

Enterprise Group for Children's Rights 2000 - 2004

In the first instance we formed an Enterprise Group and initiated a discussion about children's rights with several schools and teachers. In November 2000 we organised a one-day conference in the Hall of the European Parliament in Athens, which was attended by around 150 people, including lawyers, child psychologists and teachers. The conference examined the issue of children's rights violations, looked into what was happening in schools and discussed at length what the first major objective of the group's initiative should be. It concluded that we should move in three different directions: inform as many parents and teachers as possible; pinpoint the most vulnerable areas of violation; and ask the government to create a Children's Ombudsman in line with other countries.

In the months that followed we set up friendly group meetings, spoke to teachers, lawyers and psychiatrists, did systematic research on the internet, found organisations in Europe, the US, Canada and Australia and requested information. It was evident that both experts and public opinion in other countries were also concerned about the issue but that unlike Greece, they all had the appropriate institutions to deal with it. And so in December 2001 we organised an open-day at the Zappeio Conference and Exhibition Centre in Athens, which was attended by over 200 people. Expert opinions were noted, ideas were heard, thoughts exchanged and the most frequent violations of children's rights in Greece were noted. Right there and then the first «Declaration» of the Enterprise Group, emphasizing the importance of creating the office of Ombudsman for Children, was drafted and signed. A few days later a large group of children went to see the President of the Republic, Kostis Stefanopoulos, to personally hand him the «Declaration».

In the ensuing months we intensified our contacts and discussions not only inside and outside schools but also with MPs, Euro MPs, the Greek Ombudsman, the Committee for Educational Affairs of the Greek Parliament, the Athens Bar Association, the Offices of the European Parliament, the European Commission in Athens and more. Contacts were also made with foreign organisations for the promotion of children's rights in other European countries. In April 2002 we organised a public consultation at the Zappeio with the title «A Children's Ombudsman: a major step towards the safeguarding of children's rights and the development of a policy for minors». Those taking part included Children's Ombudsmen from Europe, the Greek Ombudsman, academics, Greek organisations and NGOs. An Enterprise Group organised a similar event in Thessaloniki. These two events really highlighted existing needs and were major stepping-stones in the movement towards our goal. The office of Children's Ombudsman was created in December 2002 - January 2003, an achievement that was not only very satisfying but gave much cause for optimism.

A small group of us, armed only with our own concerns and convictions had managed in just two and half years to reveal and explain violations of children's rights to a group of about 500 people. We had engendered broad social dialogue, cooperated with official institutions both within Greece and abroad, coordinated several dozen volunteers and finally succeeded in setting up the office of Children's Ombudsman, overcoming the usual apathy and bureaucracy. It was a good beginning and paved the way for the steps that followed.

Our dealings with Europe had made us realise that there was no mention of children's rights in the European Constitution that was being debated at the time. We began to gather signatures in support of the declaration «The Future of Europe is the Future of our Children». Furthermore, realizing that a fight against child labour would have a direct positive impact on street children in Athens, we undertook the Greek translation and publication of the International Labour Organization's «A Future without Child Labour» with funding from Emboriki Bank. This was our very first sponsorship and it encouraged us not

only to find sponsors but also to request donations from various organisations - both private and state – in order to complete any project that went beyond the daily practical work that we shared voluntarily between us.

Throughout 2003 we worked at institutional and European levels informally, voluntarily and with passion. Following the passing of the bill for the establishment of a Children's Ombudsman by the Greek Parliament a group of children visited the President of the Republic in order to express their thanks. Another group of teachers and pupils from our partner schools took part in a trip to the European Parliament in Brussels where we put forward the idea of a European Network for the Safeguarding of Children's Rights and made many new contacts.

