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"INVESTING IN CHILDREN": A DOMINANT DISCOURSE ON CHILDHOOD AND CHILDREN IN 21ST CENTURY

Abstract

Looking at the last 30 years, one can observes the radical change in the academic and political discourse concerning childhood and children. The concept of "investing in children" has become dominant in the academic discourse and political programme of at least the European Union. Investing in children is located at the core of the social investment strategy. In this article, the social investment paradigm is characterised, and two types of arguments for investing in disadvantaged children are presented. J. Heckman's explanations concerning the stage of a child's life cycle in which to invest, and how, are presented. Practical implementation of the Early Child Education and Care in the European countries is outlined.

Key words: investing in children, the social investment state, Early Child Education and Care

INTRODUCTION

Approaches to childhood and children change over time and cultures, according to the production mode and cultural constitution dominating in society. Society's functioning provides incentives to exclude childhood and children, or include them in society as full-fledged citizens and influence the discourse on their present and future significance and impact on society.

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In looking back over the last thirty years, one can observe a radical change in the academic and political discourse about childhood and children. The concept of "investing in children" came to replace that which was in force in industrialised countries, offered by the developmental psychology. Childhood was then considered a universal phase in a human being's development, immune to the environment in which children live. Developmental psychology, as created by Piaget and his followers, perceived children as objects of adult's activities, whose primary characteristics were nonage, immaturity and the need for protection. Based on the critique of this perspective, childhood studies arose in the 1990s as a modern sociological approach. Jens Qvertrup, one of the founders of childhood studies, claimed that childhood is socially constructed and relational in nature. He explained that: *The notion of childhood does not have the individual child in mind but rather the legal, spatial, temporal and institutional arrangements available for children in a given society* (Qvertrup 2007: 13). According to Leena Alanen (2001), another prominent representative of childhood studies, generational relations, i.e. between childhood and adulthood, are like those between social classes and gender.

Currently childhood studies encompass three streams in sociological studies on children and childhood [van Krieken, Buehler-Niederberger, 2009:188]:

1. The structural approach, also referred to as the generational approach, concerns childhood and adulthood as segments of macro-structure, constituted by the inequality between them;
2. The historical and social constructivist approaches analyse discourses about and actions toward children;
3. The ethnographic approach focuses on interactions and communication in different groups of children.

The sociological approach to childhood and children paved the way for perceiving children as competent and capable agents impacting on their environment. It also contributed to conceiving children not only as adults-in-the-making but as persons living "here and now", with specific needs and rights. The notion of "children well-being" as a multidimensional concept became widespread, attracting not only sociologists but also scholars in economics. Approaching childhood as a underprivileged macrostructural segment also called for political engagement. For decades, priorities in social welfare programmes did not explicitly cover children. The central figure was that of a man serving as a breadwinner, whereas women and kids were "privatised" as belonging to the realm of the family. Welfare programmes protected male-workers against income losses, in case of unemployment, illness, injury, or old age, to enable him to satisfy the primary needs also of his family members. Children were neither considered a subject nor a target of social policy. While this does not mean that the policy did not impact on children's well-being, nonetheless in no way were children the primary focus of social policy. Recent years seem to have brought about a process of change, at least in the academic discourse embedded primarily in welfare state studies as well as in international political declarations.

'INVESTING IN CHILDREN' IN THE CENTRE OF THE SOCIAL INVESTMENT PARADIGM

The reason for this change lies in the structural and cultural changes in developed countries, which produce "new social risks". Combating them requires a redefinition of the maintainers of society's development and, accordingly, a new approach to welfare programmes. Children and childhood have been placed in the centre of the new welfare paradigm. New social risks are defined as a gap in access to work that pays and hence to high-quality services (Jenson, Saint-Martin 2006: 430). The underlying causes are the transition to a "knowledge-based economy", demographical factors, and shifts in culture.

