



Girl planting seedling

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INTRODUCTORY CHAPTER

IMPROVING THE QUALITY OF CHILDHOOD IN EUROPE: The Social Organisation of a grass root initiative and its strategy

by Michiel Matthes

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The Alliance for Childhood European Network Group, in short the Alliance for Childhood, is a network organisation with some twenty member organisations in many European countries. This book, the fourth in the series, is the result of the close cooperation between the Alliance for Childhood and the European Council for Steiner Waldorf Education (ECSWE), one of its founding members.

This chapter gives the reader an introduction to the various and diverse contributions in the book by relating them to the development process of the Alliance for Childhood group and the strategy that it has followed during the past years and the various alliances that were gradually formed, among others with the Universal Education Foundation / Learning for Well-being partnership.

Both organisations are working together with partners to organise in Brussels from 23 until 26 October 2013 the international conference with the title 'Unfolding - Creating a culture that allows each and every child to unfold their unique potential and to engage in society' (More information at the end of the article).

The Alliance for Childhood European Network Group had its constituting meeting on 4 October 2006 and in this meeting the mission statement was formulated as follows:

The participants at the meeting declare that they share a deep concern about the quality of childhood in the member states. For this reason, they have come together and have decided to start to work in concert to improve the 'Quality of Childhood' in the member states of the European Union and beyond.

The participants believe that a poor quality of childhood is harmful for children. When society as a whole improves this quality, it will be beneficial for the children and adolescents in question and for the societies in which they grow up.

Furthermore, the participants believe that a good quality childhood is based on the following principles and attitudes:

The child is respected as a fellow human being with his or her own aspirations to develop his/her inner potential.

The quality of the relationships of the child with important adults and others is a key element of the quality of his/her childhood and for his/her growth as a human being.

How to orchestrate this change process in society? In this chapter we like to share with you the strategy that the Alliance for Childhood developed to set this change process in motion.

1. The whole system of the child

We realised that policy making and policy implementation by governmental and other agencies takes place in silos and in a compartmentalised way where children are concerned. We therefore felt a need to develop an approach that encompasses the whole child and the whole living environment of the child in which he/she grows up. For this we developed the following diagram:

A Diagram depicting the Whole System of the Child

Age Category	Home Environment	Day care and School Environment	Work Environment	Free time Environment	Virtual Environment
22 and older					
19-21 years old					
16-18 years old					
13-15 years old					
7-12 years old					
4-6 years old					
0-3 years old					
Pregnancy					
Before pregnancy					

What happens in one compartment in the diagram above has an impact on the situation in other compartments, and with that on the entire system of the child.

On the basis of this diagram the Alliance for Childhood group decided that our field of work should be the whole child and that we should strive simultaneously for an improvement of the situation in each compartment and in the entire system.

The next question for us was then: how do you do that as a civil society organisation with limited manpower and limited funds?

We realised that in each compartment and in each column in the diagram many actors and stakeholders are active:

- private persons
- governmental organisations
- semi-governmental organisations
- commercial organisations
- media companies
- and many others

The next step on this journey was to take a closer look at the diagram, but this time from an organisational perspective.

A Diagram depicting the Whole System of the Child seen from an organisational point of view

Age Category	Home Environment	Day care and School Environment	Work Environment	Free time Environment	Virtual Environment
22 and older	In each column there are many organisations that work for the child, but that do not know each other.	In each column there are many organisations that work for the child, but that do not know each other.	In each column there are many organisations that work for the child, but that do not know each other.	In each column there are many organisations that work for the child, but that do not know each other.	In each column there are many organisations that work for the child, but that do not know each other.
19-21 years old					
16-18 years old					
13-15 years old					
7-12 years old					
4-6 years old					
0-3 years old					
Pregnancy					
Before pregnancy					

In doing this we came to the following conclusions:

