

## Building a Cradle for Quality of Childhood

By Clara Aerts, Antwerp, Belgium

In 1991 I was asked by Caroline Smits, one of the founders of Steiner/Waldorf education in Flanders/Belgium, to represent our Flemish kindergarten movement in the International Association of Waldorf Kindertagesstätten (IVW), which until 2006 acted as the legal body for both the German and the International Waldorf Kindergarten movements. A lot has changed in the more than 20 years since I joined the circle of country representatives as a young kindergarten teacher from Belgium. In those first years we were still strongly led in our mission and working together by Dr. Helmut von Kügelgen, who founded the IVW in 1969 and urged us to act as the voice for young children who can't yet express and meet their needs. He described it in his creative manner as follows: 'In our midst there lives a nation whose people cannot speak or act for themselves but who depend on us to take up work on their behalf and allow their voice be heard in the world.'



### Living the imagination

I remember his presence in the council as that of a visionary who often opened our eyes to understand the greater dynamics at work and what was at stake regarding development in childhood at the present moment and its significance in relation to the future development of mankind as a whole. When he crossed the threshold in 1998 to work from the other side, a new era of working together was asked from all those continuing the work in the IVW. We were challenged to develop new ways of working

together in which we could learn how to reveal and build a vision together. We also realised that if we were to really become a world movement, we had to enlarge our circle with the richness other cultures could bring.

Several new developments within the IVW were initiated and in 2006 after many years of intensive work the International Association for Steiner/Waldorf Early Childhood Education (IASWECE) was finally strong enough to be born out of the IVW nest that had kept it safe until it was strong enough to walk on its own feet. With this change also the IASWECE council increasingly became a reflection of the different folk souls in the world. At the moment representatives from 28 countries come to the IASWECE council from 5 continents, all active for the Steiner/Waldorf Early Childhood movement in their countries and willing to work together on behalf of children in the world.

Looking back I remember 1998 as a special year in other ways as well. In our society I observed that as we were approaching the change of the millennium; many apocalyptic predictions were made and with them, various emotions such as fear, faith, anxiety and also hope and courage were being fed. Overall I think back on this as a dominant atmosphere of acceleration, and if you were able to take a distant look you could observe a kind of anxiety setting the tone in conversations, the media and so on. It was also a time where many were struck by the fact that they suddenly realised more strongly or perhaps for the first time that there are no certainties or guarantees for what the future might bring. The responses to this unknown were of course also very diverse, some withdrew further and further in a kind of apathy, others continued on their course with a kind of fatalism, and still others revisited their childhood religion or entered a new prophetic one, and so on.

## Working from the strength given to you

In Steiner/Waldorf Circles I remember this period as one where an urge was buzzing around us at conferences and meetings to become fully awake to the quest that we have taken upon ourselves. And in raising our consciousness and awareness about the path we were asked to walk, we were confronted as a consequence with Michaelic questions that were waiting for us at the threshold. Do we really understand the true nature of goodness, beauty and truth? Have we schooled ourselves enough to be able to judge this in a pure and selfless manner? Are we in our striving working on the side of Michael and serving a higher cause or are we unconsciously living a self-fulfilling prophecy and misleading ourselves?

Of course no absolute answer can be found to these questions, and I believe they are put in our way to serve as beacons, preventing us from getting lost in the darkness of our small egotistical desires. Nevertheless it bothered me that I more than once experienced in Steiner/Waldorf circles that the “outside” world was looked upon in a pedantic way and considered to be the dragon that needed to be fought and tamed. It seemed to me that too often we were forgetting or being unaware of the dragon forces that are lurking in each one of us that also in our own circles are hindering and misleading our thoughts and actions. I then remembered what Uwe Lichtenknecker used to tell me with a twinkle in his eyes, ‘You know, Clara, anthroposophists are after all also just human beings, facing the same challenges that all human beings do.’



## Forming a circle

One of the key elements in the IASWECE council meetings has always been sharing pictures that describe the situation of small children in our countries, both within our Steiner/Waldorf movement and in society as a whole. It was at one of those moments in 1998 that Joan Almon from the USA said the following words that I will never forget: ‘For years now we hear in the reports from different countries about how childhood is under attack. When are we as Waldorf movement finally going to do something about it? If we want to turn this tide, we will have to learn to work together with other like-minded partners, because it is clear that by ourselves we are too small to bring about real change.’



*The Kuratorium of the International Waldorf Kindergarten Association in 2002, with Joan Almon and Jürgen Flinspach*

These words spoke right to my heart because they addressed the universal “I” in myself and in each one who is willing to work together for a higher cause that bridges the differences and brings us together as contemporaries in this spiritual quest. In this cradle of Waldorf Early childhood educators, the ‘Alliance for Childhood ‘ (AFC) was born and established with the help of its godparents: Joan Almon, Dr. Michaela Glöcker, Christopher Clouder and Jürgen Flinspach.