The knowledge-based economy's mode of production requires highly educated skilled workers. Former male industrial workers did not meet such a criterion and many of them were transformed into long-term unemployed, supported by different benefits. They thus lost their attractiveness as husbands and fathers for women, who in growing numbers were entering the labour market. Prolonged education and the employment of females, combined with efficient control over reproduction, contributed to delayed and lower fertility. At the same time, the increasing number of divorces increased the number of single-parent households, with many of them being provided with benefits. Overall, this made that marriage occured less necessary for women and children to survive and less protective against income losses. Though the public at large has accepted single-parent families and single women as mothers, there is no doubt that changes in the family structure impose a burden on the state budget. Moreover, in developed economies there is a tendency for children to decline in number. This makes policy-makers worry about the functioning of pension schemes in the future, as at the same time the share of the elderly population steadily increases.

These structural changes undermined each of three pillars of the socio-economic welfare system: the market, the family, and the state, making the protection of individuals and families from being left behind ever more problematic. Therefore, the model of the existing welfare regime required re-definition and needed to be re-structured, not least because of the growing costs it generated. The neoliberal approach to the state intervention, regarding it as "spoiling" the regulative forces of the market, also played a part in the attempts to reconstruct the welfare state.

New ideas developed in the course of the 1990s. Some of them aimed at making anti-poverty measures more cost-effective, and some at increasing social integration *via* employment. The concept of social investment, invented in academia, was transferred into flagship political programmes adopted by international bodies, like the European Union.

One of the precursors of the idea that public spending aimed at empowering the poor should be treated as a social investment is Micheal Sherraden (1991). He challenged the anti-poverty strategy based on income-support as ineffective and proposed a new strategy called Asset-Building. This strategy is based on a conviction that assets have a positive impact on both the poor and the society as a whole. According to the author assets: improve household stability; create an orientation toward the future; promote the development of human capital and other assets; enable focus and specialisation; provide a foundation for risk-taking; increase personal efficacy; increase social influence and political participation; and increase the welfare of offspring (p. 166). To enable poor families to accumulate assets he proposed Individual Development Accounts based on matched savings of the family and public institution (central government).

In Europe, Anthony Giddens (1998) propagated the concept of "the social investment state", which laid the foundation for the Labour Party programme with its well-known slogan "Children first"[1]. He proposed a so-called "Third way" for developed countries to maintain economic growth and competitiveness under conditions of globalisation. According to him, the role of the state should be converted from 'protective" and 'corrective" to promoting and supporting 'prevention", "activation" and "productivity". The state should act as an entrepreneur, aiming at receiving the highest gains from public spending. Hence

[1] The Labour Party entirely reconstructed the social policy model in the United Kingdom towards a preventive one. The policy was targeted primarily at children, families, and communities. It constituted a comprehensive social welfare system based on the following priorities: 1) more financial support for (deserving) low-income families; 2) welfare to work, childcare and family-friendly employment policies; 3) investment in Sure Start programmes; 4) more support for first-time mothers; 4) investment in parent education; 5) policies aimed at strengthening marriage and promoting child welfare in divorce proceedings; and 6) initiatives to address domestic violence, school truancy, teenage pregnancy and youth offences (Home Office, 1998).

it should invest in those social groups and activities that promised the highest pay-off. Therefore human capital development should be a focus of government interest, and children should be considered the first group in which to invest. The responsibility for welfare has to be shared between individuals and the state, and therefore there are "no rights without responsibilities". Social benefits should be conditioned on the activities undertaken to obtain work by individuals. The provision of high-quality services should improve the skills needed in the labour market and also the academic achievements of children growing up in low-income families. In order to deliver social services, private-public partnerships need to be constructed. According to the author, making economic, employment and social policies fit together would contribute to achieving the goal of building a competitive and the cohesive knowledge economy.

