution and in society. It is about the place of the parents within the institution.

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When we talk about identity, especially cultural identity, it is important to realize this comes from the past, the present and the future. Limiting children by the history of their parents is not helpful or productive when we are seeking to build multiple or even new belongings.

We need to find a balance between the "colour-blind" and the "tourist" approaches to diversity in the classroom. In the former, the educator claims to treat all children the same, believing that all children are equal. However, when children are assumed to be exactly the same, they are all treated as though they were the average child. Such a child simply does not exist. The average child is simply a middle-class, contrived construction. Because children are not the same, it would be unequal to treat them as if they were. Under the colour-blind approach, we do not take diversity into account at all.

The other extreme is to treat diversity in class as a tour. You devote a day to each country represented by a member of the class. You offer some of their food such as couscous and sing a few of their songs. The next day you do the same thing for another nation or group represented in the class. On that day, the children may get to eat with their hands and eat something different. They then return to the normal curriculum. On the wall, there may be some nice posters, taken from travel brochures, for example, showing children standing in front of their house somewhere in Africa. At the end of all



this, the educators assume they have become a multicultural centre.

We must find a balance between these two extremes. It is about building little bridges for little children. It is the very simple symbolic things of life. Take music, for example. You can ask the parents of a child to bring in a CD with music from their culture. On the other hand, you can ask them to bring in a CD or an instrument that the child particularly likes. These are two fundamentally different approaches. The first approach risks taking the tourism approach. The second accounts for the family culture, which is embedded in the history of their culture. This second approach builds into the education both the past and present of the child and his/her family.

How can educators build these little bridges without falling into the trap of colour-blindness on the one hand, nor by reducing diversity to the rather simplistic, touristic view of the diversity across different cultures? When we want to talk about diversity in cultures, we cannot work with the children alone anymore. It is inappropriate to build pedagogy unrelated to family cultures, uninformed by parents and unaware of local communities.

Building little cultural bridges is not enough. All the educators would like to see children happy, content and feeling okay with themselves and comfortable with who they are. No educator would like to see a group of children who think they are superior to the others. Therefore, our task is also about exploring ways in which we can all live together. It is also about social cohesion.

There is also the bad news that prejudices emerge at a very young age. Current research in Belfast, Northern Ireland with a large group of children is looking at these prejudices. This is a very specific situation of course. It is a very segregated society. The children tend to go to segregated schools, support segregated football clubs, frequent segregated pubs, attend segregated churches, etc. If you go to Belfast, you cannot see if someone is Catholic or Protestant. However, if you talk to people on the street, you hear it in their accents. You notice the difference in areas by the colour of the pavements you walk on.

Although children at the age of three are not ethnically different, at that age they are already fully aware of the group to which they and others belong. What does this mean in terms of the colours of a favorite football team, the kind of school they go to, etc.? At age three, they all are aware of their own group. Between three and six, children become aware of which is the "out" group. They have already developed very negative feelings about the "out" group; everybody is bad, wants to kill you and can never be trusted.

At three years old, they are aware of their own group. Between three and six, they have very positive feelings about their own group, which is nice. However, they hold horrible stereotypes of the "out" groups. We are aware of this by what the children say. When we

work with day care centres for socially disadvantaged 3 year olds, with the trained staff who are working as observers in the centres, we see prejudices developing at an even earlier age.

It is very simple why this is so. We want children to generalize because we all do. For example, throw a ball and watch it bounce and roll. Throw another ball and watch it also bounce and roll. Then throw another ball and watch it do the same thing. Soon you have a mental image of what a ball does when you throw it. It bounces and rolls. Generalizing from observation is how we learn. We function through mental images. However, some images may be true and others may not. Often we see things in reality that conflict with our mental images. We do not change our mental images. We change what we see. For example, if we have a prejudice against women drivers and see a woman doing something wrong on the road, we use that to justify our precious prejudice. Unfortunately, if a woman is driving well, we will not even notice it.

Young children in particular tend to trust that which is familiar and are afraid of that which is strange. Children may be reluctant to have contact with a person who has a skin colour different to their own. Children notice skin colour very early on. This has been observed with children less than two years old. Once, the Professor saw two, 2 year old children sitting next to each other, one black and one white. The white child took a cloth and started rubbing the knee of the black child. The white child was amazed by the black child and was trying to deal with the colour of the child's skin. The white child was unable to give voice to his amazement. He could see they were not the same and was uncomfortable with this.

