

# Arion Study Visit

## La Violence Faite a L'Enfant En Europe et dans Le Monde

15<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> November 2004

Lycee Lachenal Annecy – Argonay – France

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## Report

Arion study visits are designed to promote interaction throughout Europe in the field of Education and are organised within the UK by the British Council. The Arion study group that I was part of consisted of ten members, including myself, representing a variety of countries including, Great Britain, France, Belgium, Italy, Greece, Poland, Romania, Spain and Turkey. The hosts were the Lycee Lachenal in Annecy, France. We were representative of a number of professions within the world of education, both practitioners and administrators. We were joined each day by a selection of local students, academics and practitioners who were participating in specific parts of the programme that were of interest to them in their own studies and work. The purpose of the visit was to learn from each other on the theme of violence and the mistreatment of children.

The working title for the week was 'La violence faite a l'enfant en Europe et dans le monde'.

The organisers had prepared a programme that reflected a wide range of concerns about the abuse of children throughout the world and how they might be supported. This incorporated presentations and debates about global issues in the areas of poverty and warfare as well as the abuses taking place in wealthier and politically stable parts of Europe. The programme was very well balanced in terms of offering a variety of perspectives on how we come to identify and deal with violence and its impact on

young people, whether it is directly focussed on them, or, if it is a by-product of wider instability/social influences. The themes could best be summarised as being:

- Identification of adolescents in crisis.
- Prevention of violence.
- Child abuse
- Solutions/Plans of action in France (locally and nationally).
- The organisation of child protection.
- Building resilience in children.

When looked at holistically, the key themes of the week knitted together in a cogent and cohesive way. Proceedings were initiated by the key note address whereby we were informed of the problems being faced locally in terms of integrating difficult youngsters into school and reminded that schools as institutions pose unique problems in terms of managing large groups of people. Concern was expressed about the rise in violent behaviour among young people. This led us to explore the difficulty of determining for a child with problems, whether the locus of control and responsibility lies within them, or whether external forces determine the reasons. This theme was explored in some depth by M. Jean-Louis Beratto (Service Medico-psychologique Universitaire – Grenoble) in his paper entitled ‘Peur d’apprendre, peur de se separer’. M. Beratto discussed the difficulties of helping young addicts and other traumatised young people to deconstruct the disabling and damaging perceptions of life that they have developed, and to replace them with strategies to cope with life and to move their lives forward. He emphasised the fears that have to be overcome in order to let go of destructive behaviours and the fears many have to overcome in order to learn a new way of dealing with life in order to grow to full autonomy enabling behaviours to be referenced from internally. This linked well with a presentation by M. Dominique Senore from the University of Lyon. He discussed how to support children to become resilient enough to achieve intellectual and emotional autonomy and to have the capacity to cope with the stresses of life. He offered a broad view of the function and purpose of education contrasting with a more limiting one of children being made capable of passing examinations through the acquisition of knowledge and through drilling.

These two approaches could be seen in juxtaposition with organisational and systemic methodologies that looked at how we could better reconstruct the external world in order to remove some of the stresses from children in order that they might lead healthier and more fulfilling lives. This was well illustrated in the presentation by Laurence Dubois talking about the IPEC programme (IPEC: Programme International pour L’Abolition du Travail des Enfants). This presentation on the theme of child labourers and how they are exploited was illustrated on an international scale, and offered a stark perspective in relation to how we emphasise the importance of certain types of difficulty that pale into insignificance in comparison to the scale of this problem. The point of reflection for me was the idea that on the one hand, the incidence of psychological and physical abuse of children is extraordinary when looked at on a global scale. The millions who are deprived of education are paying the price for living in what amount to almost slave economies. On the other hand, children from relatively wealthy and privileged backgrounds are not immune from abuses that similarly reduce their capacity to live healthy lives despite the overt material differences. This was well exemplified in the CD presentation ‘Les Cahiers

de L'Enfance Dechiree'. In this, we were able to appreciate the scale of child abuse in France and the strategies employed to prevent it. It was interesting to compare and contrast the views emerging from these presentations, not least the fact that there are passionate debates in France over how these agendas are managed, and by whom. The other interesting feature here was that all of the international participants could report similar phenomena existing in their respective countries.