The further elaboration of the concept and practice of the social investment state took place during the Portuguese Presidency of the European Union in 2000 and the Belgian Presidency in 2002. The governments of both the above-mentioned countries commissioned reputable academics to elaborate reports on both the model and the architecture of a new welfare state. The former, written by Ferrera, Hemerijk, Rhodes (2000), concerned the future of welfare state. The second report, authored by Gosta Esping-Andersen with Gallie, Hemerijck and Myles, proposed an answer to the question what the architecture of the new welfare state should look like. The report by Gosta Esping-Andersen and colleagues, published in 2002, became the most influential publication on the social investment paradigm. Anton Hemerijck defines that paradigm as: *a new welfare repertoire based on consistent normative principles, coherent causal understanding, (re-)distributive concerns and institutional practices – a repertoire that is comparable in its generalities to that of the male-breadwinner Keynesian welfare state of the post-war decades* (2006: 1).

Gosta Esping-Andersen (2002) formulated an explicit reference to childhood as a central figure in the social investment state. He claimed that in order to increase their productivity, European societies would have to make better use of the employment potential of women. This requires the "de-familization" of women and children as the primary factor for society to develop. The traditional form of child care provided by mothers hampers their activity on the labour market. Therefore the institution of child care services, financed jointly by the family and the state, would enable women to obtain gainful employment. Simultaneously, children born in low-income families would have a better start, and inter-generationally transmitted inequalities would be prevented. Early child education and care (ECEC) institutions would help disadvantaged children to obtain the skills enabling them to break the vicious circle of poverty and avoid becoming poor adults. The focus on child care and education would reward society in two ways: by increased productivity and by combatting inequality and preventing it from continuing in the next generation.

Esping-Andersen's approach is based on the conviction that childhood impacts on achievements in later stages of the life-cycle.

THE IMPACT OF POVERTY ON BRAIN DEVELOPMENT AS A CAUSE FOR POOR ACADEMIC ATTAINMENT

Studies documenting the critical role played by poverty during childhood were conducted primarily in the USA. These studies demonstrated that children living in poverty have a poorer vocabulary upon their arrival at the kindergarten steps. They attain less academically and – as adults – they remain at the bottom of the socio-economic ladder (Shonkoff, Philips (ed.), 2000; Yaqub 2002; Chase-Lansdale, Kiernan, Friedman (ed.), 2004; Lareau 2011). Nonetheless, at the start of this century the question of why poor children have inferior academic achievements remained without a definitive answer.

The progress in neuroscience, molecular biology, research into the genotype as well as studies of behaviour have brought us closer to answering the question. The differences in the process of development of a child's brain resulting from growing up in poverty might be the reason for the low academic achievements of poor children.

Comparative studies of the brain structure and functioning of children from poor and non-poor families provided evidence that growing up in poverty damages neuronal connections in the prefrontal cortex, the operation of which plays a decisive role in the cognitive potential of an individual. The research also pointed to the significant lack of nerve connections that affect communication (linguistic) and social abilities. Farah, Noble and Hurt (2009) stated that childhood in poverty leads to limitations in the functioning of the brain which are similar to the damage caused by a cerebral haemorrhage. It impacts on language skills and memory, which subsequently affects academic achievements. Therefore, it is a matter of crucial importance to provide timely incentives that stimulate the development of the brain. In this context, attention is paid to the environment in which a child is raised. Adverse social and physical conditions can generate toxic stress in children, which destroys parts of the brain responsible for cognitive processes, such as attention span, memory and language competencies. This contributes to lower educational attainments (Evans, Brooks-Gunn, Klebanov 2011).

As Jack P. Shonkoff (2011: 10) states: *Today, there are no doubts that a child's development is a result of mutual interaction between 'nature' and 'environment' and that:*

- *genes provide an initial plan for brain architecture,*
- *the environment affects the neuronal connections that will be created,*
- *mutual interactions between genetic predispositions and early experiences resulting from the environment affect whether the basis for learning, behaviours and physical health are weak or strong.*

Researchers have underlined that growing up in poverty need not be a life sentence (Conti, Heckman 2014). Early intervention may stimulate brain development. Whether to invest in disadvantaged children is no longer subject to question. However, there are different arguments over why and how to do it.

