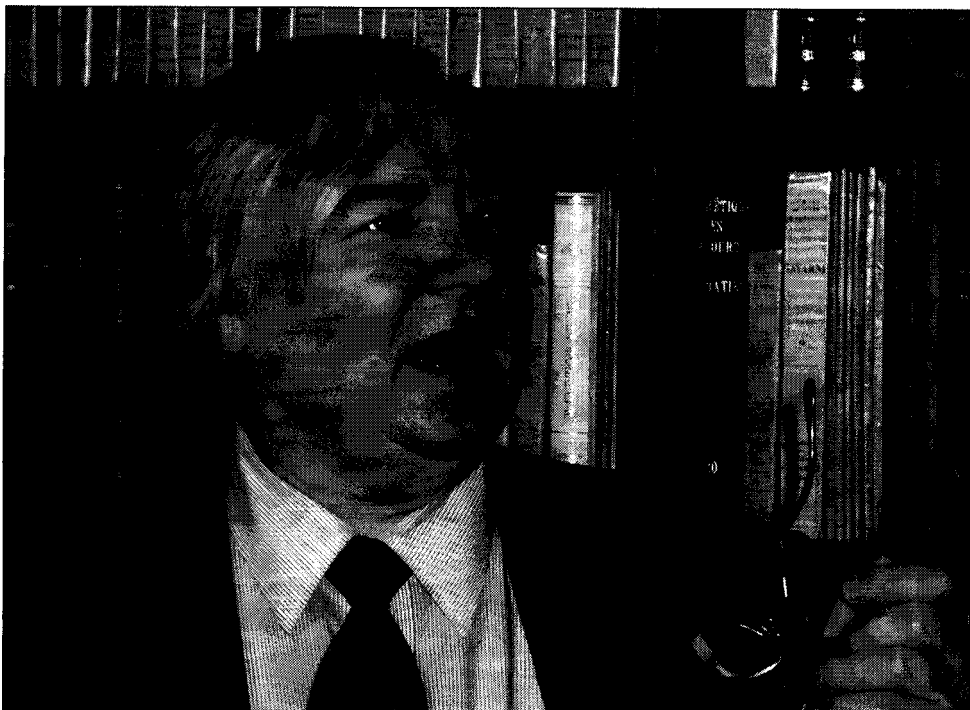




# Promoting science to the benefit of practice: A professional biography of Walter Hellinckx

MAES, B., GRIETENS, H. & GHESQUIÈRE, P.



Professor Walter Hellinckx has been the founder of the European Scientific Association on Residential and Foster Care for children and adolescents (EUSARF) and the association's president for about fifteen years. In September 2007, he left the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, after a long and outstanding academic career. To honor him, the EUSARF members offered him a *Festschrift* (see *Book announcement* in this issue). This *Festschrift* is a 'state of the art' of the knowledge of the care for vulnerable children and families, a study field where Walter for a lot of years has been very active and in which he brought together both national and foreign colleagues. In this paper, which is a reprint of the first chapter of the *Festschrift*, we would like to give an evocation of his academic career. We realize that it has been very multifaceted and that it is difficult, if not impossible to in brief give a complete overview of all that Walter has realized during his career at the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven. We consider this contribution therefore rather as a sketch in which we want to illustrate the versatility and the importance of his work by means of some milestones. We hope that throughout the text it may become clear how much Walter has meant and continues to mean as a colleague, univer-

sity teacher, researcher, supervisor, counsellor, inspiration and person for so many people in Flanders and far away.

