

Investing in children innovative solutions to improve children's well-being

Introduction

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Contemporary social sciences on the one hand perceive children as a social group posing a challenge for the adulthood and childhood as a stage in life cycle when one is at risk of multiple problems on the other (Ornacka 2013: 11). The children-focused perspective found its reflection not only in academic theory, research and publications, but also in social policy documents and tools. Children and childhood were placed at the centre of welfare state interests in modern societies threatened by “new social risks” whereas the “investing in children” discourse became dominant in the EU’s social investments paradigm (Warzywoda-Kruszyńska 2015). As Eurochild (2015: 3) states, “a child-centred investment strategy is a precondition to achieving sustainable and equitable economic and social development”, and therefore it needs to be prioritised in the European Union’s policies. In February 2013, the European Commission published a Recommendation on *Investing in children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage*, which serves as a key element of the EC’s Social Investment Package. The document was followed by a study on national policies, synthesised by Hugh Fraser and Eric Marlier in a report subtitled *Assessment of what Member States would need to do to implement the European Commission Recommendation* (2014), and by 28 national country reports prepared by members of the Network of Independent Experts on Social Inclusion (2014). The idea behind the Recommendation and the new children and youth policy approach is that focusing on children enables tackling disadvantage early, before it compounds (European Commission 2014: 7). Investing in children should cover actions undertaken by public, non-governmental and private entities to improve children’s well-being to provide them with a chance to become self-efficient and active participants of social, economic and political life.

The Department of Applied Sociology and Social Work of the Institute of Sociology of the University of Łódź has been involved in children and childhood studies,

particularly in the context of children's poverty, social exclusion and social policies aimed at improving children's and families' situation, for a long time. Therefore, for almost a decade, the Department has organised a series of conferences on children and youth in research, policy and professional helpers' practice, to stimulate debate and exchange knowledge on children's needs and solutions to meet them. The first two conferences were titled *Neglected Childhood* and took place in 2009 and 2011. The publication of *Investing in Children* Recommendation and relevant studies became an inspiration to change the conference title, as well as the nature and the scope of the next two conference editions which took place in 2014 and 2016, and were entitled *Investing in Children*. International and interdisciplinary speakers and audience, representatives of local, regional, national and international public and non-governmental organisations as well as research institutions took part in these events.

This book contains a selection of speeches and papers delivered during the *Investing in Children. Social Innovations for Children and Youth: Research and Practice* conference which was held at the Faculty of Economics and Sociology of the University of Łódź on October 20–21, 2016, and was organised by the Department of Applied Sociology and Social Work. The conference was the fourth of the *Neglected Childhood – Investing in Children* conference series. The aim of the conference was to continue the discussions on theoretical frameworks, research results, policy solutions and methods of professional work with children and youth in eight key dimensions: (1) children's rights; (2) child poverty and social exclusion; (3) early years care and education; (4) family and parental support; (5) child and youth participation; (6) children in alternative care; (7) migrant and refugee children; (8) children's health. The aim of this conference was to provide a platform of knowledge and experience exchange among researchers, policy makers and practitioners representing disciplines and working fields such as sociology, economy, psychology, pedagogy, social policy, social work, medicine, and law, working towards developing innovative solutions to improve the well-being of children and youth. Researchers, policy makers and professional helpers from 10 different countries took part in the conference. They represented numerous academic institutions (University of Sussex, University of Georgia in Athens, USA, Manchester Metropolitan University, National University of Ireland, Polish Academy of Sciences, University of Warsaw, Jagiellonian University in Kraków, University of Łódź among them), non-governmental organisations (such as EUROCHILD, European Social Network, UNESCO, the Empowering Children Foundation), public policy entities (for example the European Commission, the Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Policy of the Republic of Poland, Regional Office of the Lodzkie Region in Brussels). The content of the book reflects the international and interdisciplinary nature of the conference.

The book is divided into two sections, each of them containing four texts. The first section is titled *Social investments, campaigning and advocacy for children: European and Polish perspective* and is dedicated to investing in children as a social

inclusion and poverty reduction policy strategy. The second section is entitled *Investing in children: instruments and results* and presents findings of the research on mechanisms and consequences of specific solutions aimed at improving children's well-being.