- in each compartment and column there are many actors and stakeholders that often do not know each other, have a different image of the child and different objectives and work programmes, that will inevitably work against each other.
- In this way inevitably much tax money is wasted.
- we discovered in this context the ideas of Urie Bronfenbrenner (Bronfenbrenner, L, 1979). In his classic ecological theory children's life conditions were defined in terms of micro-, meso-, exo- and macrosystems. A microsystem is a pattern of activities, roles, and interpersonal relations experienced by the developing person in a given setting with particular physical and material characteristics. Important microsystems are family, day care, school, and peer group, where human relationships and material resources affect the child's behaviour and development. A mesosystem comprises the linkages among two or more systems in which the developing person actively participates, such as home, school, hobby clubs, and media. For instance, family-school-linkages, i.e., parental involvement in children's schooling, parental knowledge about the child's whereabouts with his peer group, and parental supervision of the child's internet use are significant assets which promote positive development. An exosystem refers to one or more settings in which events occur and affect the child indirectly, such as parents' employment,

health and other services available for the family and child, and migration. A macrosystem refers to a subculture or culture as a whole with its belief systems, traditions, and policies. They include religious beliefs, human rights, gender roles, the value of education, the perception of the child in the society, and many other things. In our work we aim to consider these four systems in order to capture, in a comprehensive way, the living conditions of children and youth in Europe. there is neither an organisation that has an overview of what all these organisations are doing nor an organisation that monitors the quality of the services rendered and the impact that they may have on the development of the child.

The next question on our journey that we posed ourselves was: in which way can we help these organisations to work together on the well-being of children and the quality of their childhood?

To find an answer to this question we started to study the history of social change in the western world. We looked at the history of the movement to abolish slavery in the western world, the history of the socialist movement, of the environmental movement, the civil rights movement in the US, the movement of the emancipation of women etc. We discovered that these movements followed a similar pattern: in all these cases the citizens were the first to take action and to organise themselves.

The Alliance for Childhood therefore decided to follow the same pattern. The implication for us was:

- In the first phase: not to try to liaise and to cooperate with governmental, semi governmental or commercial organisations.
- But instead to try to identify the civil society organisations that were active in one or more columns and to invite them to cooperate with us.

When we had identified these organisations,(and this is an ongoing process), we started to contact them with the following message:

We realise that the situation in the various compartments in the diagram is affecting the quality of childhood in all other compartments and with this in the whole system. We also realise that we want to improve the situation, and we are aware that not a single organisation can do that alone. We have to do it together. But if we work together we can make a difference.

On the basis of this approach the Alliance for Childhood European Network Group has gradually grown. The current list of member organisations can be found in the annex of this book.

2. The strategy of the Alliance for Childhood European Network Group

When we had formed the Alliance for Childhood Platform the next question on the journey presented itself: 'What to do with the Platform to bring about the desired change?' Currently the strategy has the following elements:

- The Alliance for Childhood group itself and its coherence, connection and cohesion.
- The image of the child that the group embraces
- The wheels in society (or said with Jean Monnet's expression in French: l'engrenage). Below this concept is explained in more detail.
- The group as a knowledge system.
- Communication, dialogue and documentation.
- To develop a new language regarding children and childhood.
- Making links to other networks.
- The building up of institutions.
- The benefits of a vibrant network organisation: convergence regarding the objectives pursued and resource coalitions.

2.1 The Alliance for Childhood group itself and its coherence, connection and cohesion.

The Alliance for Childhood European Network Group itself is the basis of all other work that is undertaken. The first objective in this respect is to let the Alliance for Childhood group be a healthy and wholesome community that is cherished and kept vibrant by its participants, where there is a continuous dialogue, a continuous growth, and where the values we adhere to form the basis of the relationships and the activities undertaken. In short, we will try 'to walk our talk'. Furthermore we will strive for coherence, connection and cohesion within this community.

The group is formed by its participants and for this reason we invite organisations, and in some cases also individuals, that work in a similar direction. Together we can ensure that participation in the group is attractive for the members in terms of:

- networking opportunities and international contacts.
- discussions, dialogues and friendships.
- new insights.
- themes that are being discussed.
- encouragement and enthusing for the work that each one is doing, often as a lonely pioneer in his/her own situation.
- The Alliance for Childhood is also a platform where new ideas can be presented and probed in a safe environment before it is put forward to the general public.

2.2 The image of the child that the group embraces

The image of the child that the group embraces is another important pillar of the strategy. In the diagram of the whole system of the child we see that in each compartment in the diagram there are many organisations working for or with children. Each of these organisations has consciously or unconsciously, an image of the child and childhood which

is derived from that a set of objectives that it will pursue. The child may be seen as an object of adults' shaping actions, such as a learner in the educational system, a patient in the health system, a consumer in the commercial system, a media consumer by the in the global competition of his / her country.