## The early years

Walter Hellinckx was born on July 17 1945 in Mechelen, the only son of Jef and Henriette Hellinckx-Mulkens. He spent his primary and secondary school years in Mechelen. In 1963, he came to Leuven in order to study pedagogical sciences. In the licenses he chose 'orthopedagogics',<sup>1</sup> which had then just started, as a main subject. There he got to know among his contemporaries his later colleague Lieve Vandemeulebroecke and his future wife Annemie Veroveren. He graduated in the year 1967 together with the first class of orthopedagogues at the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven. The title of his dissertation was: '*Controlestudie betreffende de psychologie van het enige kind: onderzoek van dossiers uit een Medisch Psychologische Kinderkliniek*'<sup>2</sup> under the supervision of Professor D'Espallier. Immediately after graduating he was engaged as an orthopedagogue in the Sint-Ferdinand Instituut (Saint Ferdinand institute) in Lummen. It is a large residential institution of the Brothers of Charity for children and young people with mental retardation; linked to it was a school for special primary and secondary education.

In 1972 Walter was asked by Professor Karel Swinnen to return to Leuven as a temporary assistant at the Centre of Orthopedagogics. According to Karel Swinnen there were a lot of reasons for this: Walter belonged to the best students of his year, he was very motivated, he had expressed the wish to take his doctor's degree and already as a student he had attracted attention by his large organizational abilities and managerial qualities. His colleagues in that initial period were among others Marcel Van Walleghem, Godelieve Duran, August Dens and Imelda Taelemans.

From the initial years on Walter has left his mark on the courses. He introduced among others the behaviour therapeutic perspective in orthopedagogics. He played an important role in the realization of the new curriculum, with among others the extension of the program to five years, the organization of a period of practical work and the introduction of a number of new courses on the 'treatment of children with behavioural problems' and 'residential care'. In that period Walter also made the first contacts with the Professors of orthopedagogics in the Netherlands at that time. He also invited them to Flanders within the framework of teaching and the study days of the professional association (cf. infra). Early February 1976 he made with colleagues a tour of the Netherlands (something that he would later repeat together with his colleagues Frank de Fever and Erik Broekaert).

In that period Walter also worked on his doctorate. His interest in behaviour therapy influenced the choice of his subject: 'early intervention' based on behaviour therapeutic principles. In order to get to know better 'early intervention' he regularly went on working visits to foreign countries (in the United States and Europe) and he attended congresses of the International Association of the Scientific Study of Mental Deficiency. He translated in that period one of Gunzburg's standard works concerning social adaptive behaviour in people with mental retardation into Dutch '*Sociale vaardigheid voor geestelijk gehandicapten*' (Social Competence and Mental Handicap). It was published in 1973, in the Ortho-series by Lemniscaat. In 1979 he successfully defended his doctoral thesis, '*Vroegtijdige hulpverlening aan gezinnen met een Down's syndroom kind: Een orthopedagogische benadering*'.<sup>3</sup> The doctorate included a theoretical framework and a concrete orthopedagogical program for the early counselling of children with Down's syndrome and their family. It has inspired several generations of orthopedago-

gues and other professionals for their work in the services for home-based family support for children with a developmental impairment.

In 1985 Walter was appointed as a university teacher to the department of Educational Sciences of the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven. His appointment consisted of further developing both research and teaching in the field of behavioural and parenting problems at the Centre of Orthopedagogics. That was the beginning of his academic career, which was rewarded in 1999, with an appointment in the degree of full Professor.

## Training and education

In the initial period of the Orthopedagogics curriculum the emphasis was strongly on child-directed and clinical psychological diagnostics. Attention was given especially to the support of children with a handicap or learning disabilities. The introduction in 1980 by Ter Horst of '*Problematische Opvoedingssituatie*'<sup>4</sup> as a core concept was at the basis of the widening of the study domain of orthopedagogics. Prompted by his predecessors, the Dutch Professors De Ruyter, Kok and Ter Horst, Walter has further developed the field of orthopedagogics also in Flanders. He laid more emphasis on pedagogically directed diagnostics and interventions. He aimed at new target groups, such as children and young people with behavioural and psychosocial problems and families with parenting problems, both within the context of family, school and substitute care settings. In Leuven this renewal initially took shape in 'psychopedagogics', another branch of study in the department of educational sciences. Walter played an important role in this renewed program. The psycho pedagogues were thoroughly introduced in his methods of family-oriented parenting support. With his students he visited clinical practices in the Netherlands. By means of practical training periods new possibilities for graduated pedagogues were created. Later, this main subject was incorporated in the study of orthopedagogics. The family-oriented perspective which started in that period, has remained up to now an important component of the Leuven curriculum.