As adults, we must know how to explain such differences to a small child. We cannot ignore them. One very smart, early childhood teacher dealt with the issue of skin colour in this way. She told the children that skin colour is a very nice gift from one's parents. She explained to the class that they had all seen the black child's mother and knew what she looked like. Then she said the white child had also received a gift from his mother, they had all seen her and knew what she looked like. The statement was true, and had nothing to do with coming from a country where there is a lot of sun (which some teachers are known to have said.) The teacher explained the difference and the similarity at the same time. She made a connection between the children. They are similar because each child received the gift of skin colour from their parents. She ignored the difference and instead used it to connect the two children.

We each use many hierarchies and assumptions to judge and categorize others. We are social learners and want children to socialize, to integrate according to social norms. And they do. Children integrate according to social norms. Social norms are usually implicit. For example, many educators of children say that children should engage in symbolic play. They are expected to practice social talents and participate in different roles. Many

nurseries have a Western style kitchen. What kind of message is that with regard to the hierarchy of kitchen cultures? Some are worthwhile to be included in the day care centre and others are not. That is what the English call racism by omission. Some children are always present in children's books and some are never represented. For example, there are very few lesbian families in children's books. There are very few children with special needs depicted in childhood education centre resources.

We know that prejudice begins to appear at age three and is clear by age 6. Albert Einstein said that prejudice is harder to crack than an atom. We do not wait until babies begin to talk before talking to them. Why would we wait to begin talking about diversity and dealing with diversity until the prejudices have already emerged? We need to be ready to deal with it in early childhood. This is another reason why diversity is at the very core of early childhood education and cannot be ignored.

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Professor Vandenbroeck then spoke about a day care centre in Brussels. They were working on diversity issues with very young children between two and three years old. For snack time, they asked the parents what kinds of things they have at snack time at home. Because their families are very diverse, they placed all of the various kinds of breads in one large basket. Each child took a familiar kind of bread. Each child watched what types of bread the other children were taking.

One child had taken a particular kind of bread and was sitting next to a girl from Belgium. He took the bread, slapped it on his thigh and rubbed it with his hand. The child from Belgium took the bread away and put it back in the basket. The boy took another piece of bread and again slapped it on his thigh and rubbed it with his hand. The Belgian girl once again took the bread away from him, put it back in the basket, and said he should not do that again. The teacher came over to the children and asked the Belgian girl about her favorite bread at home. She said a sandwich was her favorite. Then, the teacher asked if the child's mother had told her not to play with her food? Yes, said the child. And the teacher said well you are a very good girl and you have learned that very well at home.

The teacher turned to the boy and asked if he could tell the class how his mother makes this kind of bread. He showed how the mother slapped the bread against her hand or thigh in the same way that he had. The teacher complimented the boy for knowing how to make the bread his mother makes. In this situation, the teacher took advantage of a teaching moment to instruct each child about diversity. She also highlighted the fact that both children had learned what their parents had been teaching and that it was okay.

This was very important teaching moment for the instructor and a very important learning moment for these children. They learned and the teacher taught about differences. The teacher also taught about what is communal. Our parents teach us how to behave and how to handle the truth. These are two sides of the same coin. Identity construction or well-being teaches that it is okay to be who you are and to be different.

### **Structural Inequities – Issues of Accessibility and Inaccessibility**

Another aspect is about structures, policies and structural inequalities, which involves the issue of accessibility or inaccessibility to early childhood care education. Accessibility is an economic as well as educational issue. The educational gap starts at an early age. Differences in a child's education (high quality versus low quality) and socio-economic status have a significant impact on the lives of students. In almost all European or Western countries, research shows that children of lower economic status are in centres with lower quality care. Those who would benefit most from the highest quality care are not in centres of the highest quality. This is much less true in the Scandinavian countries where childcare is almost universally available. However, it is still a problem in these countries for new immigrants. It is a much greater problem in countries like France and Belgium where there are not enough childcare spaces for children from zero to three. There is even less childcare available in countries in southern Europe.