Added to these broad presentations were some very specific ones that focussed on healthcare, the legal system and specific school projects in the region of Haute Savoie. M. Christophe Guigne (medecin attache au service de l'Inspecteur d'Academie), the Office of the Conseil General of the Haute Savoie region amongst others discussed in detail how the region tackles the issue of child protection. Even more specific reference was made to actions taken in particular federations of schools – Reseau Education Prioritaire ( REPs –networks to support priority education areas). These equate roughly to Education Action Zones in the UK. and suffer from the same performance measures and short term funding as our own similar initiatives. No measure had been devised in France for assessing the rise in the over all quality of school life (to the chagrin of all concerned), despite the fact that the greatest gains were there. This sounded extremely familiar.

Reseau, (networks) was one of the most used terms of the week. The necessity to share and to act jointly was a theme that recurred, with each country having had traumatic national examples of institutional failure on which to learn from and use as motivation for building a better future. Like our debates in England resulting from the Green paper 'Every Child Matters', our European partners are tackling the issue of how to share information and ideas in order to protect and educate children. 'Passing the buck' was seen as the major problem, and in this respect we all had a lot to share and a lot to learn from each other.

By looking at the global/bigger picture, and then focussing on the internal pathology of individual children through case studies, and touching en route, the professional, academic, political and personal concerns of a wide group of diverse people, the week offered both a tour de force and a welcome opportunity to listen think and discuss the issues around violent behaviours caused by individuals and by societies.

My over riding impression was that the week was highly successful. The basis of this view is two fold. Firstly, a great deal of thought had gone into the programme and there was a high standard of presentations and activities. The second factor was the opportunity to share this experience with nine colleagues from different countries who all interpreted the experience in a different way and who also questioned things in a different way.

Aside from all of the theoretical debates and the illustrations of good practice that I was exposed to, I will digress a little to comment on my own observations of the environment in which the week took place, and the significance that I think this has.

Annecy, the base for the visit, is in the Haute Savoie. It is by any standards an affluent area of France with a diverse economy. It is an area rich in tradition and a food-lovers paradise. Close by is Geneva in Switzerland, a city at the heart of global strategies for reducing violence, housing as it does, one of the international bases for the United Nations Organisation and home to the famous 'Geneva Convention'. Within this

geographical area, a great deal of practical energy is being devoted to creating safe learning environments that also cope with the pockets of deprivation that are commonly prevalent within seemingly affluent communities. There are large immigrant communities that reflect France's historical connections in the wider world, and in these respects, make a good point of contemporary comparison to many parts of the United Kingdom. I was particularly interested therefore in the investment in educational infrastructure, particularly school buildings. I visited four different school campuses and was in each case highly impressed by the quality of build, the design, cleanliness and the equipment.

I came away from this experience with a much clearer view about the importance of aesthetics in school buildings, and the significance of good diet in terms of creating greater readiness for learning. On the surface, this might sound a little trivial, but I think it is an area that can be greatly underestimated, probably because it is so obvious and so simple to remedy. When seen at first hand, it contrasted starkly to the features that prevailed when we looked more intellectually at the worst abuses of children, namely low quality environments, poor nourishment, poor nurturing, a general absence of care, and a surfeit of negligence and exploitation.

As a group we tended to engage in discussions about the practical issues of the lives of children in schools. This was understandable given that this was an area where we all felt we could make a difference in our own countries both by discussing what we do, and also by reviewing our respective practices on our return.

As the week went on, I felt that the activities were a touchstone for a very profound experience, namely being given the opportunity to think, talk and listen outside of the daily events that crowd one's life. The value of the week began to emerge as being the opportunity to form and maintain a new network with a wider perspective, and that this might link into one's existing networks in order to create some form of synergetic partnership.

Having participated with an open mind (perhaps a worthy enough objective in its own right) I was extremely pleased with the whole event at every level. The host's attention to detail, the support and administration in the UK and the experience itself, have enabled me to think and act outside of my own educational paradigm. I was always going to be less concerned with the details of the exemplars, as it is not they that translate as well as the underpinning governing principles, the philosophy and ethics at work. The humanising of global problems did give me the confidence to think that it is possible for an individual to make a difference, but it became obvious that a network of people can achieve more.

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### **Postscript**

Should any reader wish to discuss any aspect of this report or wish me to refer them to other Arion participants/contributors or organisations related to this visit, then please do not hesitate to contact me by e.mail.

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