

## IMPROVING THE QUALITY OF CHILDHOOD IN THE EUROPEAN UNION

### CURRENT PERSPECTIVES



The European Council For Steiner Waldorf Education (ECSWE) is a European organisation with 22 national Waldorf Associations, representing over 650 Steiner Waldorf schools in Europe. It is registered in Brussels as an AISBL (898707869) [www.ecswe.net](http://www.ecswe.net)



The Alliance for Childhood European Network Group (AfC-ENG) was created in 2006 with the aim of improving the "Quality of Childhood" in the European Union and is part of the Alliance for Childhood global network. [www.allianceforchildhood.eu](http://www.allianceforchildhood.eu)



The Fundación Marcelino Botín has its head office in Santander (Spain). Its aims are educational, scientific, cultural and social. The Foundation contributes to the well-being and progress of society by investing its resources in education, developing an applied experience called *Responsible Education* to facilitate and foster emotional, cognitive and social development in childhood. [www.fundacionmbotin.org](http://www.fundacionmbotin.org)

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We also appreciate the contribution by Leonard and Kathryn Romney for drafting the basic report of the session on 28 April 2009 with Peter Moss.

We are grateful to all those who contributed to this publication and the time taken in supplying content to assist in its completion.

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### CURRENT PERSPECTIVES

This publication consists of talks given by a range of experts to the Working Group on the Quality of Childhood (QoC) at the European Parliament (EP).

QoC was created in 2006 by the European Council for Steiner Waldorf Education (ECSWE), the Austrian Member of the European Parliament (MEP) Mrs Karin Resetarits and the Alliance for Childhood European Network Group (AfC-ENG). Its aim is "to improve the Quality of Childhood in the European Union and in the European Educational Space."

It has been meeting every two months since 2006 in the Parliament building in Brussels and it has involved prominent organisations in Europe and high profile keynote speakers on important themes at European level that were related to its remit.

During the European Parliament legislature of 2004 to 2009 the following Members of the European Parliament were members of QoC:

#### **Alde Party**

MEP Karin Resetarits (Austria)

#### **Group of the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats in the European Parliament**

MEP Rovana Plumb (Romania)

MEP Adrian Severin (Romania)

MEP Corina Cretu (Romania)

#### **Group of the Greens**

MEP Hiltrud Breyer (Germany)

#### **Group of the European People's Party (Christian Democrats)**

MEP Marie Panayotopoulos-Cassiotou, (Greece)

MEP Livia Járóka (Hungary)

#### **Independence / Democracy Group**

Kathy Sinnott (Ireland)

As of October 2009, the following Members of the European Parliament are participating in QoC:

**Group of the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats in the European Parliament**

MEP Rovana Plumb (Romania)

MEP Adrian Severin (Romania)

MEP Corina Cretu (Romania)

Evelyn Regner (Austria)

**Group of the European People's Party (Christian Democrats)**

MEP Livia Járóka (Hungary)

QoC coordination is carried out by Michiel Matthes, Christopher Clouder and Chiara Carones.

The Working Group aims to be a think-tank for a 'peer learning' reflective activity on important childhood themes, in order to offer policy recommendations to EU Institutions and Member States on how to improve the quality of childhood and how to increase the quality and effectiveness of education and training systems in the EU.

The purpose of the publication is to inform policy makers and other interested parties about current issues to do with childhood and adolescence. The speakers all include suggestions and approaches about how to go about improving the quality of childhood.

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## INTRODUCTION

*by Christopher Clouder*

*International Director, Alliance for Childhood*

“There was a child went forth every day  
And the first object he looked on, that he became  
And that object became part of him for the day or a certain part of the day  
Or for many years or stretching cycles of years.”  
Walt Whitman.<sup>i</sup>

Questions to do with childhood today are global. It is not new to be concerned about the way our children are brought up and educated, however, now something else is in the air. Our technology facilitates communication and makes it possible to build connections all over the globe, yet can also increase our concerns as well as disseminating our successes. This can lead to exaggerated and unbalanced responses, exacerbated by the constant bombardment of the media that can lead us to see things out of proportion. One possible consequence being exaggerated, unwise and precipitate reactions. An example of this would be the increased fears around the safety of children as described by Tim Gill in *No Fear: Growing Up in a Risk Averse Society*, which looks at the contradictions inherent in current attitudes and policies engendered by media hysteria and reveals how risk averse behaviour can actually damage and endanger children's lives.