Much current research shows that parents do not choose the childcare that they would like. It is an ideological myth that parents can choose. We have studies showing that children from poor families are in low quality centres. In addition, much research from the 80s and 90s showed that we should teach parents how to choose better childcare for their children. Thus, we were saying parental choice was the nexus of the problem. Current research shows however that parents choose what is available. It shows parents are taught to be content with what is available. They in fact have no choice in such situations. Most parents were asked if they were happy with their childcare. They all said that they were happy with their childcare. It is not because these poor parents are stupid and do not know what quality is or how to find childcare. It is because they have no choice, and they have make use of the childcare option available in order to get on with their lives.

So environmental constraints force them to make the choices they make. Some small-scale research about this in Flanders has discovered that there is almost no institutional childcare, only family daycare. Ireland has almost no institutionally provided daycare. In Brussels there is hardly any family daycare, but there are daycare centres so all families choose daycare centres.

What is the key to quality? We have discussed many preconditions, but need to discuss the key to quality. One key to quality is access to information. For example, information on staff/child ratios is not equally available to all. It is more readily available to parents in

more affluent situations. Parental choice is not a good explanation of structural inequities. Funding policies are better explanations.

In the EU, at least two distinct approaches are emerging. One is the liberal approach, which says that early childhood care education should be provided by private enterprise. Parents pay high fees. Then governments intervene with voucher systems for those who cannot afford the fees. It is a market-oriented approach. The UK, the Netherlands, and the United States have traditionally had these kinds of systems.

Scandinavian countries, especially Norway, Sweden, Denmark and Iceland, exemplify the other extreme. There, childhood education has long been considered the state's public responsibility. Several countries like Belgium lie between these two extremes. The market-oriented approach does not work very well from an accessibility perspective. Voucher systems, depending how they are shaped, will often be beyond the reach of the poorest of the poor. They do not have access to the structures that administer the voucher systems.

The lower middle classes also fall out of the voucher system. They do not have quite enough income. They have too much to qualify for vouchers and too little to be able to afford the full fees.

Subsidising parents through the use of vouchers insignificantly affects quality. Subsidizing providers improves quality because it improves wages, raises professional qualifications and moves people up the standard of living scale. Subsidising through vouchers actually subsidizes entrepreneurs who are profit-motivated. The highest costs to government of early childhood education are where there are voucher systems. Furthermore, we have documented in countries with voucher systems like the UK that qualifications for workers in private day care centres are lower than they are in countries where day care, childcare and early childhood education are provided publicly. Funding is important.

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Availability of spaces is also important. For example in Belgium, 20% of the workforce population represents 40% of the childcare population. The 36% of the population that represents poor people take up only 20% of the childcare population. In addition, spaces are unequally distributed. For example, Brussels is divided into nineteen municipalities. The richest municipalities have the most childcare places available per hundred children. This is a structural inequality. The Netherlands changed to a privatised, market-oriented system. They now provide new services in areas where there are already many childcare

services available. These are in the wealthy areas. There are not many new resources available in the poor or rural areas.

Thus, funding policies and the unequal distribution of places are two factors in the accessibility equation. Another is the waiting list. The sooner one subscribes, the better chance there is to get a place for one's child. And that means that the better chance one has depends upon how well one is informed. Only those of the upper socio-economic classes tend to know how to get access to information about waiting lists.

These structural aspects play a key role in determining how much diversity there will be in a childcare centre. To sum up: Accessibility should be a key factor in achieving diversity and quality in our day care centres. This means not only student-teacher ratios but also actual access to these centres. Enabling policies are more likely to have positive long-term effects than corrosive policies towards parents. There should be more places. Even though The EU parliament has approved the Barcelona targets, the targets are completely useless unless they are also accompanied by quality targets. It is of no use to say that a country is achieving the benchmarks when it has only 33% of the places needed to meet the demand. The EU could put some important things in place with regard to working towards improved quality, such as setting targets for child/adult ratios. They need to fix a target number for these ratios. For the under three year olds, the figure should be between four and six. These are minimal, not optimal standards. The Barcelona targets are minimal standards.