## Sharing our thoughts

The AFC was founded in 1998 in Forest Row England and launched in 1999 at a conference in Spring Valley, New York for the US and then in 2000 in Brussels at an international conference with the title 'Alliance for childhood: A bridge to the future.' As an outcome of this conference, AFC movements started to become active in several countries in Europe, Brazil and lately also in Peru and Hong Kong, and AFC conferences followed in 2005 in Salzburg, 2010 in Budapest and recently from 23-26 October 2013 in Brussels once again.

The European AFC network has several members and partners who work on behalf of children, either in their countries or in Brussels working on a policy level. Among them are leading umbrella organisations and NGO's in the European landscape such as Eurochild, Learning for Wellbeing Institute, Nivoz and many others. From the beginning the Steiner/Waldorf movement has been a strong and active collaborator in the AFC work in Europe, primarily through Christopher Clouder, who for many years represented ECSWE and has been a voice advocating for a Quality of Childhood in the many platforms and conferences where he is asked to speak, and also through IASWECE, represented at first by Geseke Lundgren and since 2008 by myself. Later on, ELIANT also joined as a partner and with this a link to various initiatives for applied anthroposophy was established.

In 2006 the Alliance for Childhood European Network Group was able to found a working group for the 'Quality of Childhood' (QOC) and since then this QOC group organizes a session every 2 months in the European Parliament, inviting researchers and other prominent speakers to share their findings. The overall objectives of these meetings are:

- To gain a better understanding of the Quality of Childhood in the EU member states, each time focusing on a different element, and to think about the role that the European institutions could play to improve the situation.
- To get to grips with the values, principles and approaches that could lead to improvements for children.
- To form an effective working group and to get a sense of how to move on.

Reports of these meetings have been collected and published in four books that are available for purchase. The reports gathered in the first 3 books are also available as a pdf version on [www.allianceforchildhood.eu](http://www.allianceforchildhood.eu) on the QoC page.

The latest publication (volume 4) is also available as pdf on

<http://www.ecswe.org/publication-qoc-europe-2013.php>



## Building a chalice made of courage

Working together with like-minded partners is a very enriching and at the same time can be a challenging experience. You're forced and learn to revisit your own ideals and deepen them with understanding in order to become able to share from the essentials within them instead of speaking about the methods or from the outer forms that often become too narrow a window from which to look at them. At the same time, you feel strength is given to you if you open yourself with genuine interest for what the other has to share; in return, your own inspirational background becomes interesting to the other and is experienced as something valuable for them to explore.

In this collaborative outreach I have often found deeply shared concerns regarding children and an enormous amount of good will to do something to improve childhood. The image of a beautiful dance has often come to my mind in thinking about this collaboration with others in the AFC, where the music is leading both in a balanced choreography and there is no question or competition in who's taking the lead and who has to follow.

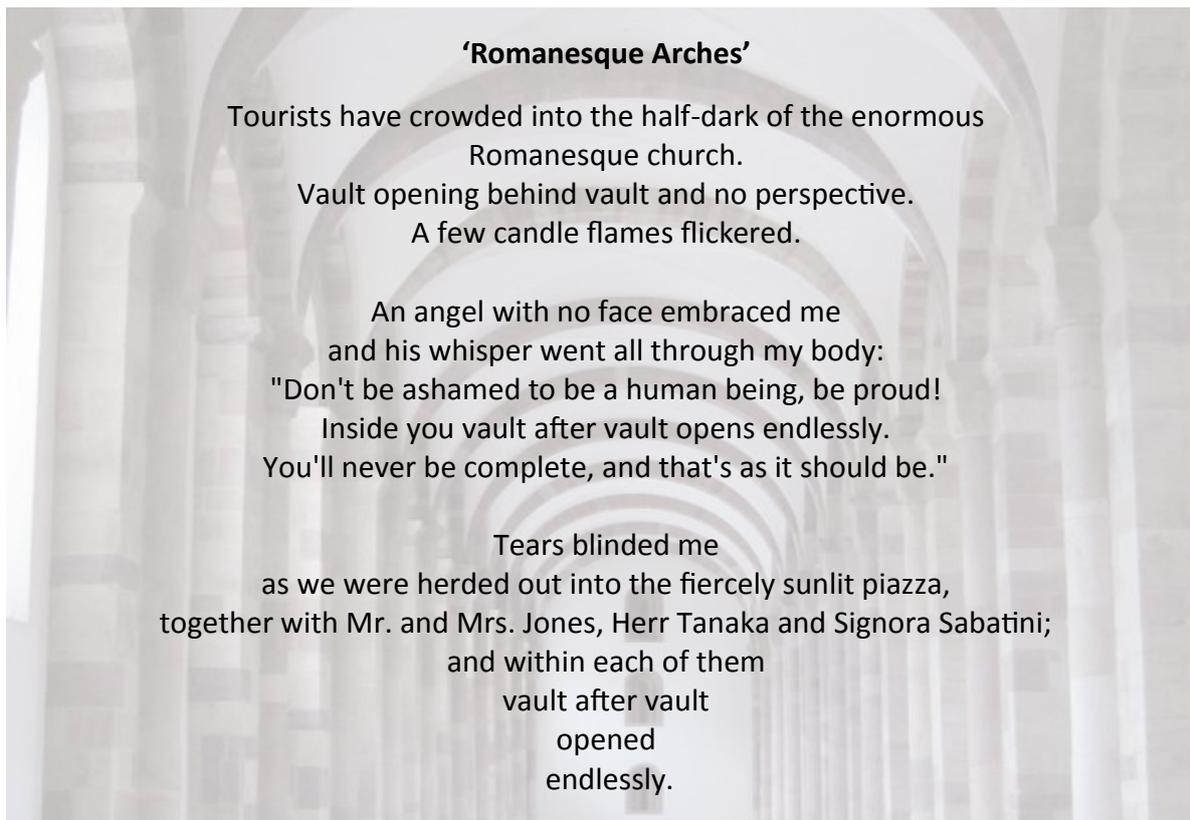
In this respect I remember the words of one of the other founders of the Alliance movement, Michaela Glöckler, who when asked about how we can work together with others without losing our own identity said ' In order to stay in balance we have to remember that for every step we take in the outside world, we have to take two towards a deepening of our inner work and understanding of the essentials.' In this sense, working in the Alliance sphere can be considered as a constant schooling of one's own inner path of self-development.



