

CHAPTER 1

by Michiel Matthes & Lea Pulkkinen

INTRODUCTION

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

This series of books *Improving the Quality of Childhood in Europe* is based on the talks in the European Parliament organised by the Working Group on the Quality of Childhood (QoC), as explained in the Preface. The first QoC Talk was hosted by MEP Karin Resetaris from Austria. Christopher Clouder, at that time Director of ECSWE (the European Council for Steiner Waldorf Education), was introduced to her by the Austrian representative in ECSWE Rosmarie Bluder. Christopher Clouder is a co-founder of the Alliance for Childhood European Network Group that Michiel Matthes has chaired from its inception in 2006. Michiel Matthes describes the series of books in the first part of this Introduction. The present volume is presented jointly by him and Lea Pulkkinen.

In the first QoC Talk in 2006, there were two speakers, Christopher Clouder and Professor Hans van Crombrugge, and the topic was *The toxic childhood syndrome and the quality of childhood*. When I invited Hans van Crombrugge to speak about the quality of childhood he was pleased with the question, but also a little puzzled, and he replied: "This is a good question and it has never occurred to me to think about it in this way. When I studied pedagogy the first year of the course was the same for everybody, and then students would choose a specialisation in the second year and then they would never speak with each other again. Your question takes me back to the basic issues on which we work." The first QoC Talk was attended by eight participants. As the organizer of the event I was a bit nervous of MEP Karin Resetaris' reaction because perhaps she would have been disappointed that so few people attended. But I need not have worried about this because she reacted enthusiastically and told me: "These two speakers are very knowledgeable and the question and answer session afterwards was most inspiring." She was therefore willing to work with us and she hosted nine QoC Talks before leaving the European Parliament in the summer of 2008. That is how it all began.

I recorded the sessions with a tape-recorder, transcribed them and then I edited them to prepare them for publication. The participants of the Alliance for Childhood European Network Group were enthusiastic about these texts because they represented a new way of looking at childhood issues and they also showed the way in how our societies could address the challenges in this area.

With the encouragement from the Network members and most notably from ECSWE the Alliance decided to look for a commercial publisher to publish the texts as a book. Initially, we did not succeed in finding a publisher, but in 2009 ECSWE and the Alliance for Childhood European Network Group obtained a grant from the European Union's Jean Monnet Programme. This support made it possible for the Alliance to publish the first four books. The costs of producing the last three books have been shared between the Alliance and the Universal Education Foundation (which is now known as the Learning for Well-being Foundation). The chapters of all the volumes in this series can be downloaded from the website: www.allianceforchildhood.eu

Volume 1 had 18 chapters containing many new ideas, some of which were taken up by governments in the EU member states or by the European institutions themselves. As an example of one of the chapters in the first book I would like to mention the contribution made by Jesper Juul from Denmark, of which the title is *The quality of child-adult relationships in families and schools*. In his chapter he described that families find themselves in a new landscape in comparison to previous generations, because society, with its shared moral norms, has completely changed, as have marriages, and because of this today's young parents are pioneers who must find their way. A new insight from Juul is, for instance, that the child should not be seen as an object, who must obey, learn, take tests, be nice, be clever, adapt himself / herself to the wishes of the adult, but instead that the child can be seen as a subject and that the relationship of an adult with a child could be the relationship between two human beings who have both equal dignity.

Volume 2 was published in 2011 and had eleven chapters. A chapter of which we are proud was written by Professor Richard Wilkinson, the co-author of the book *The spirit level: Why more equal societies almost always do better*. The QoC Talk with Richard Wilkinson took place on 8 September 2009 and was hosted by MEP Rovanna Plumb from Romania. In the summer of 2009 Rovanna Plumb had indicated to me that she would be willing to host another event in September, and that the subject should be: Continuing to work in Europe on the quality of childhood during the present economic downturn. I accepted the challenge, but at that moment had no idea how to handle this request. I then sent an email to my network and Professor Peter Moss from London replied and introduced me to the book written by Richard Wilkinson and his wife Kate Pickett. The Alliance for Childhood European Network Group was the first to invite Richard Wilkinson to Brussels. His presentation was a big success. However what pleased us most was the fact that afterwards he was invited many times to the various European institutions in Brussels. Meanwhile the authors' new insights have been integrated into the policy discourse of most global forums such as the UN and the EU.