Walter took care of a large diversity of parts of that curriculum, such as family-oriented pedagogical support, residential support, orthopedagogical diagnostics and theory of orthopedagogics. He introduced the students to the development of the orthopedagogical theory, the diagnostic principles and methods and the orthopedagogical treatment interventions. Furthermore, several parts of the program were near to his research area, particularly the diagnostics and support of children and young people with behavioural and psychosocial problems. During his career Walter by his teaching has kindled enthusiasm in dozens of generations of students. He was a very inspiring teacher and carried his students away during his colleges with enthusiastic reasoning concerning his study field. His teaching had been grafted on most recent scientific research, but he interlarded the theory with captivating tales from practice in former days and now. It was thus no coincidence that for many years the largest group of orthopedagogics students has chosen the option 'behavioural problems'. Walter also has supervised dozens of generations of master students in writing a dissertation that was related to his research field. Except in the department of Educational Sciences, Walter was also a teacher in diverse other programs at the university (such as the Youth Health Care program and the Speech Therapy and Audiology program of the faculty of Medicine).

During his career Walter took on several administrative functions in the centre, the department and the faculty. He has been for many years president of the study council and responsible for the Centre of Orthopedagogics, member of the board of the department of Educational Sciences, member of the appointment commission Educational Sciences and member of the board of the faculty Psychology and Educational Sciences. Because of his expertise he was

asked in 2005 to be part of the visitation committee of the courses of Educational Sciences at the universities of the Netherlands.

## Clinical practice

Already as an assistant Walter developed his expertise in clinical work. He successfully followed a post graduate training in behaviour therapy. As an assistant he got the opportunity of doing clinical work in child psychiatry two days a week (with Professor Fonteyne and Professor Pyck, at that time in the Sint-Rafaël-hospital). Later on, as a university teacher, Walter also found it very important that students in orthopedagogics mastered not only theoretical insights, but also acquired the necessary clinical competencies in order to be able to analyze behavioural or parenting problems in a justified and systematic way and to plan, carry out and evaluate interventions. This should result in a professional approach by graduated orthopedagogues in several fields of society. It was also for this reason that he set up the Orthopedagogical consultation service in 1980, of which he was more than 25 years the inspiration. Families can get help at this consultation service for questions concerning their child's education, behaviour, learning and development. After a thorough diagnostic examination they are referred or a pedagogical support program is started up. The service gives students and assistants the opportunity to qualify themselves in the practice of orthopedagogical diagnostics and support. The material collected in this service is used as didactic material in different courses. Walter was responsible for the content of the service's functioning; he supervised the team meetings and supervised both students and assistants at their clinical work. He also supervised numerous students who followed a one-year specialist training program in providing pedagogical support to children and young people with behaviour problems. In 2004, on Walter's initiative, the orthopedagogical consultation service's infrastructure was thoroughly adapted and entirely modernized.

## Research

During his career Walter has set out several research lines. His research resulted in numerous important and highly appreciated international publications in authoritative journals in our field. We give an outline of some of the most important research lines.