This new insight incited us to reflect about the image of the child which it holds itself. This brought us to the image that Loris Malaguzzi formulated when he spoke about the 'rich child':

'... not materially rich, but a child born with great potential that can be expressed in a hundred languages; an active learner, seeking the meaning of the world from birth, a co-creator of knowledge, identity, culture and values; a child that can live, learn, listen and communicate, but always in relation with others; the whole child, the child with body, mind, emotions, creativity, history and social identity; an individual whose individuality and autonomy depend on interdependence, and who needs and wants connections with other children and adults; a citizen with a place in society, a subject of rights whom the society must respect and support.'

The policy of the Alliance for Childhood in this respect is not to preach its own perception of the image of the child to other parties, but instead to encourage them to reflect on the question which image of the child they hold themselves. However we find it important that each government in Europe, and also the European Commission, clarifies for itself this question.

2.3 The Wheels of Society

Jean Monnet, one of the founding fathers of the European Union, often spoke about the wheels of society (Monnet, J. Mémoires, 1976). Normally he would use the French expression for this and that is 'l'engrenage'. He meant with that expression that the entire society can be seen as organisations and individuals which have continuous interaction with each other and this can take place consciously or unconsciously. If one organisation starts to behave differently vis-à-vis the others this will have an impact on the behaviour of those others. To explain this I take the example of a parent organisation in a given European country. This organisation will have interactions with its members, the parents, but also with schools and the Ministry of Education, which may be one of the financial sponsors. If this parent organisation is for instance changing its perception about the child and childhood and education etc. it will start to act differently in all of the above mentioned relationships, or in Jean Monnet's words its wheels will start to turn differently, and as a consequence of this the other organisations will be incited to change their behaviour whether they like it or not, because the wheels of one organisation makes the wheels of another organisation turn.

2.4 The Alliance for Childhood group as a knowledge network

All activities in our society take place on the basis of the knowledge that is inside the people in question, be they the actors or stakeholders. In this context we understand that knowledge is: the set of concepts, meanings, skills and routines developed over time by individuals or groups as they process information. Knowledge is in people. It is intrinsically related to social practice. Actors generate, transform, integrate, exchange, disseminate and utilize knowledge while going about their daily business (Salomonson, M. and Engel, Dr. P. 'Networking for Innovation', 1997, page 74).

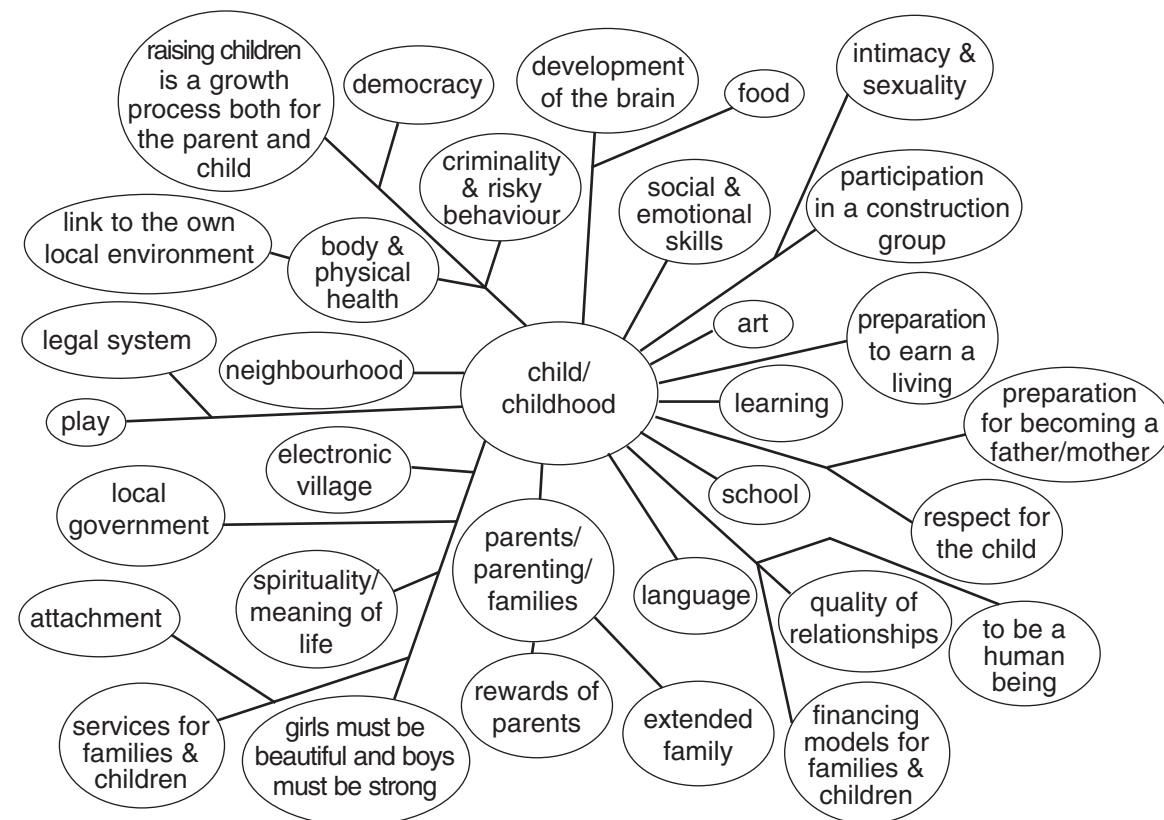
We can speak about a knowledge network when individual people join together to deliberately generate, share and use ideas, knowledge and information. Each participant is both a source and a user of information (Salomonson, M. and Engel, Dr. P. ditto).