APPROACHES TO INVESTING IN CHILDREN LIVING IN POVERTY

Two types of arguments are applied in favour of the thesis about the need to invest in children:

- the pro-natal one, which points to the 'utility' of children as prospective future employees;
- the financial one, which points to the losses generated by society as a result of growing up in poverty and the economic advantages of minimization of losses *via* appropriately addressed support.

In developed countries, children have lost their utility as providers to their elderly parents. However, as future employees they are indispensable to ensuring the solvency of the pay as you go (PAY) pension systems. In this respect, they constitute a quasi-public good since those who are no longer working will benefit from the productive activity of children when they become adults. Nancy Folbre N. (2008), the representative of feministic economics, represents this stance. She indicates that increasing the inclination of the state to spend money on children requires a shift in the approach towards households. In her opinion, it is imperative to move away from treating a household as a unit of consumption and towards the perception of it as a producer of human capital. When a household is perceived as a unit of consumption, a child is valued as a durable consumer good, in the sense that adults may choose to either have a baby or to obtain other durable consumer goods. Under this approach, parents are ascribed the overall financial responsibility for children. However, should a household be conceptualised as a unit of manufacturing and retaining human capital, the benefits coming from children become indisputable for the entire economy. Therefore, the state should contribute to the cost of rearing them. According to this argument, investing in children, by providing them with the best possible conditions for their development, means promoting prosperity in the future both for the children themselves and for the whole society.

In the second type of argumentation, it is stressed that child poverty generates losses for society. Attempts to calculate the total costs resulting from child poverty have been undertaken only recently. So far, such estimates are available for just two countries and one Canadian province. Although the calculations make a huge impression, one should realise that their findings are dependent, as pointed out by Griggs and Walker (2008), on the theoretical assumptions, accessible data, and applied variables. For this reason they should be treated with caution as a rough illustration rather than an established and indisputable fact.

These estimates usually take into account the following types of costs:

1. Costs of corrective actions, including health care, the fight against criminality, and the provision of social security benefits.
2. Costs related to intergenerational transmission of poverty, since children raised in poverty 'inherit' difficulties and deficits that ensure their parents remain destitute.
3. Lost opportunity costs borne by society because of the failure to use the productive potential of those who are poor.

For the US, losses resulting from the fact that a part of the population is growing up in poverty are deemed to equal at least 500 billion dollars annually, which is the equivalent of 4% of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of the country. In Great Britain, the costs are estimated as at least 25 billion pounds sterling annually, which translates to 2% of the country's GDP (Holzer, Schanzenbach, Duncan, Ludwig 2007). Annual losses related to the existence of poverty in the province of Ontario in Canada are estimated to be 5.5% – 6.5% of the GDP of this province (Lauri 2008: 4).

In Great Britain, Allen and Smith (2008: 34) estimated individual annual costs resulting from poverty and dysfunction in the following way:

- *Violence costs the country at least £20 billion*
  – Violence towards NHS staff is estimated at £69m
- *Children in care cost £2 billion;*

– *Child abuse: at least £1 billion (mostly dealing with the consequences, not prevention)*

• *A child with a severe conduct disorder costs £70,000 (1995 estimate)*
– *with indirect costs seven times that*
– *parents' training amounts to approximately £600 per child*

• *Social Security benefits (including tax credits) increased from £35.5 billion to £142.7 billion in the 12 years up to 2005/06".*

Hence the authors conclude that eliminating child poverty would greatly contribute to decreasing public spending in the future.

WHEN TO INVEST IN CHILDREN, AND WHY THEN?

Analyses (by, *inter alia*, Cuna, Heckman, Schennach 2010; Conti, Heckman 2012), supervised by James Heckman, the 2000 Noble laureate in economics, generated strong arguments in favour of investing in children from socially and economically disadvantaged milieus. At the same time, they documented when such intervention is the most cost-effective. These studies support the common belief as regards the overwhelming importance of early childhood. Heckman and his co-workers based their analysis on the latest achievements of developmental science, considering the development of skills as the principal mechanism for success in society.

