

## Children, first and last

In 2001, the OECD made a comparison of childcare provision in several industrialised countries. The report 'Starting Strong' concluded that the educational level of childcare professionals in Flanders was extremely low. A formal qualification was required for only 19% of all childcare jobs, more than half of the staff had no qualifications and the training that was available for child minders took no more than 5 days to complete. The Flemish governmental agency for children and families "Kind en Gezin" realised that this lack of training would not result in a quality of service that would meet parents' expectations or the government's requirements. The first step in changing the situation was to link all training provision to the official job specifications of SERV, the Flemish Social and Economic Council and this meant that it was possible to set up courses for different types of staff, such as carers in crèches or childminders at home.



### Raising the profile of childcare

VBJK, the lead partner, in this EQUAL Development Partnership (DP) is a Resource, Research and Training Centre on Early Childhood Care and Education in Flanders. This collaborative organisation brings together the Universities of Ghent, Leuven and Brussels and the child care sector in ECCE AMA and the objectives of this DP are to:

- Improve the quality of childcare services;
- Increase access to childcare for socially disadvantaged target groups, in particular, ethnic minorities;
- Ensure the involvement of more men in childcare;
- Expand the employment prospects of ethnic minorities in this field, through adapted training and accreditation of prior learning and experience.

For Jan Peeters, the project coordinator, "it is quite simple: if there are no opportunities to move into a real career in childcare, we won't find candidates for childminding at home. Recruiting child minders from ethnic minorities is only a first step. It is only

through training that people can become real professionals and provide children with the breadth of activities necessary for their development". Within this EQUAL project, many partners that can contribute to creating "real careers" have been brought on board including childcare services, social services, career guidance services and education and training organisations.

### Quality is what matters

ECCE AMA's first task was to develop a training course for future childminders, combining group activities and individual e-learning. Recognising the social and educational role of childcare, the DP also prepared a training module on extra-curricular activities that would offer children a constructive alternative to simply waiting until their parents picked them up after school. Schools, universities and childcare services will be able to integrate this module into their courses for managers. One of its most interesting features is that it attempts to promote the involvement not only of parents but of fathers in particular.

Opening a crèche or any type of childcare facility is generally planned from an employment perspective. For ECCE AMA, it is just as important to ensure the developmental role for the children concerned. A Quality Charter for the whole sector is the next step in raising quality to the extent that neighbourhood crèches and home provision will be able to be integrated into the mainstream system. These neighbourhood crèches are set up as social enterprises, as an answer to the specific needs of disadvantaged areas. They attempt to ensure the empowerment and participation of employees and clients, accessibility with respect for diversity and priority for parents who are not (yet) served by regular provision. They are also locked into a local network through collaboration with welfare services, training organisations, employment agencies and NGOs, which aims to promote social development and social cohesion. These "bottom-up" enterprises have accumulated a lot of knowledge, mostly through their grass-roots experience. "Their innovative, social and economic value is widely appreciated, but they need financial and structural support, as well as a foundation for their operation and for their quality. Their existing know-

how, bottlenecks and objectives needs to be recognised and processed, so that all similar enterprises can benefit from the result of the DP”, adds Jan Peeters.

## Men in childcare

Several barriers prevent men from taking up and completing childcare



training. There is a general view that women are natural carers whereas men are not, and any men who choose to enter this field of training or work face prejudice and discrimination, both direct and indirect. Some researchers argue that childcare centres should consider the hidden message that all-female childcare centres may send to children. According to research, the presence of male childcare workers can help to challenge stereotypical views of men and women, encourage staff to change their own gender assumptions and avoid children developing a skewed picture of the roles of men and women in society. At pre-school level, children begin to explore adult roles. With male carers in their lives, boys will have positive male role models, and all children will benefit from the different qualities which men can bring to work with children, such as an adventurous approach to outside play and sports activities. More fathers will become actively involved in childcare and in events at local centres when the number of male care workers increases. Increasing awareness of this issue, changing public opinion and influencing policy are central to the DP's activities. An analysis of male students' needs and of the obstacles they might face during their training includes the views of current and potential students and also students that have not completed the course. Individual interviews and discussions in focus groups are recorded to feed the on-going debate amongst partners and a broad range of stakeholders. Assertiveness training, sensitisation to diversity and media communication are all part of the course, which is supported by an integrated website.

## A wider range of influence

ECCE AMA's new developments are based on many years of project experience that have been supported by the Bernard van Leer Foundation, the NOW Strand of the EMPLOYMENT Initiative

and Objective 3 of the ESF. The mainstreaming potential of the DP in this policy field is well established through VBJK's close links with "Kind en Gezin". The other channel for its outcomes is the world of higher education. The DP's lead partner is already working in close cooperation with the University of Ghent on post-academic training for trainers and a course on childcare as part of a Masters in Social Work. In addition, an on-line learning programme has been developed, which links with the Centre for Equity and Innovation at Melbourne University. Participative work and the respect of diversity form a substantial part of the two-year training course for managers of childcare initiatives run by two Flemish Colleges. Then, every year, the Kind en Gezin Academy organises a one day seminar for mainstream trainers in early childhood education, bringing together some 250 participants who can see and handle the tools produced by VBJK and attend parallel workshops on their use. These books, DVDs, CD-ROMs and magazines can also be downloaded from the DP's website.

## Soon on the screen

A video on the needs and perceptions of parents is currently being filmed, in cooperation with the DP's partners in Luxemburg and Germany. This will enhance awareness-raising activities about the importance of access to quality childcare for socially vulnerable parents so that they might find a job, follow a training course or have additional support in educating their child.

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