One of the core objectives of the group was to function together as a knowledge network regarding childhood and children. The group focused its attention on three questions:

1. a major step was taken when the group decided to focus on the theme of the quality of childhood. We did not decide to focus on a specific group of children such as poor and excluded children or homeless children, or a theme like children's rights or gender equality, but instead on a gradual improvement process of the quality of childhood for the unfolding of each child's unique potential.
2. the next step was then to obtain new insights regarding a better quality of childhood and well-being of children.
3. a third element for us was to obtain new insights on how to orchestrate change processes. It is not enough for instance to know how a better school culture looks like, it is also necessary to know how to bring about the desired change process with the resources available.

New insights regarding a better quality of childhood

The following is a mind map following my reflections on the many different domains in the environment of a child:



For all these different domains we ask ourselves the following questions:

- What is the situation for the various domain at this moment? What are the underlying belief systems and values?
- For each domain we ask ourselves the question: how did it come to be like this? But also to let the past flow into the present and at the same time to imagine a possible future (after Irwin, T. and Colquhoun, M. Goethean Process, unpublished document). What is the current thinking regarding the various domains and what approaches seem to be the most beneficial for the development of children. Which practice in which country is the benchmark at present?
- What is the knowledge base in scientific research in all of the above mentioned domains and regarding the connections between them.
- For each domain: what is the challenge with which the people concerned are confronted at this moment? What kind of actions can be taken? What kind of plan can be developed?

In this context we should make one remark: our knowledge is always evolving, and every day we get new insights and perceive the subjects from another angle and in a new way.

The third question is then how to orchestrate the desired change process?

Here our policy is as follows:

- continue with the meetings of the Working Group on the Quality of Childhood at the European Parliament
- continue to publish the accounts of these sessions in the book series 'Improving the Quality of Childhood' and disseminate these books widely among policy makers, NGOs, politicians and furthermore among anybody who is interested.
- share the books with people on the internet.
- participate in hearings and workshops whenever possible.

Will this be enough? Here again we follow a rather simple line of reasoning which is as follows: When an international group of experts has reached a consensus on certain themes regarding the Quality of Childhood and children's well-being , sooner or later the message will be picked up by:

- The media
- The policy makers and politicians
- The general public at large

The International Panel on Climate Change is an example for us in this respect.

In this way a theatre of innovation was brought about with the following elements:

- A social organisation between the participating NGOs and Actors and Stakeholders came into being;
- A communication network emerged.
- Work procedures and routines were worked out.

- A mechanism to validate views regarding the subject came into being. A group learning process emerged.
- and with all of this a vibrant knowledge network in the area of the Quality of Childhood continues to function.

2.5 Documentation, communication and dialogue

When we look at conference methods that orchestrate change processes in many different ways such as the Future Search Conferences developed by Martin Weisbord (*Weisbord, M. Discovering Common Ground, 1992*) or the Open Space Technology developed by Harrison Owen (*Owen, H. Riding the Tiger: Doing Business in a Transforming World; Abbott, 1991; Owen, H.: Spirit: Transformation and Development in Organizations; Abbott, 1987*) we noticed that the documentation of these processes is an important component of the method followed, and for this reason the Alliance for Childhood group and the Working Group at the European Parliament started to document their activities.