Ironically matters around childhood, that are now frequently raised, and occupy headline concerns, are also part of the overdue attention for which childhood has been longing. Too often in our history we have neglected the well-being of our children, but as we enter into a comparatively new era of children's rights, founded on the basis of the 1989 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, we can reassess the way we treat and respect our children. Technical advances make the results of research more available, as well increasing the accessibility of issues that are raised by questioning attitudes, and these new possibilities could, hopefully, lead to a wiser implementation of policy and initiatives. Political leadership at national and EU level needs to be galvanised, together with developing a fruitful partnership with those who are active within civil society for improving and sustaining the quality of childhood. All legislation should be examined as to its impact on children and the research that points to particular hazards or negative outcomes taken seriously. Hopefully the contents of this book will make a worthwhile contribution to this goal.

Looking ahead we can see there are many problems that our children will have to resolve, whether they are concerning the degradation of our environment, the complex question of values around genetic technology, conflict over diminishing resources of the earth or the changing forces of human geography. We are not only faced with new challenges in our social relationships with each other but also with our relationship to the planet itself. We have witnessed an enormous growth in travel possibilities as well as a great familiarity at one level with other cultures than our own. These tendencies are loosely termed globalisation, which some see as creating new opportunities and others as a threat to social coherence.

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*'Globalisation, because of the risk it brings of soulless standardisation, can lead to fragmentation and a reduced sense of belonging to a wider community. The excess of unbridled markets.... are being met with an excess of nationalism, regionalism and parochialism. These threaten peace and raise the spectre of resurgent racism and intolerance.'* <sup>ii</sup>

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As adults we cannot be prophets of our children's future but it can be foreseen that these problems may be overwhelming and complex, consequently the attributes of critical thinking, self-reflection, decision making and problem solving skills will be at a premium. The best that can be done is to prepare our children by modelling creative and practical alternatives in order to approach such dilemmas with understanding and courage. Whether they will be able to learn this will depend on the childhood, they in, turn have experienced. Our children face an age of hyper-complexity. This has implications for how we, as responsible educators, parents, carers and policy makers, assist them now in developing the competencies that will be demanded of them in the future. Unfortunately there are also wider tendencies and social influences that work against this, such as the perpetuation of outdated styles of education which still have their roots in 19th century thinking. Awareness of these multiple issues becomes the basis for any possibility of betterment. It is not easy to convince anybody to change their opinions but we can help open the gates of perception and encourage advocates to become activists.

In April 2007 the European Commissioner for Freedom, Security and Justice, Franco Frattini announced that in Europe *'families and schools are in crisis'*. Faced with all these symptoms is it any wonder that people turn to early childhood centres and schools to help find the solutions? Being a parent in such a demanding and turbulent time is no easy task. Yet dealing with these questions goes beyond the capacities of the state. It also falls to the organs of civic society to develop awareness, disseminate research, activate change, collaborate in bringing the urgency of the situation to the fore and bring political influence to bear. The Alliance for Childhood, a network and a community of childhood advocates spanning the globe regardless of cultural or philosophical backgrounds, holds just that vision. Not by producing litanies of complaint that evoke a bygone golden age of childhood, because for many of the world's children that did not exist. The approach of the Alliance, and similar groups, is to explore the roots of our problems and through sharing

our common human responsibility to seek creative solutions to the future wellbeing of our children. Such a community of concerned individuals and organisations has the potential to counter the soulless and mechanistic fragmentation with which we are threatened.

The nature of the questions on this subject will, of course, differ amongst countries and cultures, but by concentrating our minds and hearts on this theme we can cross all boundaries, whether ethnic, historical, national or cultural. It is precisely in our diversity that we can find our common humanity and we can inspire and encourage each other and elicit new insights and remedies. The suffering of so many children in an age of such technological prowess is unconscionable and it is not beyond our powers to make a positive difference. The plight of children who face impoverishment, abuse, inadequate healthcare, violence and starvation has to occupy our conscience as much as the dilemmas and paradoxes of affluent societies and the role of schooling and education. By networking, sharing and taking an interest in constructive and effective activities we can find the strength and courage needed. Working for childhood enables people to find the buried roots of childhood optimism and hope in themselves and draws the best out of us all. By putting energy into free cooperation, and not into the complexities of founding and funding yet another organisation, personal resources can be focused on the task in hand. A network is an ephemeral and a constantly changing phenomenon, but precisely in that condition it reflects our sense of wonder and imagination.