In a first line concerning family-oriented pedagogical support in cases of parenting and behavioural problems, a model was in the first place developed on the basis of the ecological models by Bronfenbrenner and Belsky. It was applied both in clinical work and in empirical research with respect to families who have questions about their child's rearing and behaviour or development, as well as with regard to several problematic parenting situations. An important accent in this line was laid on research concerning multi-problem families. It resulted in 1993 in the first doctoral dissertation under Walter's supervision, namely Pol Ghesquière's *'Multi-problem gezinnen: perspectieven op een problematische hulpverleningssituatie'*.<sup>5</sup> A second doctoral project concerned the differences in the parenting process between consulting and non-consulting parents of a child with behavioural problems. Because of the unfortunate death of drs. Katrien Van Dun, the doctorate, which was at a very advanced stage, was broken off. Research was also done, commissioned by *'Kind & Gezin'*,<sup>6</sup> concerning procedures for early identification of problematic parenting situations with a risk of physical child abuse and neglect. This research resulted in a scale, which meanwhile is being used by professionals in preventive and child welfare services. In this area Walter developed an intensive cooperation with Professor Herman Baartman (Free University Amsterdam). *Kind & Gezin's* counselling activities for

families at risk were inventoried and evaluated in order to optimize their way of working. With the dissertation *'Het preventief hulpaanbod aan gezinnen met een risico op fysieke kindermishandeling en/of verwaarlozing. Een kwaliteitsevaluatie door middel van een literatuurstudie en een empirische exploratie'*<sup>7</sup> Liesl Geeraert in 2004 successfully defended her doctorate, under Walter's supervision.

A second research line aimed at the prevalence of behavioural and emotional problems of children and young people. The publication in the early nineties of the results of a large-scale prevalence study on 3-to-12-year-old-children, meant for Walter an important international breakthrough. In this research for the first time in Flanders the Child Behaviour Checklist was used, a behaviour rating scale that afterwards found its way also to clinical practice. The Flemish prevalence data were included in several cross-national comparisons (with among other countries the Netherlands and the United States) and this up to now. This research also provided a long-term cooperation with foreign research groups, among others with the department of Child and Youth Psychiatry of the Academic Hospital Rotterdam-Sophia (with Professor Frank Verhulst and Professor Fop Verheij) and the Centre for Children, Youth, and Family of the University of Vermont (USA; with Professor Thomas Achenbach). In 1995 Walter, in association with some foreign colleagues and with the financial support of the European community, coordinated a large-scale prevalence study into behavioural and emotional problems of young people in the Russian Federation.

A third research line aimed at support given to children and young people with psychosocial problems. The quality evaluation of youth care in Flanders took an important place here. Walter's research results did sometimes raise a lot of dust, but were at the basis of a lot of renewals within the sector of youth care. Walter also supplied the sector with numerous instruments and handles in order to systematically test and optimize the quality of youth care. Research was also carried out into several recent trends and renewals in youth care, both in Flanders and in a European perspective. In so doing attention was given to residential care, foster care and family preservation. In this respect and in the context of the European Scientific Association on Residential and Foster Care for children and adolescents (cf. *infra*), Walter together with Professor Mathew Colton (University of Swansea and the Norwegian University of Science and Technology) among others, published several books on current developments and problems in child welfare. Within this research line Hans Grietens made under the supervision of Professor Ko Rink (Groningen University) and Walter, a doctorate on the attitudes of young delinquents towards social limits and the possibility to change these attitudes. The dissertation was successfully defended in 1999, under the title *'Attitudes towards social limits, undersocialized behaviour and self-presentation in young people: A contribution to the theoretical framework and the empirical validation of the Reaction Pattern Research in Flanders'*.

A fourth research line concerns antisocial behaviour of children and young people, it examined the relation between parenting mechanisms and the development of antisocial behaviour in young children. In particular, longitudinal studies were carried out into the relation between coercion and the development of antisocial behaviour. On this research line Peter Prinzie obtained his doctorate under Walter's supervision in 2002, with the thesis *'Wederzijdse dwang in ouder-kind interacties, ouderlijke persoonskarakteristieken en kindkenmerken als predictoren van antisociaal gedrag bij 4- tot 9- jarigen. Een toets van hypothetische modellen met behulp van een versneld longitudinaal design'*.<sup>8</sup>