« Balance»-  
Painting by Ingeborg  
Reubke-Breidenbach

## Drops of light

The Unfolding Conference that recently took place from 23 – 26 October in Brussels was co-hosted by the Alliance for Childhood European network and the Learning for Wellbeing Consortium. It was a fine example of realisation in working together selflessly for a higher cause and aiming for 'nurturing a culture in which each and every child can unfold her or his unique potential and engage in society.' Christopher Clouder, who gave one of the opening lectures, set the tone and spirit of this conference in a very artistic way and warmed the souls of the participants with his lecture on creativity and the importance of the arts in education. But most of all, he opened our hearts and awakened our imagination through sharing with us the beautiful poem, "Romanesque Arches" by the Swedish poet Tomas Tranströmer, in which he is taking us into a spiritual dimension and painting in words the infinite depths of our human potential.



(Translation by Robert Bly)

After engaging in the first 1 ½ day in lectures and workshops that looked from different angles at elements relating to the development of the child's inner self and her/his relation with the environment, an Open Space was created in which all participants were invited to take initiative and responsibility for questions they wanted to embark upon with others who wanted to enter in a dialogue with them and exploring next steps for taking actions. In taking initiatives for working together in the future on action tasks such as articulating what we mean by age-appropriate child participation, bringing back the word 'spirituality' in the Flemish/Dutch translation of the Charter on the Convention of Children's Rights, and many others, new networks and collaborations between partners were established for the future.

## Other circles of collaboration to build a cradle for the Waldorf Early Childhood Movement

In addition to the task in the field of networking and outreach/collaboration with other likeminded partners, we also work together intensively with other partners in our Steiner/Waldorf movement. Together with the Pedagogical Section we try to disseminate the burning issues for Waldorf education and create opportunities such as conferences and colloquia to deepen our understanding of the phenomena and improve our pedagogical practice as an answer for meeting the needs of children. In this respect an international conference on transitions in childhood is planned for the first week of April 2015 in Dornach, where we hope to bring together professionals who work with the child from birth to puberty (see announcement in this newsletter).

In IASWECE we also believe that each Steiner/Waldorf kindergarten or early childhood initiative where children are helped to develop the inner path towards freedom in the world of today is like

an initiative towards world peace. Therefore we focus our support on the development of training and mentoring in many countries in a way that will empower local educators and foster the quality of education. By doing so we aim to improve their quality of life and, as a consequence, that of the children and families they will take care of as educators.

With the rapid development of new Steiner/Waldorf EC initiatives in the world there's a growing need for supporting the development of Steiner/Waldorf training and mentoring. To keep an overview of the developments we have regular meetings with Nana Goebel from the Freunde and Claus-Peter Röh and Florian Osswald from the Pedagogical Section, and to coordinate the support, we collaborate with other anthroposophical associations and foundations such as Acacia (CH), Freunde der Erziehungskunst (DE), Helias Stichting - Internationaal Hulp Fonds and Iona Stichting Khedeli (NL), Sanduko (DK), Sofia (SE) and the Godparents Association (UK).



IASWECE Council meeting in Mechelen (Belgium), October 2013

Before I became a member of the coordinating group in IASWECE I had the privilege to work for more than 20 years as a kindergarten teacher in the Michaelschool in Turnhout/Belgium. Each Thursday we would start our faculty meeting by speaking together the Foundation Stone meditation and end by saying together the following verse by Rudolf Steiner.

This verse has become a helpful meditation for me in developing the inner attitude from which I try to work:

May wisdom shine through me  
May love glow in me  
May strength penetrate me  
That in me may arise  
A helper of mankind  
A servant of holy things  
Selfless and true.



From the IASWECE Council meeting in Mechelen,  
October 2013



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