Introduction

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.[i]

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 but 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 wellbeing 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 into the future 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 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.

> *'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. '* [ii]

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 us 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 turn advocates into 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*,

> *'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.'* [iii]

This book is, of course, full of words, but 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 wellbeing. Although Freire was mainly concerned with the milieus 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 in so-called prosperous societies. A global effort of civil society is called for to complement the activities of Inter-Governmental Organisations and national policies. '_The pursuit of full humanity however, cannot be carried out in isolation or individualism, but only in fellowship and solidarity.'_ [iv]**

Christopher Clouder

[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