Volume 3, published in 2012, had ten chapters. I was pleased to have in this issue the chapter by Dr. Aric Sigman who wrote about *The impact of screen media on children: a Eurovision for Parliament*. Aric Sigman is one of the people who was aware of the risks of viewing too much screen media, especially among children under the age of three. Regarding this age group he states that the European Parliament should have an opinion about the number of hours that young children are spending in front of the screen and in particular about the age at which they should be allowed access to screen media. Furthermore he explains that scientific evidence is now available that too much screen time is linked to health risks, physical fitness and what he calls 'internet addiction'. Meanwhile this subject has been picked up by the media and policy makers and we are pleased to have in the current volume a chapter on the same subject by Professor Dr. Paula Bleckmann.

Volume 4, published in 2013, had seven chapters. This book is a good illustration of the connection of the Alliance for Childhood European Network Group with Finland since two chapters were written by Finnish authors. One was by Professor Lea Pulkkinen, the co-editor of the current volume,

who wrote about *Goals for the Decade of Childhood 2012–2022, based on Ten Pillars of a Good Childhood: a Finnish perspective*. This text was an elaborated version of the keynote address that Lea Pulkkinen gave at the Global Summit on Childhood in Washington D.C. in March 2012. The second Finnish chapter was by Maria Kaisa Aula, Ombudsman for Children in Finland. The title of her chapter is *Improving the quality of childhood from the perspective of the Ombudsman for Children in Finland*. She approached the theme from a child rights perspective. The key document with regards to children's rights is the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). Maria Kaisa Aula discussed how we can define the criteria for a good childhood based on this document and furthermore she discussed the role of the ombudsmen for children in promoting the quality of childhood. In addition she addressed the same questions from the perspective of the EU Institutions.

Volume 5, published in 2015, had eleven chapters and in this book the Alliance for Childhood European Network Group invited two American keynote speakers who had spoken at the Global Summit on Childhood in Washington to each give a QoC Talk in the European Parliament and to contribute a chapter to our book. The speakers were Enola Aird who spoke about the dangers of applying biotechnology to human beings and as a consequence the possible alteration of the human species. The other American speaker was Susan Linn, the director of the Campaign for a Commercial-free Childhood. In her chapter she explains in detail how today corporations specifically target children in order to increase their sales. In the USA at the beginning of this century companies were spending some \$ 17 billion per year targeting children using the most sophisticated techniques. She describes that the underlying message of commercial marketing – that the things we buy will make us happy – is a major factor in the acquisition of materialistic values, which have been found to be linked to depression and low self-esteem in children.

Volume 6, published in 2016, had eleven chapters. Dr. Jan C.M. Willems from Maastricht University, who was the first Dutch chair holder in Children's Rights at the VU University in Amsterdam from 2002 to 2008, for the occasion of the 25th anniversary of the CRC was invited to write a chapter on the following theme: What has been attained in this period and what he deemed necessary next steps in this respect? Jan Willems stated that today all member states of the European Union have signed the convention. However, violence against children (child abuse and neglect), prejudice against children (seeing children as the property of their parents and not as people with rights), and discrimination against children (unequal protection under the law) are still abundant, including in Europe's high-income states. Both governmental and nongovernmental actors and activists appear to be little aware of the nature and scope of the violence, prejudice and discrimination against children. This makes the task – and the duty – to reduce violence against children, and to advance their social and legal position, an extremely challenging one.