Section one begins with an inspiring speech: *The case for investing in children*, which was delivered by Julius op de Beke at the opening plenary session of the *Investing in Children. Social Innovations for Children and Youth: Research and Practice* conference. As a representative of the European Commission, DG Employment, Affairs and Social Inclusion, J. op de Beke advocates for investing more public funds into upbringing of very young children, referring to comparative data on European Union Member States and pointing to the values, targets and elements of European policy developments aimed at improving children's opportunities. The next paper titled *Investing in children's services, improving outcomes* by Alfonso Lara Montero, the Policy Director of the European Social Network, presents the key guidelines of the European Commission's Recommendation "Investing in Children" and provides a thorough analysis of organisation and implementation of the Recommendation on the policy development level in Poland. Referring to results of a study conducted in 14 European countries, A. Montero concentrates on the case of Poland and indicates five fields which require attention in terms of implementation of "Investing in Children" Recommendation, emphasising the need of coordinated governance of the child related policies, the lack of stable and adequate financial support for formal early childcare, shortages in housing policies for families with children, the need to develop the foster care system, and necessity to involve parents and children as key stakeholders in drawing, implementing and evaluating family policies. The third paper in this section: *Money, influence and mind-sets: How can advocacy and research help the EU to be a positive force for change in children's lives?* provides an insight on the role of advocacy and research in enhancing implementation of policy solutions which improve children's well-being. The authors: Agata D'Addato, Senior Policy Coordinator, and Katerina Nanou, Policy and Advocacy Officer, represent Eurochild, a network of 180 organisations which promote and protect children's rights. In their publication, they document research and advocacy ventures promoting children's rights and mainstreaming child-oriented policies in Europe. The last paper in this section: *"Investing in Children: Breaking the cycle of disadvantage" EU Recommendation – some remarks on the situation of Polish Adolescents* by Agnieszka Golczyńska-Grondas of the University of Łódź, contains an analysis of selected dimensions of the well-being of the Polish youth in the light of "Investing in Children" Recommendation. The author claims that significant drop in objective indicators of children and youth poverty and social exclusion in Poland is accompanied by an ideological shift which might put children's rights and participation at risk.

The opening paper of the second section of the book continues to be concentrated on the Polish social policy developments. It documents and analyses a new (introduced in spring 2016) instrument of social and family policy. In his paper titled

Investment in children as a public good: the example of the Family 500+ Programme, Marek Rymysza of the University of Warsaw presents the new scheme as a signal of a shift from neo-liberal into social investment social policy in Poland which leads to subjectification and empowerment of families, although the scheme is not free of limitations and negative side-effects.

Leaving the national Polish context and moving into a more international perspective, the book offers a paper by Almudena Moreno Mínguez of the University of Valladolid, Spain. In the publication titled *Effects of Early Childhood Education on School Achievement and Inequality in Spain: the Value of Early Childhood Education* the author presents results of a comparative study on shifts in family and child education policies in selected European countries with regard to the relation between access to pre-school education and educational attainment and different uses of pre-school education depending on the socioeconomic situation of the family. Focusing on her country of origin, the author concludes that access to pre-school education for children aged from 0 to 3 has a positive impact on educational attainment in Spain and helps to reduce the educational inequalities that stem from socio-economically disadvantaged family contexts. Therefore, pre-school education in Spain proves to be beneficial for economically and socially disadvantaged children.

In the following paper, Piotr Michoń of Poznan University of Economics and Business confronts the investing in children concept with the idea of “intensive motherhood”, focusing on the role and significance of informal care performed by mothers in the first months/years of children’s life for cognitive and non-cognitive development of their offspring. Attempting to answer the question “Does mothers’ employment have negative consequences for children’s development?” the author provides a thorough literature review leading to conclusion that paid work women perform in the labour market does not influence the level of parental investments as it is the quality, not the time of care that counts as far as child’s development is concerned. In this way, the study findings remain consistent with “Investing in Children” Recommendation, which supports both parents’ participation in the labour market and investing in early childhood education and care (Commission Recommendation of 20 February 2013, *Investing in children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage* 2013).

The last paper, written by Johanna M. Thomas and Shaun A. Thomas of the University of Arkansas, titled *Understanding Early Childhood Truancy: The Influence of Life Course Studies on Evidence-Based Interventions* documents a truancy intervention programme built on the basis of life course research with participation of inmates either on death row or serving life sentence, which was in operation in Louisiana for 15 years. The case study provides an example of an effective scheme designed for youth who are prone to chronic truancy and are at risk of social exclusion.

We hope that Readers of this book will enjoy the collection of papers, which in our view contain inspiring work on multiple innovative solutions focused

on improving well-being of children and youth. On this occasion, we would like to thank first and foremost all the Authors who have contributed to publication of the book, as well as all *Investing in Children* conference participants. We already invite you to take part in the next edition of the conference that will take place in Łódź in spring 2019.

References

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