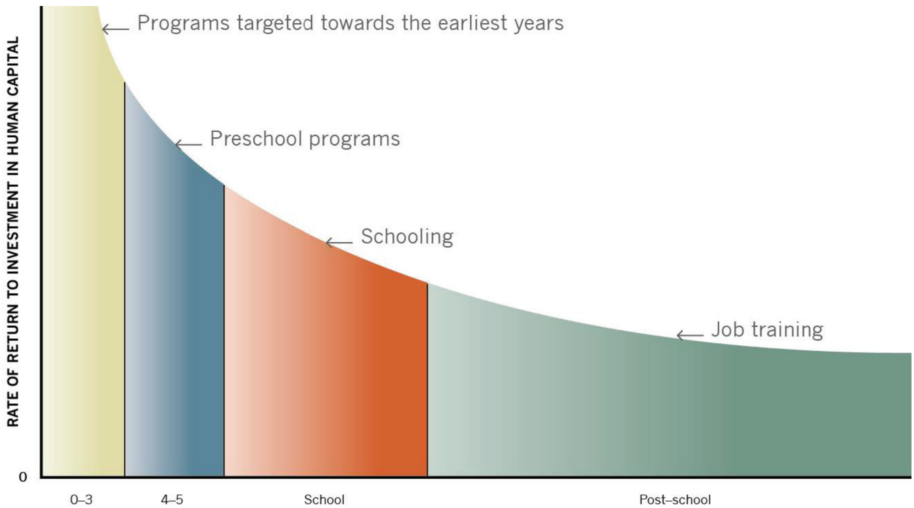
Heckman and Mosso (2014: 4) assumed that:

• there are critical[2] and sensitive[3] periods in childhood from the point of view of the formation of skills,
• success in life depends on different skills and not only on cognitive abilities,
• investments can assume various forms, including time,
• adult-child relationships are interactive systems,
• attachment is one of the major determinants of childhood learning,
• parents are not always competent in terms of fostering a child's potential and efficient parenthood.

The research team headed by Heckman indicated that investment in children throughout different phases of childhood brought about diverse effects. The highest rate of return was achieved by investing in small children (up to 3 years).

[2] A critical period is the period when, and only when, investments are efficient.
[3] A sensitive period is the period when effects of investments are especially significant.

FIGURE 1. Returns per Dollar Invested, by Stage of Life Cycle



Source: Conti G., Heckman J. (2012: 43)

The most rapid development of the brain takes place during early Childhood. The skills acquired at this stage beget other skills, and learning begets learning. Thus, if an inability to acquire capabilities arises in early childhood, it is probable that such an individual will have similar problems in adulthood too. A poor environment, i.e. one which does not offer cognitive and non-cognitive stimuli to a child, constitutes a significant factor in future failures in various dimensions of adult life. A key to success in life is social competencies, which influence success both directly and indirectly *via* increasing cognitive competencies.
Heckman (2006: 3–4) argues for investing in children in the following way:

- Life-cycle skill formation is a dynamic process where early inputs greatly affect the productivity of later inputs in the life cycle of children. Skills beget skills. Early failure begets later failure.
- Apart from cognitive abilities, an individual also possesses non-cognitive skills (character skills).
- Character skills are also important for success in life.
- Motivation, perseverance and the ability to maintain attention are important *per* se, and affect scores on achievement tests.
- The early family environment is the primary predictor of both cognitive and non-cognitive skills.

• Early intervention can influence both cognitive and non-cognitive skills.

• Early interventions promote schooling, reduce crime, improve workforce productivity, and reduce teenage pregnancy.

• These interventions in early childhood have high benefit-cost ratios and rates of return.

• Early interventions targeted toward disadvantaged children have much higher returns than later interventions, such as e.g. reduced pupil-teacher ratios, public job training, ex-convict rehabilitation programmes, tuition subsidies for students from disadvantaged environments, or expenditures on police.

Heckman and Kautz (2013) argue that success in life is influenced by various skills and that cognitive and character competencies result from investment in subsequent stages of the life cycle:

> *Skills at birth depend on prenatal investments and inherited traits. Skill formation at later ages depends on the stock of skills acquired earlier as well as prior investments. This concept is called self-productivity (...)* (p. 31) *Investments (parenting, environment, and schools) also affect skills. The efficacy of investment is moderated by the stock of skills at any age* (pp. 31–32).

