

Reflections on the role of OMEP 1948-2018

Audrey Curtis

First of all I would like to thank the World President and the Czech National Committee for inviting me to speak to you on this august occasion. I have been a member of this organisation for more than forty years and was fortunate to have met one of our Founder Members, Jens Sigsgaard, when I visited his Training College in Denmark back in the 1980s. When OMEP was launched in 1948 it was into a very different world from the one we know today, a world which was recovering from one of the most devastating wars in history, a world where millions of displaced families and children were suffering poverty and insecurity. However, it was also a time of hope for the future and the determination of many people that there should never again be such cruelty and destruction. Sadly as we know, the longed for world peace has not yet materialised.

In this talk I would like to share with you some of the ways in which OMEP has grown from a small organisation to one with 73 member countries worldwide and how it has continued to work to fulfil the aims of our Founders. I also want to consider some of the challenges OMEP may face in the future in our rapidly changing world.

Looking back to the immediate post war years the significance of the meeting between Lady Allen and Alva Myrdal in 1946 cannot be underestimated for both OMEP and more importantly, young children, Within two years these determined and energetic ladies had met with a group of like-minded people including Suzanne Herbinière Lebert, Ase Skaard and Jens Sigsgaard, who were committed to helping improve the quality of life of the many children who had been affected by war. Our Founder Members had different backgrounds but were united in their determination to act positively to improve the lives of not only, the displaced, but all young children. Lady Allen, a landscape gardener and architect by training, was passionate about the needs of children, particularly those who were institutionalised, and was employed by UNESCO as their regional representative in Europe. Alva Myrdal, was a Swedish expert in the education and welfare of young children as was Suzanne Herbinière Lebert, the inspectrice general in France. At the time Ase Skaard was a nursery school teacher, and Jens Sigsgaard, a Danish Psychologist, well known for his writings, and the principal of a teacher training college.

Reading about the discussions and decisions made by this group it is important to recognise how incredibly forward thinking they were. To think that, seventy years ago Alva Myrdal was reminding people that the children of today would be growing up in a very different world from the one that existed then. How right she was and yet even she could not have envisaged the effect that technology would have on the lives of young children in 2018.

Our Founder Members saw that the role of OMEP was:

1. To promote a general understanding of the importance of world peace, the child and the home in the early formative years.
2. To advance the widespread development of nursery school education in all countries.
3. To formulate progressive standards in regard to educational practice, health care, qualifications of teachers, buildings, gardens and equipment.
4. To bring together representatives from voluntary association and public agencies interested in early childhood education.

Although the words have changed these values are still embedded in our current constitution.

World Conference for Early Childhood Prague

The first World Conference for Early Childhood was held in Prague in 1948 and was attended by representatives from 17 countries, and five continents. Delegates included not only teachers, but doctors, parents, social workers, architects, in fact anyone interested in pre-school education. At this meeting there was, as expected, a great emphasis on supporting children who had been the victims of wars, of hunger and disease, of family poverty and disruption of homes. Unfortunately, although seventy years have passed, we all know that these issues are still a cause of concern.

The delegates unanimously voiced their concerns about the conditions under which many young children lived and believed that social conditions warranted widespread improvement if young children were to be healthy and well cared for. They also argued that the provision of pre-school education needed to be improved as far as resources permitted. To quote a leading speaker of the day, 'Young children are the citizens of tomorrow, and the way they are moulded today will decide the future destiny both of peace among nations and of active democracy within nations'.

The meeting was committed to the establishment of a World Organisation for Early Childhood Education with membership open to all, irrespective of race, creed, politics or religion, cooperating closely with both UNESCO and WHO. In this way they hoped to put pressure upon national governments who failed to understand the needs and rights of young children.

Initially our Founder Members tried to establish a secretariat within UNESCO as finance for administration and projects was difficult to find, but when we became an NGO of UNESCO with Category B status, we received an annual grant and were commissioned to carry out projects on its behalf. This grant was invaluable in supporting the administrative costs of the World President and the Executive and enabled many projects to come to fruition, like for example the publication of *The Seeds of Peace* an important contribution from Madeleine Goutard, the *International Journal of Early Childhood*, and other projects.