The result of this documentation is:

- We become conscious of our development process.
- It encourages us to pursue our work.
- We also become conscious that the wider society picks up similar messages.
- We have documented our work since 1997 and this gives credibility and legitimacy when dealing with new partners or the general public at large.
- The fact that we have worked on the subject since 1997 also gives more grounding to our work. The Alliance for Childhood group still works in partnership with the original organisations and individuals.
- It helps us to remain humble because we see that our understanding and our insights have developed all the time. The dialogue with others has continually enriched our grasp of the subject.

2.6 To develop a common language regarding children and childhood.

If we want to improve the situation for children it is important to develop a language in this respect and to clarify the objectives that can be pursued. In this context the Universal Education Foundation / Learning for Well-being partnership have done pioneering work by developing the conceptual framework shown below. Here we see a child with his/her inner diversity, with its physical, mental, emotional and spiritual aspects, interacting with him/herself, others and the environment. The child is influencing and expressing his/herself towards these various environments, but at the same time is influenced by them.

The Universal Education Foundation / Learning for Well-being partnership furthermore defined the concept of well-being as 'realizing one's unique potential through physical, emotional, mental and spiritual development in relation to self, others and the environment.' This definition is based on the view of society in which all people have the ability to learn how to realize their own unique potential and all parts of society may contribute towards children's well-being.

The Framework as developed by the Universal Education Foundation / Learning for Well-being partnership:



2.7 Making links to other networks

The Alliance for Childhood group realizes that it cannot alone bring about the desired change and for this reason the Alliance works together with many like-minded organizations and individuals. This book is a reflection of this approach, because each chapter is written by a representative of an important institution or network or by people who have themselves a substantial and influential following:

- Chapter 1: Christopher Clouder, until the end of 2012 the Director of ECSWE and currently Director of the Botin Platform for Innovation in Education.
- Chapter 2: Dr. Aric Sigman, one of the leading children advocates in the UK.
- Chapter 3: Professor Dr. Dominique Haumont, Professor Dr. Luc Zimmermann and Silke Mader are part of the European Foundation for the Care of Newborn Infants (EFCNI).
- Chapter 4: Maria Kaisa Aula, Ombudsman for Children in Finland, and at the same time a leading politician in her country and member of ENOC (European Network of Ombudsmen for Children). The University of Jyväskylä granted Maria Kaisa Aula a honorary doctorate in 2013 to honour her work in the field of the Quality of Childhood.
- Chapter 5: Professor Martine Delfos, one of the bestseller authors in the Netherlands regarding children and families.
- Chapter 6: Dr. Jan van Gils, founder of the Research Centre for Childhood and Society in Brussels and until 2005 the president of the International Play

Association. He is also the co-founder and President of the European Network of Child Friendly Cities and he is since 2005 the President of the International Council for Children's Play.

Chapter 7: Jesper Juul, founder of the organisation Familylab International, a leading organisation in Europe of strengthening families. This may need to be deleted.

Chapter 8: Professor Em. Lea Pulkkinen from the University of Jyväskylä, Finland and one of the leading children advocates in her country. Professor Pulkkinen was invited to be the key-note speaker at the conference of the ACEI in Washington, USA from 28 until 31 March 2012.

2.8 The building up of institutions

Jean Monnet once said: 'nothing is brought about without men, nothing remains without institutions'. All the above mentioned elements in the strategy are based on the enthusiasm of individual people and the things they write down. In a change process these actions are indispensable, but for really bringing about change more has to happen. We are thinking in this respect about the following:

- the setting up of institutions, for instance the establishment of a EU Child Institute, in which can be concentrated and coordinated all knowledge regarding children and their development.
- the adoption of new laws regarding the Quality of Childhood and the Well-being of children.
- however, we think that the most important institutional change would be the change of the mission statements of the Ministries of Education in the EU Member States. Nearly all of them still function in accordance with the perception that children are merely future workers in the factories and companies that must bring wealth to the country in question. This is of course partly true, but a child and adolescent is more than somebody who will later be a worker in the economy. We would advocate for a new mission statement that would be inspired by a new image of the child and by a new culture which allows each child to unfold its unique potential and to engage in society.

