



REACTION OF THE ALLIANCE FOR CHILDHOOD EUROPEAN NETWORK GROUP WITH REGARDS TO THE PAPER OF DG FOR EDUCATION AND CULTURE OF THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION ENTITLED SCHOOLS FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

Subject: Reaction of the Alliance for Childhood European Network Group with regards to the paper entitled 'Commission Staff Working Paper Schools for the 21st Century', Brussels, 11.07.07, SEC (2007)1009.

1. STATE CLEARLY AT THE START OF YOUR CONTRIBUTION YOUR NAME, THE NAME OF THE ORGANISATION AND IN WHICH CAPACITY YOU WRITE

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I write this reaction as the Secretary-General of the Alliance for Childhood European Network Group, in which participate 12 organisations from 9 EU member states (see annex). The Alliance for Childhood European Network is characterised by the following:

The Focus of the Work of the Alliance for Childhood European Network Group:
to improve the Quality of Childhood in the European Union.

The Mission of the Alliance for Childhood European Network Group:

The members of the Alliance for Childhood European Network Group share a deep concern about the quality of childhood in the member states of the European Union. For this reason, they have come together and have decided to start to work together to improve the 'Quality of Childhood' in the member states of the European Union.

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.

2. GENERAL COMMENT ON THE PAPER

The paper entitled 'Commission Staff Working Paper Schools for the 21st Century' is mainly based on the philosophy developed in:

- The Lisbon Strategy, which was adopted in March 2000.
- OECD's PISA Study.

However the authors do not take into account other major decisions and policy papers decided upon within the EU framework, or by other international organisations such as the OECD and UNESCO such as:

- the Communication of the Commission entitled 'Towards an EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child', Brussels, 4.7.2006 COM (2006) 367 final,
- the European Council Recommendation of 31 March 1992 on child care (92/241/EEC), an important statement by member state governments on principles and objectives;
- Starting Strong II, Early Childhood Education and Care, OECD 2006;
- Learning: The treasure within, Report to UNESCO of the International Commission on Education for the Twenty-First Century, under the chairmanship of Jacques Delors;

The side effects of the PISA-Study: the spreading of a stressful testing culture

The abundance of statistics offered in the PISA Study are a rich source for policy makers. However there are also side effects to the PISA work. In our Working Group on the Quality of Childhood in the European Parliament we paid attention to these side effects in our session on 9 January 2007, and Christopher Clouder, one of the members of our group, then made the following statements:

Perspectives from the Alliance for Childhood: PISA Study spreads a stressful testing culture

Mr Clouder draws the attention to the PISA Study of the OECD. He points out that the PISA Study provides many interesting statistics about the performance of children of 15 years old. However the statistics are shown in the form of league tables. Because of this a competitive element is brought into the exercise and countries and schools start to compete with each other for a higher place in the PISA League Table. The result: a narrowing of the curriculum and overemphasis on three subjects (mathematics, native language, science) and a spreading of a stressful testing culture. These side effects of the PISA Study could be harmful for children and deteriorate the Quality of Childhood. His conclusion: we should learn to handle participation in the PISA Study in a better and more thoughtful way.

Concrete action to be taken both on the national and the EU-level:

- Don't continue to treat children, but also teachers, as objects, but start to treat them as subjects.
- Create another climate around the PISA-evaluations.

3. REACTION WITH REGARDS TO QUESTION 6: HOW CAN SCHOOL COMMUNITIES HELP TO PREPARE YOUNG PEOPLE TO BE RESPONSIBLE CITIZENS, IN LINE WITH FUNDAMENTAL VALUES SUCH AS PEACE AND TOLERANCE OF DIVERSITY?

I agree in general with the text of paragraph 2.6, but it does not go deep enough. In this context I like to make the following remarks:

Within our Network Group we honour the ‘First Rule of Pedagogy’, which says:

you have to be yourself the change you want to see in the child

Mahatma Gandhi / René Diekstra

If you as a school want pupils and students to acquire democratic values and attitudes and behaviour, then you have first to treat them in that way. That means that you have to give the students a real say with regards to:

- The contents of the curriculum,
- The way it is structured, the time schedule, the testing regime.
- The social organisation of the school etc.

In this context I like to draw your attention to the work of the following persons (a small selection):

- Jesper Juul (Denmark), author of ‘The competent child’
- Prof Luc Stevens (Netherlands)
- Prof Ferre Laevers, founder of the Experiential Education Project (Belgium)
- Professor René Diekstra (Netherlands)
- Professor Peter Senge, author of ‘Schools that Learn’ (USA).
- Professor Gert Biesta, author of ‘Beyond Learning’ (UK);
- Janusz Korczak (Poland).

Concrete Action to be taken on the national and the EU-level:

In Britain the Ministry for Education was reorganised and refocused and is now called the Ministry of Children, Families and Schools, so that the child becomes a central focus for policy and that such policies are better coordinated. I recommend this type of change in the organisation of the ministries in each EU-member state and in the European Commission itself.

4. GENERAL RECOMMENDATION

The Alliance for Childhood European Network Group recommends to the European Commission to establish a European research institute regarding the rights of the child and the quality of childhood in the European Union. The task of this institute should be:

- to collect statistical data on children, children’s rights and the Quality of Childhood; UNICEF’s Report Card No 7 entitled ‘An overview of child well-being in rich countries’ goes in this direction;
- to command an overview of the new developments in all research concerning children in order to provide policy makers and other stakeholders in the Member States and on the European level a sound knowledge base and to help them in their policy work and, in the second place, to create an environment for the stakeholders where they can learn from each other. This will be beneficial, because at present the various national research communities have little contact with each other. A European research institute will enhance the exchange of knowledge and bring the work of all on a higher level.

The Members of the Alliance for Childhood European Network Group:

ARGE-Erziehungsberatung, Austria	Martina Leibovici
The Linkedness Project, Belgium	Gie Deboutte
	Kaat Pattyn
Experiential Education Project, Belgium	Ludo Heylen
The Kempler Institute, Denmark	Claes Solberg Pedersen
Legambiente, Italy	Vittoria Cogliati Dezza
Universal Education Foundation (NL)	Marijke Sluijter
Janusz Korczak International Society	Theo Cappon
Center for Youth and Development, The Hague	
University for Professional Education, The Hague	
Roosevelt Academy, Middelburg (NL)	René Diekstra
Verein mit Kindern Wachsen, Germany	Lienhard Valentin
	Sabine Heggemann
University of Cordoba, Spain	Rosario Ortega Ruiz
	Rosario Del Rey
International Association for Steiner / Waldorf	
Early Childhood Education (Sweden)	Geseke Lundren
	Oliver Langscheid
European Council for Steiner	
Waldorf Education, Brussels	Christopher Clouder
Secretariat of the Group, Brussels	Michiel Matthes
Boris Cyrulnik of the Université de Toulon, France has expressed his interest in gradually getting involved with the Alliance for Childhood European Network Group.	