In the 1960s, the number of National Committees (both full and preparatory) increased rapidly, with much of the expansion being due to the efforts and energy of the then President Ase Skaard, whose worldwide visits linked OMEP to the many people who were working towards the health, happiness and education of young children. During this period although many countries gained their independence, this was also a time of violence and upheaval and the beginning of the struggle for human rights. In addition, advances in nuclear technology posed a real threat to the world, while at the same time, advances in space exploration and the use of communication satellites gave hope for the future of mankind.

During this period, more people were becoming aware of the psychological needs of children, and the obligation to safeguard their health and happiness. In 1959 the UN Declaration of the Rights of the Child brought children to the political fore and throughout this decade OMEP's work developed within the wider field of the United Nations. There was international recognition for the need to enable children to fully develop their physical, emotional, social, intellectual and spiritual potential and to be respected as individuals in their own right.

Although the 1959 Declaration had no legal standing nevertheless it inspired many OMEP countries to focus upon its aims and to work with other associations with the same goals.

When the issue came up again in the 1980s Eva Balke, encouraged every national committee to lobby their government, writing a very strong letter on behalf of all children. As you all know on 20th November 1989 that the Declaration of the Rights of the Child was finally passed with only two countries abstaining. It had taken 30 years to achieve but the result is of vital importance to the children of the world.

Even though the Declaration has been passed it is vital that we do not forget about it. This is a concern held by the Japanese OMEP National Committee who, in 2012, decided to research how much interest and knowledge there was among child care givers and students about the Declaration of the Rights of the Child. Their research highlighted the fact that although some articles are well known, such as 'the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration' or 'the right to be protected from maltreatment, exploitation and abuse' some of the articles are less well known, such as 'the right of the child to be educated'. Clearly it is important that everyone involved with children should be aware of the Declaration's articles and the outcome of the project is a book with pictures and comments from children and adults entitled *Enrich the Children's World – Convention on the Rights of the Children is for all children all over the world*. This book should serve as a reminder of the articles in the Declaration to all those working with children. I understand this has been circulated widely among OMEP members, but is certainly worthy of global distribution.

The emphasis on the role of the family in the life of the child has been highlighted over the years, and many countries recognise the importance of the health, education and social services working together to support the development of the child through the family. All these areas were included in the principles laid down in the 1948 aims of OMEP. Mme Herbinière Lebert chaired a team of OMEP experts, under the auspices of UNESCO to publish 'the Education of Parents and Children of Pre-school Age in cooperation with the Family and Teachers of Young Children. A report which was highly influential at the time.

At the XXIVth International Conference on Public Education organised by UNESCO and the International Bureau of Education in 1961, OMEP's collaboration was specially mentioned. The contributions of eminent officials of UNESCO and UNICEF at World Conferences indicated that OMEP was now internationally accepted as an important part of the world of young children. The themes chosen during this decade demonstrate how the Founder Members wished to highlight the importance of their basic principles. In 1960 the conference in Zagreb had as its theme 'Play Vital to Childhood', with leading international speakers talking about the importance of understanding children's play, the role of motor activity and a symposium looking at play in the home, the kindergarten and the playground. In London, two years later, the emphasis was on 'Happy Healthy Children' focusing on the social and emotional development of children, while Stockholm in 1964 looked at 'Children during a rapidly changing world'. During this time, reports and findings were published with the support of UNESCO.

Cooperation between member countries

Over the decades, member countries have worked together in a variety of ways. Financially wealthier countries support preparatory committees who are initially unable to pay their annual fee or need help towards a specific project. Several instances come to mind, for example the Toy Library Project, an exciting project which involved the parents and children in several countries in South and Central America, was supported by money raised by Canada and Colombia, and Australia raised funds to help market women care for their children in Nigeria. Japanese OMEP has always been supportive of projects in its region while the Baltic Countries received assistance from the OMEP members in Scandinavia after the changes in the 1990s. The whole organisation supported countries devastated by the tsunami of 2004 and by the earthquake in Chile in 2010.