Finally Walter has always had a particular interest for the history and the theoretical foundations of orthopedagogics. His interest in the roots of orthopedagogics resulted in the publication in 2001 of the book *'De kleine Alexander. De behandeling van een jongen met aanvallen van razernij en waanzin'*.<sup>9</sup> This original work on a forgotten case describes and comments the history of twelve-year-old Alexander's illness, who because of attacks of fury, somnambulism

and loss of consciousness, is treated by the marquis de Chastenet de Puysegur. The treatment was inspired by the principles of hypnosis and animal magnetism and was in a lot of respects far ahead of its time. In other publications in this respect Walter also proves that he masters the art of a very precise and systematic analysis of historical writings, linked to a critical attitude with respect to the meaning of history for contemporary orthopedagogics. He already often committed himself to the organization of historical exhibitions, including on orphanages and special education. Pieter Verstraete's ongoing doctoral project '*Für das Leben – Durch das Leben. Kanttekeningen bij het ontstaan van de orthopedagogiek (1749-1930)*'<sup>10</sup> is very close to Walter's interest in the history of orthopedagogics.

We yet add that Walter was a member of the editorial staff of several journals in orthopedagogics and child welfare. He was co-founder and member of the editorial board of '*Tijdschrift voor Orthopedagogiek, Kinderpsychiatrie en Klinische Kinderpsychologie*'<sup>11</sup> and was on the editorial board of 'International Journal of Child & Family Welfare' and 'Community Alternatives. International Journal of Family Care'. Because of his rich research experience he was frequently asked to be on the jury of national and international doctorates.

## Orthopedagogics in an international perspective

During his career Walter has made many international contacts. One can say without doubt that by these contacts he has put orthopedagogics, which as a discipline was not known as such outside the Dutch and German speaking area, on the map.

He is the founder of the European Scientific Association on Residential and Foster Care for children and adolescents (EUSARF) and for 15 years has been its president. The founding conference was organized in 1989, in De Haan under the title 'First European Scientific Conference on Residential Care, Innovations in Residential Care'. EUSARF brings together scientists from Europe and North-America who do research in the field of care of children and young people with psychosocial problems (for instance, residential care, foster care, family preservation). The association wants to promote scientific research in this field and regularly organizes international conferences. In the womb of EUSARF, as mentioned before, many publications were born. Some of them were translated into Polish, Russian and Japanese. Since 1996 the association has also a journal, the 'International Journal of Child & Family Welfare', which early 2004 was recognized by the Institute for the Study of Education and Human Development (ISED). When passing on the president's chair in 2005, Walter was unanimously appointed honorary chairman of the association by his colleagues.

Walter was a faithful participant in and a regular speaker at conferences. Apart from the already mentioned EUSARF conferences he spoke on conferences of the *Association Internationale de Formation et de Recherche en Éducation Familiale (AIFREF)*<sup>12</sup> – together with this association EUSARF organized in 2003, an international conference 'In the Best Interests of the Child: Cross-Cultural Perspectives' in Leuven – and of the International Society for the Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect (ISPCAN). He was a guest at numerous foreign research centres and was gladly invited to give guest lectures abroad. In 1999 this was formalized at the university of Paris-X Nanterre. On the suggestion of Professor Paul Durning he was accepted as 'professeur invité' to take care of the module '*Suppléance familiale*'<sup>13</sup> within the framework of the *Diplôme d'Etudes Supérieures Spécialisées de l'Éducation Familiale*.<sup>14</sup>

He made the most of his international contacts also for his own courses. He very regularly invited foreign colleagues to give lectures. He was also the initiator of several days of foreign study travel with his students. Denmark, France and of course the Netherlands were several

times on the program. But also the United Kingdom, Ireland, Germany, Austria, Spain and Poland passed the revue. Thanks to his international contacts he also could give students in orthopedagogics the opportunity to be trained as part of the Socrates exchange program: in Paris, Groningen, Leiden, Dublin, Amsterdam, Padova and Warsaw. The international contacts within and outside EUSARF were not limited to the field of science. In the course of years Walter has become a personal and long-term friend of a lot of foreign colleagues.