The present volume, number 7, contains 12 chapters. We have grouped them into three topical areas: educational philosophy and ideas (six chapters), children's lives (three chapters), and well-being of children (three chapters). A short introduction to each theme is given on the following pages.



MEP Hannu Takkula – a teacher by training – who hosted one of the QoC sessions in 2017 criticised the fact that in educational matters the most important consideration is nowadays the Euro. It can be observed everywhere that economic viewpoints dominate decision making, not only for cost saving reasons but also to shape children to become productive members of society. We share this concern. There is a focus on speeding up development by means of early education and a structured learning path from early education through to life-long learning. The school is expected to equip children and young people for the world of work. Comparative studies in students' achievements are conducted and standardized assessments of children as young as age 5 are being developed. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) has become an international authority on education. There is a danger that educational philosophy with a deep understanding of children's developmental processes at different ages is being set aside.

As Professor Gert Biesta, the author of [chapter 2. The duty to resist: Redefining the basics for today's schools](#), says the school is used as a kind of instrument for solving societal problems. He encourages the school not just to be a function of society but also to resist what society expects of it. He pays attention to the present exaggerated language of learning and subsequent 'learnification'. People at different ages are defined as 'learners' who learn in 'learning environments'. Biesta argues that this language is in some sense 'empty' with regard to content, purpose and relationships (learning what, why, and from whom). He writes that we need a broader framework for education rather than simply learning existing knowledge and skills. The purpose of education is fundamental. He differentiates three functions of the purpose of education: qualification (acquisition of knowledge, skills, dispositions), socialization (communication and access to traditions, cultures, ways of acting), and subjectification (criticality, autonomy, grown-up-ness). School should resist attempts to reduce education to just its qualification function. Competing in the economic market is not sufficient. The real basics for education should be to do with the existential questions of democracy (how we will manage to live together in plurality), care (live in a humane way), and ecology (live on this vulnerable and partly already exhausted planet).

The principles of the Learning for Well-being Foundation (wholeness, purpose, diversity, relationship, participation, systems and feedback) have guided the programme described in [chapter 3. Elham Palestine: An inclusive partnership for systemic change](#). The authors are Marwan Awartani, a prestigious Palestinian scientist, and Wahid Jubran, a leader in education. Applicants were invited to submit their initiatives which met the Learning for Well-being guiding principles, that cover socialization and subjectification as the purpose of education in Biesta's terms. The goal is to improve the physical, mental, emotional and spiritual well-being of Palestinian children in a holistic way. The Elham programme is an intervention to enhance the learning environment under particularly difficult circumstances.

Socialization, as the purpose of education, presupposes participation that creates active citizens and is the building block of democracy, as Jonathan Levy describes in [chapter 4. Democracy begins with children's rights](#). He is the scientific and international development director of the Children as Actors for Transforming Society (CATS) initiative. International CATS conferences have been organized since 2013 with the aim of creating a world where children and adults work together in mutual respect, building a more just and sustainable society. In the article he describes the vision and principles of CATS as well as the positive impacts of CATS events.

That art works on multiple levels and has multiple effects is the theme of [chapter 5. Art education promotes the development of the child and society](#) written by Eeva Anttila, a Finnish professor of dance pedagogy. She is worried about the low value placed on the arts in the present educational policy world, and discusses the theoretical and philosophical foundations for the necessity of aesthetic experience, imagination, and artistic activity for people and communities. In line with Biesta's educational philosophy, it can be read in her article that art education not only increases qualification (skills), but also socialization (understanding of other people and cultures) and subjectification (human being as an ethical actor in relation to other people and the environment). Anttila concludes with the idea that civilization is based on every person's desire to learn, understand, know, and experience. This intrinsic need is nourished by art from early childhood onwards and it is our most important asset.