Another form of cooperation is when national committees have worked together on projects of common interest which have led to a deeper understanding of their various cultures and customs. In some parts of the world, like Europe for instance, it is easier for most countries to be able to attend regional meetings. We can't do anything about physical distance but we can still cooperate by utilising modern technology, such as video conferencing. Today we hear a great deal about social inclusion and the importance of understanding and accepting different cultures. OMEP has played a vital role in helping the growth of awareness of these issues. At various conferences over the years discussions have

been held on these topics, as well as on the challenges associated with second language learning. However, in some parts of the world, regional meetings, rather than conferences, have proved to be a more productive platform on which to exchange ideas and thoughts. I recall that in the 1980s in what was then Yugoslavia, OMEP hosted a most useful conference at Ohrid where many European countries sent delegates to discuss ways of teaching and supporting children with minority languages. It was a shared problem even though the languages and cultures were different. In the UK we were looking at ways to help teachers as well as the children and their families to understand the cultural differences of their adopted country as well as learning the English language. On our return from this meeting we decided to hold meetings jointly with Ireland and to discuss the challenges faced by second language learners from Wales, Ireland and England, but try as we may, we could not persuade anyone from Scotland to join us. Our meetings took place in all three countries as well as the Isle of Man. Looking back I realise that these meetings were some of the most fruitful that we had held as it gave us an opportunity to come to terms with some of the problems teachers were facing and to deal with them in a positive way.

We have spoken about the importance of face-to-face meetings and the 1984 conference in Chile, held in Santiago and Vina del Mare is a good example of this. When the Chilean National Committee invited the OMEP Executive to hold their World Conference in Chile, there was a considerable debate, as some national committees felt unable to visit a country where a dictatorship prevailed under the rule of Pinochet. Madeleine Goutard, the then World President and Carmen Fischer, Regional Vice President were determined that this meeting should go ahead with the hope that it would support the many disadvantaged children in the country. At this meeting the members of the Executive were invited to meet senior politicians and were given a political slant on current Chilean politics. Every OMEP member should be proud of the way our former World President argued for the needs of young children and their educators. After the conference, which was a highly successful one, the enthusiasm of the early years teachers really inspired me. I heard that Carmen Fischer, an extraordinary lady dedicated to the cause of young children and their needs, managed to get a large sum of money from the government to support day centres in Chile. There is no doubt that indirectly this successful conference was beneficial to young children in Chile.

A few years later Eva Balke, as president, was the first to initiate a World Conference in Africa. We were invited to Lagos and I, like most of the delegates, had never been to a West African country before and it was an incredible experience. The enthusiasm and vivacity of the delegates were amazing while the visits to the nurseries and preschools made us all stop and think. When we saw the conditions, so very different from those experienced by many of us, we began to understand the challenges which colleagues face when they have many fewer facilities. Later in my travels as World President I was to see how in large parts of the world early childhood educators have to face many obstacles in their efforts to provide the children with quality preschool education.

OMEP is an international organisation not linked to any specific professional body but every individual member should be encouraged to tell their colleagues about the important work which is carried out by our members. Take for example three current projects which deserve attention in every country – that of Play and Resilience, the Water Project and Education for Sustainable Development. Each of these has relevance to every child and their families. A lot of hard work and effort is being put into these projects by OMEP members, and we need to ensure that they come to the attention of everyone who is interested in the care and education of young children not just to the selected few.

Working with other associations

Our Founder Members realised that numerous issues could only be resolved by working with other national and international institutions. Over the years OMEP has had links with many of the NGOs associated with the welfare and education of young children and their families, but the strongest links have been with UNESCO, the UN and UNICEF where we have representatives on the subcommittees of these organisations. For many years Gordon Klopff was our representative in New York at the UN and chaired the committee on the Rights of Girls, making sure that our views were heard. These links are being maintained by current members of the organisation, who present interesting and informative Annual Reports. However I wonder whether this information is being disseminated to grass root members in the various countries as much as it could be. Since the days of the internet and mobile phones it is much easier to spread the word and it is important that national committees circulate information to as many people as possible. I know that countries have interesting websites but maybe there are other ways in which we can attract the attention of everyone interested in the care and education of young children.