Paulo Freire puts this approach passionately in his seminal *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*,

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*'When a word is deprived of its dimension of action, reflection automatically suffers as well, and the word is changed into idle chatter..... It becomes an empty word, one which cannot denounce the world, for denunciation is impossible without a commitment to transform, and there is no transformation without action.'* <sup>iii</sup>

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This book is, of course, full of words, however we can also turn them into action. By sharing our concerns and celebrating our successes freely and trustingly, without the constrictions of self-justification or organisational ambition, we can find, in ourselves as adults, the resources that can contribute to childhood well-being. Although Freire was mainly concerned with the milieu of deprivation, disadvantage and poverty in Sao Paulo, his words still ring true, because nearly 40 years later we can see too many children facing new forms of disadvantage and lack, including within so-called prosperous societies. A global effort of civil society is called for to complement the activities of Inter-Governmental Organisations and national policies.

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*'The pursuit of full humanity however, cannot be carried out in isolation or individualism, but only in fellowship and solidarity.'* <sup>iv</sup>

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*i* Walt Whitman. *There was a Child in Leaves of Grass* Viking. New York. 1959

*ii* Alain Michel. *What Schools for the Future*. OECD. Paris 1999.P. 20

*iii* Paulo Freire. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Penguin Books. London. 1996. P. 68

*iv* *ibid*. P.66

*New Scientist* 27/05/2005 Gender bending chemicals found to feminise boys, Andy Coghlan

*The Guardian* 6/11/2007 Two year olds at risk from 'gender-bending chemicals', Owen Bowcott

## How to improve the Quality of Childhood: Setting the scene

by Michiel Matthes

*Secretary-General of the Alliance for Childhood European Network Group and  
Secretary of the Working Group on the Quality of Childhood at the European Parliament*

### The approach and the philosophy of the Alliance for Childhood European Network Group

When fish are dying and start to float to the surface of a lake we all know something is wrong with the quality of the water in the lake or with some aspect of the environment of the fish species in question. Ecologists will work on identifying the pollution in the lake that caused the problem and try to remedy it.

When things go wrong with human beings most of the time we follow another approach. To stay with the metaphor of the fish and the water: we take the fish (i.e. the child or the adolescent) out of the lake and put it into an aquarium (or in human terms prisons, institutions, remedial programmes) and start to treat the fish with the aim of 'repairing' what has gone wrong.

We can see that the scientific disciplines that underpin the treatment of the fish in the aquarium are in the 'repair mode'. Many scientists and practitioners have done wonderful work in this respect, but very often they have not asked themselves the following question: "In the first place how can we improve the quality of the water so that the fish will remain healthy?"

One of the first scientists to follow this ecological approach was Urie Bronfenbrenner who in 1979 published his seminal work 'The Ecology of Human Development, Experiments by Nature and Design'. He also unmasked many of the psychological approaches of the time as being mainly in the 'repair mode' rather than taking an ecological approach. Since 1979 scientists have come a long way in discovering ecological relationships that are important for human development (for examples of publications see [www.allianceforchildhood.eu](http://www.allianceforchildhood.eu)). But the scientists who work in this new way are often an (under-funded) minority within their disciplines.

The 'fish-in-the-water' metaphor nicely describes the approach and philosophy of the Alliance for Childhood European Network Group. The Alliance for Childhood European Network Group defines itself in a similar way to an environmental organisation that strives to protect nature and the physical environment. In the case of the Alliance for Childhood European Network Group the focus is on the quality of childhood. As we state in our brochure:



*The members 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 members 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 members 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/ 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.*

### **The image of the child, held by an organisation and / or an entire society, is of decisive importance for the well-being of its children**

In the course of our work we discovered that the 'image of a child' that we hold is of decisive importance for the well-being of the children in our society. If the image that a society holds of a child is that of a future combatant in the global competition of his/her country then this society will design the services for its children and adolescents in accordance with this perception. Another dominant perception is that a child should be successful in life, have a good career, acquire high status and earn as much money as possible. When this is the perception of the main stakeholders and actors then services will be based on these views.

Because of the importance of these perceptions we recommend to each actor and stakeholder, who plays a role vis-à-vis children, to examine for him/herself the image that he/she holds of the child and the adolescent. Every government in the European Union, the European Commission, the Council of the European Union and the European Parliament would benefit from undertaking this exercise.