The establishment of the «Network for Children's Rights» - 2004

Our organization was set up in 2004. The massive surge in immigration that was occurring at the time and which brought with it its own set of problems, led to our decision to single out the issue of Diversity from among the various educational and cultural concerns and to focus on that. The first action undertaken by the «Network of Children's Rights» after its founding was a National Competition entitled «An Obstacle Course... with Vision, Endeavour and Hope» leading to awards called «Double Effort». The aim of these prizes was to reward the intensive efforts of those particular pupils who were trying to integrate smoothly and make headway in Greek schools. The children were indeed commendable because they managed to overcome a series of linguistic, cultural and social obstacles and to assimilate into a not always friendly Greek environment. The prize-giving at the Zappeio on April 29th 2004 was a great success. We were all moved by how sensitively the children expressed not only their difficulties but also their dreams and hopes for the future, and we were prompted to work with the well known publishing house «Kedros» in order to publish their essays in a book entitled «Hey buddy».

During **2005 and 2006**, together with our members, our every-increasing numbers of volunteers and the teaching staff we were working with, we looked into various alternative proposals that could bring better results. Our activities included a series of seminars on children's rights with academics, psychiatrists, social scientists and educationalists as speakers, as well as meetings in Europe for the exchange of ideas and experiences. We participated in open discussions in towns of northern Greece following invitations by schools and local government bodies and organised the Network's 2nd National Competition at the Zappeio with the title «Co-existence in a Multicultural Society».

Our collaboration with the Bernard van Leer Foundation - 2007

Working with the van Leer Foundation enabled us take a more methodical approach in dealing with our issues and initiatives. The Foundation, which had always focused on very young children and specialised in Diversity, responded positively to a scheme of ours concerning books for children. Our proposal was based on the theory that children's literature could be used as an effective tool for putting across the subject of Diversity to youngsters and the Foundation agreed to fund it. It was a great opportunity to acquire a full time secretary who would work systematically to coordinate our dozens of volunteers and oversee our correspondence and records. The Foundation's assistance was also significant from a scholarly point of view because it provided research, bibliography and expertise. We launched ourselves into work. We had to set up groups of volunteers who would read and select children's books that talked about Diversity and classify them by subject matter and age group. The work was challenging: a lengthy catalogue had to be completed; summaries of the books posted on the internet; one-day conferences, book exhibitions and public debates in the various boroughs of Athens and other cities organised; seminars with educationalists and parents arranged; and educational

programmes created using the books with groups of children. The enormous workload meant that cooperation between our members, volunteers and our educationalists became more demanding and at the same time more essential. Our exchanges produced many creative ideas, while the meetings of the various work groups were lively and full of enthusiasm. Despite being under great pressure to meet our deadline, the forty of us who worked on the project were excited at the prospect that we would soon be in possession of an excellent tool for children's rights. This hectic pace continued throughout 2008, each one of us reading and commenting on dozens of books, discussing and exchanging views with authors and illustrators, academics and educationalists. We set up children's groups and made a note of their experiences and reactions. Our final goal, a catalogue of books on Diversity, was beginning to take shape.

In 2009 we broadened and deepened our work on Diversity, with more volunteers collaborating in the Van Leer Foundation programme. At the same time society was being plagued by a new phenomenon of xenophobia, which we needed to fully understand before we could take any positive action. The reality was that Greek society was displaying symptoms of intolerance and aggression against the «other», «the one that was different», proving to each and every one of us the importance of our work in school, in the family and more generally in the social milieu. Our frequent contact with local government was exposing this harsh reality, which manifested itself in the way the influx of immigrants and refugees was being dealt with, in matters of education and social integration, in school bullying and more.