## Service to society

As an academician Walter never lived in an ivory tower. His research was also at the service of practice and policy.

He has realized this in the first place by means of formation and refresher courses. On the request of the cupola of free school psychology services he spent well over twenty years giving formation and training to their collaborators in the whole of Flanders, and in particular in the province of Limburg. These refresher course programs were related especially to family and school oriented pedagogical support for children and young people with behavioural and educational problems. To Child & Family's home visiting nurses he gave formation, including on screening problematic parenting situations, quality evaluation and parenting support. Consultants of the *Comités Bijzondere Jeugdzorg*<sup>15</sup> and of the juvenile courts got refresher courses on recent developments in child welfare. He took care of innumerable lectures and study days for professional care workers in youth care, for example on quality control and behavioural problems. Walter in other words has made a firm contribution 'avant la lettre' to lifelong and all-embracing learning of a lot of professional care workers in the broad field of education and youth care and to the implementation of 'evidence-based practices' in youth care.

Walter moreover is cofounder and inspiration of innumerable initiatives in youth care, such as the *Dienst Begeleid Wonen Leuven* (a service for self reliant/self supporting living), the *Thuis-begeleidingsdienst Leuven* (a centre for intensive family preservation) and the *Vertrouwenscentrum Kindermishandeling Vlaams Brabant* (Confidential Centre on Child Abuse & Neglect). He was a board member in numerous organizations in the sector of education and welfare (among other things CGGZ (Centre Mental Health Care) Heusden, *Vertrouwenscentrum Kindermishandeling* (Confidential Centre on Child Abuse & Neglect) Hasselt, *MPC* (Child Guidance Clinic) Terbank Leuven, *Consultatie Gehandicaptten* (Consultation for the Disabled) in Leuven). From the Advisory service pediatrics in the Virga Jesse hospital in Hasselt he has taken new initiatives in the field of pedagogical assistance in hospitals in close cooperation with the paediatricians. Both counselling the nurses and supporting the family with a (chronically or long-term) ill child in the hospital, were thereby at issue.

During his career Walter has also tried to give advice to policy makers on the basis of his research and practical experiences. He was a member of all kinds of advisory bodies such as the Supreme Council for Special Education, the sectorial consultation of the Centres for Child Care and Family Support, the interdisciplinary scientific Council of Child & Family, the Educational Committee for Community Institutions of the Ministry of the Flemish Community, the study group on educational standards for special schools for children with behavioural problems, et cetera. He made intensive and long-term contacts with policy makers in *Kind & Gezin* (Child & Family), in the administration *Bijzondere Jeugdzorg* (Special Youth care) and the cabinet of the Ministry of Welfare, Health and Family. In doing so he tried to put findings from (international) research at the service of renewing policy initiatives. Because of him being guest Professor at the Université Paris X at Nanterre he became a member of the scientific council of the *Observatoire National de l'Enfance en Danger (ONED)*<sup>16</sup> in France. In the

spring of 2006 he organized a working visit to ONED for the Flemish minister of Welfare, Health and Family Inge Vervotte. This resulted in important new initiatives regarding the prevention of child abuse in Flanders.

Walter has always been a zealous advocate of the social recognition of the professional category of orthopedagogues. Already in 1973 he wrote, together with his colleague at that time, August Dens, an article with the title '*Naar een beroepsprofiel van de orthopedagoog*' ('Towards a professional profile of the orthopedagogue'). Later, several master theses were made under his supervision concerning the professional profile of the orthopedagogue. Walter founded in 1971 the *Vereniging voor Orthopedagogen en Orthopedagogisch Geïnteresseerden (V.O.O.G.)* (Association for Orthopedagogues). This association held a first conference in Leuven together with O&A, the Dutch professional organization for orthopedagogues and psychologists. This association later became the *Vlaamse Vereniging voor Orthopedagogen* (Flemish Association for Orthopedagogues), of which Walter was an active member and advocate. In this respect it must also be said that Walter developed a unique cooperation and friendship with colleagues of other Flemish (Professor Frank De Fever of the Vrije Universiteit Brussel and Professor Erik Broekaert of the Universiteit Gent) and Walloon universities (Professor Jean-Pierre Pourtois of the Université Mons-Hainaut). On the basis of these good contacts he, together with his colleagues, set up the *Vlaamse Wetenschappelijke Vereniging voor Orthopedagogen (V.W.V.O.)* (Flemish Scientific Association for Orthopedagogues) in order to promote the exchange and cooperation between the several curricula of orthopedagogics at Flemish universities. At the end of his career Walter has still made an important contribution to the preparatory activities of the federal government's Ministry of Health, with a view to the legal recognition of the profession of the psychologists, the orthopedagogues and the sexologists in health care services.