The Alliance for Childhood European Network Group is inspired by the image of the child as described by Loris Malaguzzi who speaks of 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.'*

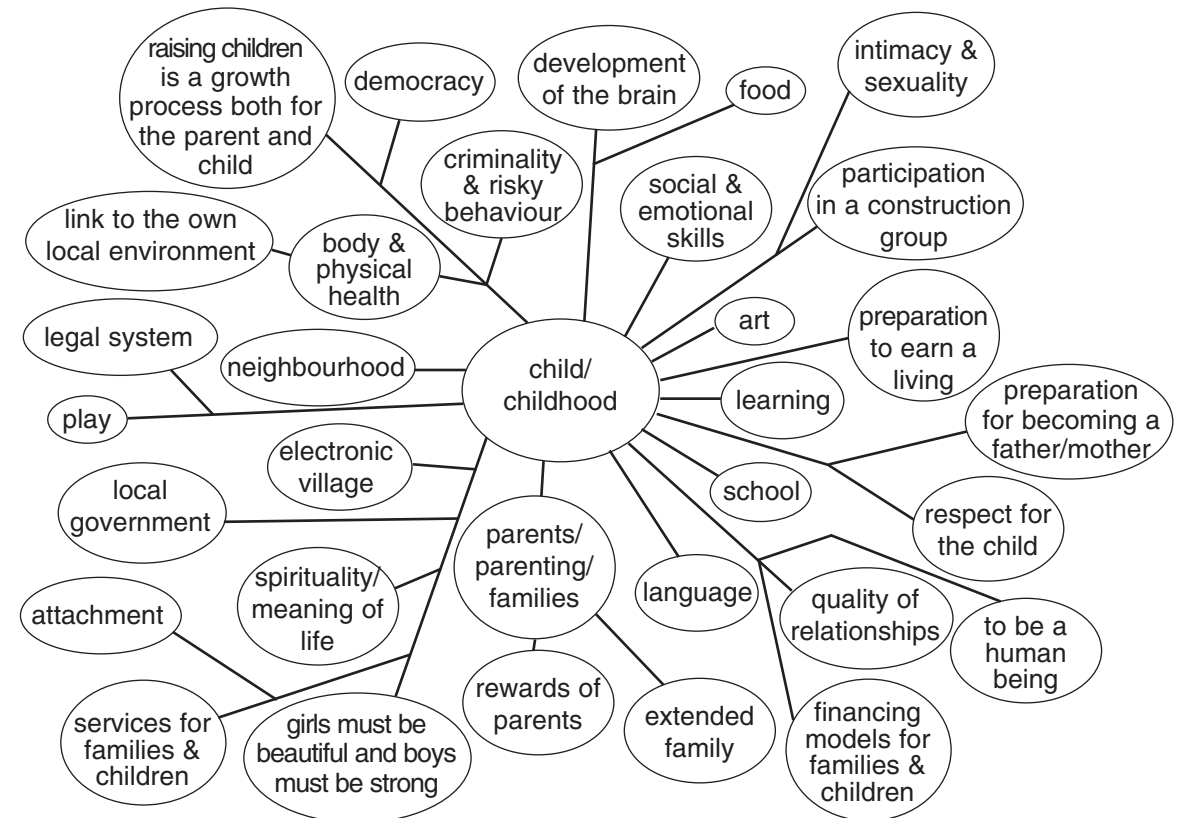
The Alliance for Childhood European Network Group is also inspired by the mission statement of the DECET Group (Diversity in Early Childhood Education and Training) which reads as follows:

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. (In reference to Article 2, UN Convention on the Rights of the Child).

### **The Alliance for Childhood European Network Group is an advocacy group**

The Alliance for Childhood European Network Group advocates a continuous dialogue with all actors and stakeholders on the subject of the Quality of Childhood and the well-being of children and adolescents. It is clear that our exploration of these subjects will continue to generate deeper insights and stimulate us to take action that will be ever more enriching and wholesome.

### **The Quality of childhood has many domains**



Within the Alliance for Childhood European Network Group we use the diagram above as a template to further our thinking about the many domains in which improving the Quality of Childhood will have a positive impact. For each element in the diagram, but also for the whole image, we ask ourselves the following questions:

- What is the present situation like and how did it come to be like this?
- Can we think in a new way about this element and about its quality?
- In this context what is the level of respect being shown to the child / adolescent and what is the level of participation of the child / adolescent (if any)?
- How does the element in question relate to the quality of the relationships of the child with important adults and others?
- Can we formulate how we would like it to be in the future?

### Key Policy Questions for Ministers and Policy Makers

In this book many recommendations are made to ministers and policy makers with regard to how to improve the Quality of Childhood in their country or area of responsibility. There are three high level initiatives that can be undertaken in each country and/or at the European level.