Unaccompanied Under-Age Asylum Seekers - 2009

In 2009 the Network shifted its focus to unaccompanied minors seeking asylum. This was a particularly sensitive matter and was acquiring unusual dimensions. We had come across and talked to quite a few children between the ages of 12 and 18, the majority from Afghanistan but also from Pakistan and Bangladesh with a few from Africa (Nigeria, Somalia and the Ivory Coast) who had arrived in Greece all alone with no family. Their stories shocked us and it was impossible to remain indifferent to their plight. We prepared an open letter to the leaders of all the Greek political parties, to MPs and to the Speaker of the Hellenic Parliament on the subject of refugee children and unaccompanied minors. As part of the Network's actions concerning unaccompanied under-age asylum seekers, we teamed up with the Child Care Association of Athens in order to provide help for the Shelter for Unaccompanied Under-Age Asylum Seekers, housed in Exarchia, central Athens. This partnership was to develop into a two-year programme of social integration and support for the Shelter's children on the part of the Network. In December 2009, to coincide with the International Day of the Child, a meeting was arranged in the Hall of the European Parliament Office in Athens with high school pupils and unaccompanied minors. Every child had the opportunity to take part in open discussion, to ask questions and to express his or her concerns. In the same month, a group of us, including unaccompanied minors and primary school pupils, were invited by the Speaker of the Greek Parliament to celebrate Universal Children's Day. At the beginning of 2010 we decided to gather petition signatures in support of the granting of Greek nationality to children of immigrants that had been born in Greece and attended Greek schools. More than 3000 signatures were gathered and several meetings were organised to promote the idea.

The publication of the catalogue of books on Diversity - June 2010

After approximately three years of work the catalogue of books on Diversity was finally in print and ready to be distributed to schools, parents and societies. It was a colourful, well thought out volume listing 170 books and we made its content available in electronic form on the Internet in order to

facilitate its use by teachers and educationalists. The publication was marked by several presentations of the catalogue at schools, cultural centres, societies and book fairs. We received much praise from the Van Leer Institute who together with many academics, teachers and authors, rated our work very highly. Demand for the catalogue soared, the first edition sold out very quickly and we had to reprint it. The publication of the catalogue was accompanied by a one-day conference in collaboration with the Faculty of Primary Education, Department of Humanitarian Studies, Athens University. The subject was «Seeing the World Through Different Eyes. Children's Books and Diversity». It took place at the University of Athens and more than 500 teachers took part.

Community of Afghan Refugees in Metaxourgeio - 2011

After considering various proposals from members and friends about where we should next offer our support, we concluded that the Samaria community of Afghan refugees in the deprived Athens neighbourhood of Metaxourgeio was where urgent action was most required to protect the rights of children. There were more than 60 children there, between six months and twelve years old. Our intervention strategy included: regular weekly presence of a group of volunteers at the shelter; English and Greek classes; a playgroup with drawing materials, books, music, DVDs and toys; cooking and a free meal after the activities; medical care; registration of the children in schools; a campaign for the collection of food, clothing, toys, hygiene items, nappies etc; food parcels for mothers and first aid kits; setting up a network of schools to support the Community; recreational activities, visits to museums and other outings; a handicraft workshop for mothers; and collaboration with other NGOs. More than twenty volunteers worked regularly at the Community premises every week.

Sarif

In May of that year we were faced with an urgent case of a child requiring a temporary home. Sarif was a twelve-year-old refugee from Afghanistan. He was waiting for his permit to go to Germany to meet his mother and brothers, in accordance with the law regarding the reunification of families, and he needed a safe place to stay till this came through. The Network housed him in the home of one of our members for three months. Friends and volunteers offered care and teaching and extended invitations to him, thereby making his stay more enjoyable. Hill Primary School allowed him to sit in on English lessons, one of our volunteers taught him German, while the «Ecumenical Refugee Programme» undertook all the necessary legal arrangements that enabled him to leave Greece and be reunited with his family.

The recession

2011 had witnessed increased anxiety amongst our members and volunteers with regard to the financial crisis and its consequences. We concluded that it was necessary to look at the problem from a multi-angled approach, exchange ideas with others outside our circle and share our experience on how a group of people can turn a plan into reality. The public debate organised by the Network in March 2011 with the title «From Progressive Ideas to Practical Application» was attended by more than 300 people, many of which took an active part in the discussion. We talked about what it meant for each one of us to put our ideas into practice; how to stop recycling theories amongst ourselves and initiate meaningful debate with kindred spirits in the world beyond. What is it that makes someone take the crucial decisions that result in cooperation and open intervention? What is it that makes people sit up and become proactive? The role played by volunteerism and NGOs was also discussed.

Throughout the year we took part in several public debates, collaborated with many other organisations in the Samaria programme and looked for sponsors who would fund our basic overheads, all with great intensity. Schools, groups of friends and NGOs offered support in a variety of ways.



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