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With regard to staff qualifications, Europe has a European quality framework. The staff qualifications should be framed within that framework. Perhaps, Europe should say that 50% or more of staff in childhood education should have level five or six qualifications. The other 30 to 50% should have level three or four. We cannot do anything with the Barcelona targets as they are now. They are not a policy instrument if we cannot combine them with quality standards.

## Conclusion

Finally, what is quality? It is a relational issue. While we cannot include the concept of "core quality" in the recommendations, we can include recommendations on the preconditions of quality, for example adult/child ratios and higher staff qualifications. There is an evolution in many countries, which we need to encourage. Professionalism in our field is moving beyond the technical to a more flexible, reflective approach. We do not

need more knowledge about what is good for the child. Because of what we have learned about diversity and social inclusion, we know that we will always face new questions, which are unanswerable in our current literature. Many issues we now face and many issues we will face simply have no fixed answers.

We need professionals who can work within this uncertainty and not become paralysed, who can work with parents to construct new and better approaches to handling this diversity. These approaches, designed to fit the situation, are not available in the literature. Childcare professionals are often also parents. They have a career and they have a family. They have values, norms and expectations about what a good life for their children entails. The professional must be very careful not to let the personal parental relationship become confused with professional responsibilities and approaches. The professional cannot act as if he were speaking to his own children. Dr. Vandenbroeck said "As a father, I do not always act with his children in accordance with my own views as a professional. Constraints of time, housing and income prevent this."

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We have this same conflict between the individual and the childcare institution. The institution has values, norms and processes which are intended to reflect the values and norms of society (??). This is not always possible. It depends on funding levels, where the institutions might be located and the diversity of the serviced population.

In summary, that is the kind of professionalism we need and hope to meet in our schools, day care facilities and childcare facilities. Childhood education has an economic dimension. This is not often discussed in educational circles, yet it is important for educational as well as social reasons. To strive for an average level of quality is not good enough anymore. We need to provide the best quality possible. That means qualified staff. Our centres must be different. They are not just child centres. They must be child centres, family centres, parent centres and community centres. Accessible childcare is a shared responsibility between parents, government, communities and society. It is not a private matter anymore. It is about the future of our society.



For further information please take a look at the following two papers:

Vandenbroeck, M. (2001) *The view of the Yeti. Bringing up children in the spirit of self-awareness and kindredship. The Hague: Bernard Van Leer Foundation.*

Vandenbroeck, M.; De Visscher, S.; Van Nuffel, K. & Ferla, J. (2008). *Mothers' Search for Infant Child Care: The Dynamic Relation between Availability and Desirability in a Continental European Welfare State. Early Childhood Research Quarterly, 23(2) pp 245-258.*

Professor Dr. Michel Vandenbroeck teaches early childhood education at the Department of Social Welfare Studies of the University of Ghent. In his dissertation entitled 'In verzekerde bewaring, Honderdvijftig jaar kinderen, ouders en kinderopvang' (translated in English: 'In safe guardianship, one hundred and fifty years of children, parents and child care') he used social pedagogical and genealogical methodologies to look specifically at young children, their families and their relationships with public policies. This approach turned out to be very powerful and in this way many new insights regarding the education of children and the role of governments were acquired. With its publication Michel Vandenbroeck was soon recognised as one of the leading experts in the world in an emerging branch of social pedagogy, inspired both by the sociology of childhood and the educational sciences.

The core research work that Michel Vandenbroeck has been engaged with over the past decades is to map the relationship between the social and political ideas in society and the social constructs of society with regards to children, parenthood and education and the governmental policies that are based on these perceptions. For this he looked primarily at the Belgium situation between 1850 and 2000.

As a next step Michel Vandenbroeck brought his new insights to bear on the present situation in Belgium and the European Union. This step inspired him to become an advocate for the social inclusion of children and parents, who plead for respect for diversity and equity in early childhood services, thus respecting the diversity of all types of families, which nowadays constitute our western societies.

Michel Vandenbroeck is the president of the VBJK (Resource and Research Centre for Early Childhood Care and Education) of Ghent University and he is one of the founding members of the European DECET network, which stands for Diversity in Early Childhood Education and Training. This is one of the leading network groups in the area of early childhood education and care in Europe. He is also member of the editorial board of the European Early Childhood Education Research Journal, the leading academic journal on early childhood education in Europe.

Date: 27th January 2009