#### *Future Search Conference on Children and Childhood.*

In most member states of the European Union the various government ministries still act independently with regards to their activities for and with children and adolescents. In many cases this will mean that one ministry's programme will conflict with the programme of another and thus both programmes become less effective.

We therefore recommend that in each country a Future Search Conference is held regarding children and childhood. A Future Search Conference\* is a conference in which the main stakeholders and actors come together to share:

- the things they are proud of, and also the things they are less proud of, or even sorry about.
- their wishes for the future of children and childhood and their need for cooperation with others. This will always be the case since it is not possible for a single ministry to address all the challenges with which it is faced.
- In the last part of the conference an inventory is made of activities, both individual and combined, of the participating ministries.

In the conference programme attention should also be paid to the image of the child as held by the various ministries. At the end a shared image of the child may emerge.

A conference like this is very important because up to now the subject of children and childhood has not been thought through in a fundamental way by most governments in EU member states. We also recommend that the European Commission considers holding such a Future Search conference, because we note that the various General Directorates dealing with children sometimes speak in different languages and are not always fully aware of what colleagues from another General Directorate are doing with regard to children and childhood.

#### *Creation of a European Union Institute for Families, Children and Childhood*

In the chapter entitled A Vision for Children and Childhood I have described how fragmented the scientific and policy areas regarding children, adolescents and childhood are. For example:

- There are many academic disciplines that focus on the subject, such as education, pedagogy, psychology, psychiatry, paediatrics and health, criminology, sociology and many other subjects. These academics tend not to communicate very much nor do they tend to work together across the various disciplines.
- In the areas of physics, chemistry, and health the international scientific community is a close knit network. With regards to the academic disciplines concerning children each country is doing its own work and the leading scientists in one country do not tend to know their colleagues in another. These circumstances hamper learning and development.
- Regarding interventions in the area of childhood we consider it to be beneficial for practitioners who work with children on a daily basis to have regular contact with the academics who are studying in this area. For both groups of professionals this contact is beneficial. However, in many countries there is still a lot of room for improvement in this respect.
- The social security systems regarding families, children and childhood in the various EU member states differ very much. This offers the member states many opportunities to learn from one another. More is said on this theme below.

The Alliance for Childhood European Network Group advocates the establishment of a European Institute for Children, Childhood and Families that brings all these areas together. All stakeholders and actors will greatly benefit from a bringing together of these disciplines on a European scale.

#### *Social Security Systems for Families, Children and Childhood: the Scandinavian Models are the De Facto Benchmark*

Over the past few years the Alliance for Childhood European Network Group has been studying the many aspects that influence the Quality of Childhood in the various countries. We are therefore very happy with the excellent comparative studies that have been published in the past few years. For example:

- The OECD's study of Early Childhood Education and Care entitled Starting Strong I and II.
- The various studies of the Bruegel Economic Think Tank
- The series of the UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre in Florence, Italy on childhood. The titles of the eight studies are:
  - Report card No 1: A league table of child poverty in rich nations
  - Report Card No 2: A league table of child deaths by injury in rich nations
  - Report Card No 3: A league table of teenage births in rich nations
  - Report Card No 4: A league table of educational disadvantage in rich nations
  - Report Card No 5: A league table of child maltreatment deaths in rich nations
  - Report Card No 6: Child poverty in rich nations

- Report Card No 7: Child poverty in perspective: an overview of child well-being in rich countries
- Report Card No 8: A league table of early childhood education and care in economically advanced countries
- The OECD's PISA Studies
- Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett's book 'The Spirit Level, Why More Equal Societies Almost Always Do Better'. Richard Wilkinson was the key-note speaker on 8 September 2009 at the Working Group on the Quality of Childhood in the European Parliament. The report of his presentation will be included in next year's publication.
- The Politics of Parental Leave, edited by Sheila Kamerman and Peter Moss
- Social and Emotional Education. An International Analysis by the Fundación Marcelino Botín.

All these comparative studies share one broad conclusion: that the Scandinavian countries have the best scores regarding a whole range of social and educational outcomes and also regarding economic and financial indicators. These studies point to the fact that the social security systems in the Scandinavian countries form an integral part of this success story. The Alliance for Childhood European Network Group therefore recommends this theme as an integral part of the work programme of the proposed European Union Institute for Families, Children and Childhood.



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*\* More information about setting up Future Search Conferences can be found in the book by Marvin R. Weisbord 'Discovering Common Ground, How Future Search Conferences bring People together to Achieve Breakthrough Innovation, Empowerment, Shared Vision, and Collaborative Action.'*