According to the authors, in the process of skills formation static and dynamic complementarity occurs. The former means that the benefits from investments depend on the current level of skills of an individual; and the latter –that current investments increase future competencies which, in turn, increase the return on future investment. This chain of interdependencies enhances the benefits from early investments since it contributes to making future investments more productive. Therefore, as demonstrated by Cuhna, Heckman and Schennach (2010), investment in the most neglected small children is economically effective since it increases returns on investment. Although interventions at later stages of childhood can also generate beneficial results, it is more expensive to reach the same effects than by way of investing in small children. However, if a society intervenes too late and individuals have too low skill levels, investments at a later age may not be cost-effective. This is why it is in the interest of both society and individuals to support the development of small children by setting up programmes targeted at early childhood. Therefore, according to the authors, social policy should be re-oriented –from programmes addressed to adults to those targeted at children. What's more, instead of programmes aimed at increasing the cognitive skills of pupils they should support the parents of small children and kids themselves *via* programmes that develop "soft" skills. These programmes should be offered on a universal basis to avoid stigmatisation, while participation fees paid by parents should depend on their income. These programmes should be evaluated based on scientific methods (Heckman, 2009).

ECEC IN PRACTICE

The conviction that early childhood impacts on success or failure at later stages of life is not new. However, the work of economists has produced "hard" evidence that investing in children in general, and in particular on those living in adverse conditions, is cost-effective and profitable for the society as a whole in the future. They documented that: 1) childhood and children are key to any investment strategy because today's children are tomorrow's future taxpayers; 2) inequalities in childhood contribute to the disproportionate accumulation of human capital; and 3) this results in unequal opportunities in the labour market (Van Lankcer, 2013: 6).

Policymakers, at both the national and international levels, have applauded the concept of social investment and claim to focus on the prevention of social risks *via* children-centred and activation policies (increased employability). They have converted the concept into political programmes. In 1998, the Government of the United Kingdom launched area-based Sure Start Local Programmes (SSLP) for children under five, realised in localities with high child poverty rates[4]. The objective of the SSLP was to improve the life chances for the most disadvantaged children to enable them escape poverty and obtain social inclusion when they reach adulthood. Improving the developmental trajectories of children was seen as a measure to break the intergenerational transmission of poverty. After a series of evaluations of SSLPs, in 2006 Children's Centres (CCs) replaced them to cover the whole of England and become mainstream services. In the 30 per cent of areas constituting the most disadvantaged areas, CCs were obliged to provide ECEC services, which was not usual for SSLPs. Local authorities instead of the central government took over the supervision of CCs.

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[4] In selected areas, Sure Start Local Programmes (SSLP) were implemented covering all children living there to avoid stigma. They were financed directly by the government and until 2006 were independent of local authorities. Each programme was run by a board composed of health, education and social services agencies, private and non-governmental organisations, and parents (Glass,1999). Each SSLP has to provide: "(1) outreach and home visiting; (2) support for families and parents; (3) support for good quality play, learning and childcare experiences for children; (4) primary and community health care and advice about child health and development and family health; and (5) support for people with special needs, but without specific guidance as to how." (Melhuish, Belsky, Barnes, 2010: 1).

Despite generous financing of the programme, the Government run by the Labour Party failed to achieve its primary objective – to reduce child poverty by half by 2010. Poverty rates declined sinking up 2007, then went up during the financial crisis. The evaluation of results (when the Sure Start children were seven) concluded that SSLPs had a beneficial impact on family functioning and maternal well-being, but that there was no impact on child outcomes. (Melhuish, Belsky, Leyland 2010). The authors assumed that this might result from the fact that universal free early education for all children was introduced in England in the meantime. It might also result from the fact that Sure Start children made developmental progress at the age of three, which was documented in earlier reports. In another place the authors concluded: *The results are modest but suggest that the value of Sure Start programmes is improving.* (Melhuish, Belsky, Barnes, 2009:160) The disappointing results of SSLPs raised the question whether, in an unequal society, services are a sufficient measure for equalising opportunities for children. Therefore, levelling social inequality is said to be a prerequisite for improving children's well-being and developmental opportunities.(Rowlands 2010)

The Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition Government established in May 2010 pulled back on social investment in children and families, and cut public spending. Nonetheless it maintains early intervention on the agenda. To win the 2015 election, the Conservative Party promised to introduce free full-time (30 hours per week) access to ECEC for the children of working parents, as compared with 25 hours per week as required by Labour Party. However, the ruling Coalition decided that children's services have to be commissioned, provided, and delivered by voluntary organisations and the private sector.

Investing in children, with ECEC as one of its most important measures, is on the agenda of the European Union. During the EU Sumit in 2002, the so-called 'Barcelona objectives' and achievement indicators were agreed upon[5]. By 2010 Member States were to establish ECEC places for 33 percent of three-year-olds and younger, and for 90 per cent of pre-school children. However, the Barcelona targets did not go beyond considering children as "dependents", and applied the "childcare" concept rather than child development and child well-being approaches. Enabling a mother's employment and the reconciliation of family and work were the leitmotifs for the interest in children.

[5] http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_MEMO-08-592_en.htm

In 2011, the Commission published the Communication "Early Childhood Education and Care: Providing all our children with the best start for the world of tomorrow"[6]. The document reminds us that ECEC lays the essential foundations for successful lifelong learning, social integration, personal development and later employability. It asserts that ECEC is beneficial because it:

• *has the potential to give all young people a good start in the world of tomorrow and to break the cycle that transmits disadvantage from one generation to another (...)*

• *has a crucial role to play in laying the foundations for improved competencies of future EU citizens, enabling us to meet the medium- and long-term challenge, and to create a more skilled workforce capable of contributing and adjusting to technological change (...)*

• *enables parents better to reconcile family and work responsibilities, so boosting employability (...)*

• *is particularly beneficial for the disadvantaged (...) can help to lift children out of poverty and family dysfunction, and so contribute to achieving the goals of the Europe 2020 flagship initiative European Platform against Poverty (...)*

• *can make a strong contribution – through enabling and empowering all children to realise their potential – to achieving two of the Europe 2020 headline targets in particular: reducing early school leaving to below 10%, and lifting at least 20 million people out of the risk of poverty and social exclusion.*

The Commission urged member states to widen access to ECEC and ensure high-quality services by employing professional staff and balancing public and private investment. It suggested that Member States include a report on progress in ECEC into the National Reform Plans which are obligatory to submit every semester to the EC.

European networks of non-governmental organisations, like EUROCHILD, dealing with overall children's well-being critically reacted to the Communication. In its Policy Statement from February 2011[7], EUROCHILD underlined the:

• importance of underpinning early childhood policies with a recognition that children are rights-holders,

• necessity to perceive childhood in its own right, not solely as a transition to adulthood,

[6] http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex:52011DC0066.

[7] http://www.eurochild.org/policy/library-details/article/eurochilds-policy-position-on-early-childhood-education-and-care/?tx_news_pi1[controller]=News&tx_news_pi1[action]=detail&cHash=99cc2d79cfb5008887f0d2a2e43e8776.

• need to avoid promoting ECEC services as a mechanism merely enabling women's participation in the labour market and appreciation of their importance for child development,

• need to conceive of ECEC services as an part of broader policy system combining labour market policies, maternal and parental leave, family support policies and formal education systems,

• entitlement of all children to access high-quality inclusive ECEC services, coupled with targeted support for disadvantaged children,

• need to apply an integrated approach to ECEC for children aged 0–6, instead of splitting services for 0–3 year-olds and 4–6 year-olds,

• requirement to establish common EU criteria for quality ECEC services,

• need to raise professional standards, training and the remuneration of ECEC employees.