## A life-long passion for books

Walter was possessed not only by scientific work. He also developed a boundless love for books. Already in his youth he saved his pocket money in order to buy books. At an early age he took a privately published range of interviews from Flemish writers. His passion does consist not only of very gladly reading very many books, but also of collecting books. As a bibliophile he has a passion for the 'beauty' of old books (the typography, the immaculate binding, the illustrations), but also for the 'authenticity' of books and writings. His interest is extended to old books on animal magnetism, psychoanalysis, the origins of psychiatry, the founders of orthopedagogics, characters from French literature... moreover he has a preference for (auto)biographies, memoirs, diaries, collections of correspondence, et cetera. Characters who interest him in particular are among others authors such as Thomas Mann, Goethe, Samuel Johnson and philosophers such as Nietzsche, Wittgenstein, Rousseau, Voltaire and Diderot. Wherever in the world, he unerringly knows where the bookshops and the antiquarian booksellers are to be found and he takes the necessary time to make new discoveries. By means of personal contacts and the Internet he has in the course of years built a vast and unique collection, which is treated with very much care. Beside books also busts, paintings or drawings of the above-mentioned characters take a place in his personal library.

## To conclude

From the above sketch it will become clear that Walter for more than three decades has been an enthusiastic and enthusing academician, who has performed innovative work in many fields



and who in a worthy and entirely unique manner knew how to combine education, research, clinical practice and service to society. He has given orthopedagogics in Flanders an identity and has developed it into a discipline that nationally and internationally is taken into account. His vision of youth care and his model for family-oriented pedagogical support in cases of behavioural and parenting problems will undoubtedly continue to inspire for a long time a lot of professionals in Belgium and abroad.

## Notes

---

1. We are using in this text the term 'orthopedagogics', a literal translation of the Dutch term 'orthopedagogiek'. This discipline covers the scientific study of care for people with disabilities, special needs education and child welfare.
2. Control study concerning the psychology of the only child: Study of files from a Medical Psychological Child clinic.
3. Early intervention to families with a Down's syndrome child: An orthopedagogical approach.
4. Problematic educational situation.
5. Multi-problem families: Perspectives on a problematic support situation.
6. Child and Family.
7. The preventive support offer to families at risk of physical child abuse and/or neglect. A quality evaluation by means of a literature study and an empirical exploration.
8. Reciprocal coercion in parent-child interactions, parent personality characteristics and child features as predictors of antisocial behavior in 4 to 9 year olds. A test of hypothetical models using an accelerated longitudinal design.
9. Little Alexander. The treatment of a boy with attacks of fury and madness.
10. 'For life – By life. Marginal notes on the origins of Orthopedagogics (1749-1930).
11. Journal for Orthopedagogics, Child Psychiatry and Clinical Child Psychology.
12. International association of Formation and of Research on familial education.
13. Child and family welfare.
14. Diploma of higher specialized studies in familial education.
15. Committees Special Youth Care.
16. National Observatory of Childhood at Risk.

## Authors notes

---

**Maes, B., Grietens, H. & Ghesquière, P.**  
Centre for Parenting, Child Welfare & Disabilities  
Katholieke Universiteit Leuven  
Belgium