2.9 The benefits of a vibrant network organisation: convergence regarding the objectives pursued and resource coalitions

Within our group we are fortunate to reap the benefits of being vibrant network organisation:

- Synergies between members of the Alliance for Childhood have supported their respective work. The intensified cooperation between the Alliance for Childhood and the Learning for Well-being partnership has made the co-creation of the Unfolding-Conference (to be held in Brussels in October 2013) possible.
- Since the beginning resource coalitions have emerged. This refers to practical things like office space and meeting rooms that are made available to partners in the group, many

parties and speakers that contribute free of charge to the meetings of the Working Group on the Quality of Childhood at the European Parliament and the sharing of the costs of our publications.

CONCLUSION

We are proud of the fourth book that we herewith present to you. We are proud of our authors who have been writing with their profound knowledge about their subjects, and we are thankful to the many Members of the European Parliament who have hosted our sessions in the past year, and all the persons who attended our meetings and contributed to our discussions.

The result of all our work is presented in this book, which contains many uplifting messages in the area of children and childhood, which we can summarize with the following statement:

Yes, we can improve the quality of childhood and the well-being of children and we can create a culture that allows children to unfold their unique potential.

And now we invite you to read the various contributions of our outstanding speakers and authors.

Michiel Matthes

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Information about the Conference, 'Unfolding – Creating a culture that allows each and every child to unfold their unique potential and to engage in society', to be held from 23 until 26 October 2013:

Hosted by the Higher Institute for Family Sciences, the Alliance for Childhood and Learning for Well-being with participation of Eurochild, Universal Education Foundation and ELIANT are organizing a pan-European conference: a unique 3-day international event, mixing plenary sessions and interactive seminars with Open Space Technology. This method creates the open-ness everybody enjoys in conferences: the "coffee-break-feeling" – engaging in dialogue and taking initiative.

We firmly believe that children are to be trusted as competent partners with their own aspirations, in order to unfold their unique potential. The quality of the relationships of children with others and their environments is a key element for the quality of their childhood.

We need to find a new image of children that moves far beyond our old image of children as objects of care, consumers, future workforce, "blank pages". This is the precondition for creating a culture that allows each and every child to unfold their unique potential and engage in society.

Our aim is to implement a different perspective moving from standardized to child-centred approaches and from sectoral to systemic solutions in policy and society.

We want to move from disease- and treatment-centred healthcare to promoting health and well-being. We understand learning and living as integral processes encompassing physical, emotional, mental and spiritual dimensions.

We are inviting actors from all sectors of society to collaborate beyond their silos: a trans-disciplinary approach, bridging perspectives from practice and research, on how children relate to themselves, to others and to their environments.

The conference is designed with interactive sessions, artistic experiences and participative methods which will stimulate an innovative process of mutual learning. We offer diverse learning opportunities that will engage different ways of learning and communicating. One focus point is the further unfolding of regional innovative and multidisciplinary networks in Flanders.

We are working in cooperation with children and youth. Inspiring initiatives and projects will be presented during a marketplace.

For all those who are concerned with the well-being of children and the quality of childhood such as professionals working with and for children (at different levels) and (grand)parents

We look forward to welcoming teachers, child care practitioners, professionals from all sectors (education, health, welfare, justice, child protection, media), policymakers, researchers, youth leaders and (grand)parents.

The announcement for this conference shows the unique qualities of true co-creation.

Michiel Matthes

was born in 1950 in Bussum, the Netherlands. He grew up in a nourishing family made up of both parents and four children. In 1967 he received his secondary school diploma. He studied Economics for Developing Countries at Wageningen University. From 1976 until 1980 he worked for the FAO in Ethiopia and Kenya. From 1981 until 2005 he worked for the Rabobank and the Unico Banking Group, for most of that period in the Netherlands. He married in 1976 and has a family of three sons. He became active in the advocacy field regarding the quality of childhood because of his experience as a father of these three boys. He discovered that measures taken by governmental organisations, including schools, were often not in the best interest of the child. In 1998 he founded a Platform Group in the Netherlands, and in 2006 he co-founded the Alliance for Childhood European Network Group in Brussels to advocate for the improvement of the quality of childhood in the European Union (www.allianceforchildhood.eu). Michiel Matthes is co-editor of the 'Improving the Quality of Childhood in Europe', series.