[Chapter 6. The new educational curriculum in Finland](#) was written by Irmeli Halinen the Head of National Curriculum Development. The goals of education are defined broadly in this curriculum with the leading principle that education is the best way to build a sustainable future. The purpose of education is to promote life-wide learning, well-being, and a sustainable way of living. The article describes the reform process of the Finnish national core curriculum in which children were invited to actively participate, their views were elicited, discussed and helped to shape the new curriculum. The value basis consists of four value pillars: respecting the uniqueness of each student, promoting growth as a civilized human being and active citizen of a democratic society, valuing cultural diversity, and understanding the necessity of a sustainable way of living. Art education has traditionally been valued in Finnish educational philosophy and at school and it should further be given much weight in education policy.

The last chapter in the group of chapters on educational philosophy and ideas is written by Mathias Urban; [chapter 7. \(D\)evaluation of early childhood education and care? A critique of the OECD's International Early Learning Study](#). He is an expert in early education and care and works on several international projects. He presents critical arguments concerning the project conducted by the OECD the purpose of which is to develop a standardized assessment of 5-year-old preschool children for international comparisons, as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) does with 15-year-olds. He presents arguments against this study, for instance, its methodological flaws and general inappropriateness for the evaluation of the development of small children. This study draws attention away from

meaningful initiatives to create in-depth understanding of early childhood. By using Biesta's terminology, education includes much more than the qualification, that is the acquisition of measurable skills. Early childhood should create a basis for one's whole development.

|| CHILDREN'S LIVES

The motto of the Alliance for Childhood European Network Group is: Improving the quality of childhood in Europe. It is our wish that across the whole of Europe this will be a gradual process to which people dedicate themselves. However, within the Alliance we did not define precisely the concept of the quality of childhood because living contexts are different. We can add that these contexts are also in a continuous flux. Factors such as the continuing globalization of the economy, climate change, technological developments, and conflicts and wars in neighbouring areas cause millions of people to flee to Europe or elsewhere. Also the poverty in Africa and the lack of opportunities for young people in these African countries push them to want to try their luck in Europe. And all of these changes have a profound impact on the way that children grow up in our European societies. In many cases governments are not ready to face the new challenges associated with these changes.

At the Alliance for Childhood European Network Group we try to have an open mind vis-à-vis these new developments, to identify new threats and, if possible, to have a dialogue with concerned people on these issues. In this regard the editors are most pleased that we could incorporate three chapters about newly emerging domains into the current volume. In this respect we refer to Professor Paula Bleckmann who wrote [chapter 8. Toward media literacy or media addiction? Contours of good governance for healthy childhood in the digital world](#). Paula Bleckmann contends that digitalisation is a fact of life nowadays. She stresses, however, that it is now up to our societies to find ways for children to acquire the skills which will allow them to make full use of the chances and potentials of digital media and to prevent the risks connected with it. Extreme risks include pathological forms of media usage such as Internet Gaming Disorder.

A second emerging domain was addressed by Professor Frosso Motti-Stefanidi from Greece, who wrote [chapter 9. Who among immigrant youth does well and why? Public policy implications of research into immigrant youth adaptation](#). Frosso Motti has done extensive research in this area and approaches the subject in a broad way. In the first place she looks at the characteristics of the social environment of the society to which the immigrant is adapting. She asks what the cultural beliefs, social representations and ideologies are, as well as the variables that reflect power positions within society. Secondly she looks at the interaction between the society and the immigrant youth and thirdly she looks at the individual level and pays attention to personality characteristics and personal agency. She concludes that the successful adaptation of immigrant youth is the result of interventions on all three levels.

Via MEP Julie Ward we became aware of an organisation called COPE (Children of Prisoners Europe), a European umbrella organisation of national organisations that support the situation of children with a parent in prison. In many countries these children have been overlooked by policy makers, politicians, the media and the public at large. But these children face a series of social and emotional difficulties as a result of their parent's arrest, sentence and imprisonment. COPE estimates that in the European Union the number of these children amounts to about 800,000. With appropriate and timely support and promotion of their best interests, most children can go on to lead safe, included, happy and achieving lives. [Chapter 10. Considering the best interests of every child with a parent in prison: an impossible task?](#) was written by Hannah Lynn from COPE. She describes how policies can be shaped to achieve optimal results.