I recall one particular project, which in my view, certainly did not get the attention it deserved. In the late 1990s members of NAEYC (National Association for the Education of Young Children) in the USA and OMEP met in Zurich to draw up global guidelines for the promotion of early childhood education and training. I was present at this seminar and the final product was an agreed text between the two institutions. However these global guidelines, the result of much effort and discussion from experienced early years professionals, did not, for whatever reason, get the worldwide distribution they deserved and are probably buried deep in a cupboard somewhere.

Finance

Earlier I mentioned that initially, we were an NGO with class B status which gave us a grant from UNESCO, so it was a blow to the organisation when the funding was withdrawn in the 1990s, and since then OMEP has had to look elsewhere for funding although our links with UNESCO remain. We still have NGO status but we have to compete with others to get funding for projects. OMEP has always had to be careful with money, but a lack of financial resources has been a serious challenge, particularly since the economic situation has been

difficult in many member countries. Although we have had many worthy candidates holding office over the years I have always been concerned that there may well have been others unable to stand for election due to a lack of finance. There are numerous people with excellent ideas to help promote our aims and values but if they don't have the backing of universities or governments they may be unable to attend conferences and showcase their ideas. Besides administering the organisation, an important part of the role of the World President and the Regional Vice Presidents is to not only attend the World Conferences but to be able to visit member countries, particularly preparatory countries and those countries located many thousands of miles away from the location of the next international conference. I know that in this modern age Skype and inexpensive mobile connections exist, but these are no substitute for face-to-face contact. Unfortunately, however, travel is expensive and the host country is not always able to cover the costs of the visiting member.

On a personal level I remember that although I received support from the UK government, I would not have been able to carry out some of my activities without the help of an unpaid secretary who was highly committed to OMEP. But understandably this lack of funding put constraints on what could be achieved.

The interests of governments in pre-school education

Immediately after the war there was little or no provision for children under statutory school age in many countries and the provision that did exist varied enormously in suitability and standards. Our Founder Members were well aware of this and worked hard to ensure that some provision existed. In this country, the home of Comenius, Maria Bartuskova, chairperson of the Czech National Committee presented members of the Prague Conference with a booklet on Nursery Education in Czechoslovakia which demonstrated the efforts being made in the country for very young children. Between May 1946 and January 1948 there was a 90% increase in the number of nursery schools. Efforts were made to ensure there was provision for the children of working mothers and that there was a training faculty for preschool teachers in every training institution. However this did not happen in all other countries. In 1961, the dearth of provision for children under school age in my own country, inspired a teacher, later a member of OMEP, to set up playgroups organised by mothers. This then developed into what is now the Pre-school Learning Alliance with many thousands of members. Over the years, governments have increased places for children between the ages of 2/3 to 5/6, but the majority are still in the private sector. In recent decades state intervention in many countries, including my own, has led to rules and regulations being imposed upon pre-school educators that are not necessarily in the best interests of the child. Globally it seems that there is pressure upon early childhood educators to achieve unrealistic targets that fail to take into account either the development or the cultural factors of the child. League tables showing achievements in maths and literacy, both internationally and nationally, are resulting in downward pressures being made on children irrespective of their level of development. The idea that play is the

main vehicle for learning in young children seems to have been forgotten, and in its place formal methods are being introduced. In any country where proposed changes in legislation may not be in the best interests of young children OMEP needs to work with other early childhood organisations to persuade government officials to 'think again'. A fairly recent successful intervention venture in the UK was when the combined efforts of every association involved with very young children successfully lobbied a minister who wanted to change child-adult ratios to what we felt would have negative consequences.