The data monitoring progress in ECEC is collected by EUROSTAT and the OECD, which provides the *Family Database* and publishes the reports *Starting Strong* (2001, 2006, 2012). The results of the analyses are not optimistic. The vast majority of EU Member States are far from achieving the objective of covering children under three with good quality services. This means that the lowering of social inequality among children and improving the school readiness of disadvantaged children remains a distant achievement. The organisation and management of ECEC services differ among the Member States. This also concerns formal competencies of the staff employed in nurseries (OECD 2006).

Recently Wim Van Lankcer (2013), relying on EUROSTAT data, published a very competent comparative analysis of ECEC services in the EU 27. He stated that: *It is crystal clear (…) that the majority of EU Member States still have a long way to go in universalising and equalising formal care use for children below the age of three (...)* (p. 17). He provided evidence that:

1. There are huge differences between member states in the use of formal ECEC services for children under three: in Czech Republic, Slovakia and Poland coverage is lower than 10 percent of population, whereas in Denmark and Sweeden it is higher than 80 percent.
2. In all except six countries (the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Austria, Lithuania, Malta and Estonia) there are sgnificant differences in the use of formal ECEC between high-income and low-income families. However, the magnitude of inequality in this respect is particularly striking in countries with low levels of formal ECEC use, like Hungary, Poland, Romania, and Bulgaria. For example, in Poland high-income families use ECEC 5.5 times more often

than low-income households. Denmark and Sweeden are countries with the lowest inequality (<2). No European country reports a higher usage of ECEC services by low-income children than by higher income counterparts.
3. In the majority of Member States, there is no significant inequality in the availability of nurseries for employed mothers. Inequality ratio between high-income and low-income groups are low (<2). However, in the Czech Republic, Poland, Hungary and the United Kingdom the ratio is high and exceeds five. This means that in these countries even employed mothers with low-income have less possibilities to obtain care for their children in formal care institutions than better-off employed families.
4. To obtain a similar ECEC usage as Denmark, all countries but Sweden would have to increase budgetary spending on childcare.This would require doubling it in Belgium, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom, tripling it in Germany, Spain, Slovenia and Estonia, or even quadrupling it in Poland, Austria, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia.

Van Lankcer concluded that: *The main lesson to draw from this analysis is that the children who would benefit most from being integrated into high quality childcare are the ones currently most likely to be excluded. This is likely to exacerbate rather than mitigate social inequalities in early life. Hence, the unavoidable conclusion is that existing childcentred investment strategies are bound to fail* (p. 21).

CONCLUSIONS

The academic concept of investing in children as a core of social investment strategy seems to be well-documented. However, putting it into practice depends on political decisions and is constrained by budgetary needs and the values attached to children. Considering childhood as a macrostructure segment, composed of citizens holding social rights, is not very widespread. Children are rather considered as a private good and family dependents. Therefore it does not seem to be easy to put “children first”, since this requires recognition that children are entitled to access state resources on a par with adults.

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„INWESTOWANIE W DZIECI" – DYSKURS O DZIECIACH I DZIECIŃSTWIE DOMINUJĄCY W XXI WIEKU

Streszczenie

W ciągu ostatnich 30 lat dokonała się radykalna zmiana dyskursu akademickiego i politycznego na temat dzieci i dzieciństwa. Koncepcja 'inwestowania w dzieci" zdominowała dyskurs akademicki i program polityczny, co najmniej w Unii Europejskiej. Inwestowanie w dzieci stanowi jądro strategii inwestowania społecznego. W artykule scharakteryzowano paradygmat inwestowania społecznego i przedstawiono dwa typy argumentacji na rzecz inwestowania w dzieci z defaworyzowanych środowisk. Omówiona została koncepcja J. Heckmana dotycząca inwestowania w dzieci małe oraz efektywne sposoby interwencji. Wskazano na praktyczną implementację inwestowania w małe dzieci w krajach Unii Europejskiej.

Słowa kluczowe: inwestowanie w dzieci, państwo społecznych inwestycji, wczesna edukacja i opieka nad dziećmi.