III WELL-BEING OF CHILDREN

International comparisons of children's lives and well-being are valuable for many reasons. They reveal possible problems in the material circumstances of childhood and children's subjective well-being. They make it possible to estimate how much children's subjective well-being is explained by the materialistic aspects of life, and how much subjective well-being is explained by other factors. We need to understand what the other aspects of life are that affect the quality of childhood. Improving the quality of children's lives is the motto of the Alliance for Childhood European Network Group and is also the theme of this series of books. Therefore, comparative studies are most relevant for the Alliance.

Comparative data collections and analyses have been conducted continuously since 1983 in a WHO-collaborative study, the Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (HBSC) that has provided a valuable dataset for national and international policy-making. [Chapter 11. Collaborations that work: Lesson from the Health Behaviour in School-aged Children \(HBSC\) study](#), written by Aixa Y. Alemán-Díaz, analyses elements that make the network of researchers (currently including over 400 researchers in 47 countries) successful in working on this type of long-standing project. Three main elements are highlighted: partnerships, rules of engagement, and sustained interactions. The author concludes that the "most important by-product has been a research collective that produces something that is greater than what individual teams can produce on their own."

[Chapter 12. Children's worlds in Europe](#), written by Jonathan Bradshaw and Gwyther Rees, presents a survey of over 60,000 children aged 8 to 12 years in 18 countries including ten European countries. Children's opinions have been surveyed with regards to home and family relationships, money and economic circumstances, friends and other relationships, school, the local area, how they spent their time, the self (including self respect, body image, and so on), and children's daily activities. In addition, subjective well-being was assessed in terms of how satisfied they were with their life as a whole. In all indicators there were differences between countries so that the countries with the best and poorest levels differed from one another significantly. The tables of the

article illustrate similarities and differences between the countries, and present quite surprising results on the low association between children's satisfaction and the external circumstances of life.

The media and the general public are often not aware of what is happening in Brussels, while on the other hand some 80% of laws adopted in the Member States have been initiated in Brussels. And this is true for all policy domains, including that of children and childhood. Small policy steps taken in Brussels can have, ultimately, a big impact on the quality of the lives of ordinary citizens, including those of children. For this reason we have invited again Dr. Agata D'Addato from Eurochild to contribute to our book. [Chapter 13. Reflections on how recent EU developments in the social field can deliver for children in Europe](#) discusses, for example, the breakthrough that took place when in Gothenburg, Sweden on 17 November 2017 the European Pillar of Social Rights was proclaimed by the chairs of the European Parliament, the Council of the European Union and the European Commission.

BIOGRAPHIES

Michiel Matthes was born in the Netherlands where he studied Economics for Developing Countries at Wageningen University. From 1976 until 1980 he worked for the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the UN (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 became interested in the quality of childhood and wanted to advocate its improvement. In 1998 he founded a Platform Group in the Netherlands, and in 2006 he co-founded with Christopher Clouder the Alliance for Childhood European Network Group in Brussels. He has been chairing it from its inception, edited its series of books and acted as an author of an article in each of its volumes.

Lea Pulkkinen is Professor Emerita of Psychology at the University of Jyväskylä in Finland and the Chair of Haukkala Foundation, the purpose of which is to promote mental well-being in children and youth in collaboration with other actors both nationally and internationally. Her major research work has been a longitudinal study on personality and social development as presented in the book *Human development from middle childhood to middle adulthood* (2017). She has actively participated in the work of the Alliance for Childhood European Network Group since 2011, acted as one of the editors of its series of books since Volume 5 and as an author of articles in these books since Volume 3. She is a member of the Council of the Alliance.