Training Programmes in Early Childhood Education

OMEP has always been involved in the training of early childhood educators and worked to improve their training and education. Internationally during the 1960s there was a focus on the numbers of failing children and new research suggested the possibility that good early childhood programmes which involved collaboration between pre-school and family could remedy this. In the USA, Head Start Programmes and in the UK programmes in the Educational Priority Areas were introduced and led to discussions at both national and international levels. A number of OMEP members were involved in these programmes, especially if they were working in Teacher Training Institutions, but the prevailing view of many was that education in the early years, based on knowledge of all aspects of child development, was one of the most effective ways to help children and their families. OMEP helped publicise these discussions by devoting the 1971 issues of the *International Journal of Early Childhood* to the subject.

Over the years, the organisation has had many individual members from all over the world working closely with UNESCO and UNICEF to carry out projects and produce publications on the training of preschool educators and as well as holding lively discussions at conferences. Quality training of early childhood educators is vital but the individual programmes must take into account, not only the newest research, but also the various cultures and differences within a country. This is one of the most important challenges that face teacher trainers in any multicultural society as only in this way can we provide children with the best opportunities for learning.

Our Founder Members were concerned that our members should both carry out and be aware of research into all aspects of child care and education. In recent years much research has focused on the brain of babies and very young children and ways to stimulate their development. Although the majority of our members working with young children are normally dealing with the ages of 2/3 upwards, we still need to be aware of the implications of this research.

The value of OMEP to the individual

When I was working with students I was often asked 'why should I join OMEP, I am already a member of my professional organisation?' It was a question that for me was not difficult to answer. Not only do I subscribe to the values and aims of this international organisation and

want to help improve the education and care of young children but for me there was something more. Through membership of OMEP I have been able to learn more about the education and care of children in different societies and cultures. One of the most important aspects of a World Conference is the opportunity to visit nurseries and day care institutions. Settings and programmes may well be very different from those in our own country but there are many benefits for us as individuals of seeing and reflecting upon what we have witnessed., It is impossible to overestimate the importance of these meetings as participants are not only exposed to a variety of settings but will have the opportunity to discuss what they have observed with colleagues from all over the world.

Hopefully I have been able to demonstrate to you some of the ways in which members of OMEP have met the aims of our Founder Members, but what of the future?

Future Challenges

Lady Allen wrote in 1948, 'that it is not difficult to launch an international organisation, but it is very difficult to keep it full of energy and purpose.' Over the last 70 years I hope you will agree we have achieved a great deal, but we face a number of important challenges if we wish to support young children and their families in the next decades.

One challenge that has been continuous since our inception is the lack of financial support. With the rapid increase in the number of NGOs it was inevitable that UNESCO would alter the way it distributes its funds. I know it is a difficult problem but it is one that needs to be addressed, if OMEP is to continue to be effective.

With the increase in the number of member countries, the role of the World President becomes more demanding, so should more responsibility be placed in the hands of the Regional Vice Presidents?

Our Founder Members addressed issues relating to health, nutrition, education, poverty and jurisprudence, should we still be attempting to embrace all these issues or should we focus on only on one or two? If so which ones?

As I've previously mentioned, the number of countries belonging to OMEP has increased, but in many countries individual membership has fallen drastically, especially where national professional early childhood institutions exist. I suggest that national committees could stimulate interest in OMEP and its work with the use of social media. Most OMEP countries have websites, but they do not always include information on projects carried out by both OMEP and other organisations in different parts of the globe on behalf of young children. This information needs to be disseminated in an accessible manner and perhaps we could all be thinking about how interactive websites, blogs and twitter could be used to help spread the word.

There will continue to be many issues affecting young children in the future. But just being concerned is not good enough, we must be politically active too. Compared to many NGOs

we're a small organisation, but if we work with them our voice will be stronger and the chances of success will be higher.

We live in a highly technological world that talks about cooperation, but in reality seems to worship competition and commercial gain. We cannot change this but as early childhood educators we must help children understand the importance of cooperation and tolerance, and to accept those who come from different cultures with different ideas and recognise that everything is not always about being 'the best'. Children are the future of the world and our efforts must be directed towards providing them with learning experiences through play. Today's world is very different from 1948, but sadly there are still thousands of children who live in poverty and in daily fear for their lives, but there also many whose material needs are met but who are denied the right to play and to feel loved and respected. OMEP's role is to provide all children with memories and experiences that will sustain them throughout their lives.