The Early Childhood Education and Care Policy Debate in the EU *

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Summary. *The paper describes the many cultural and political turning points in childcare in the EU over the past thirty years, focusing on official EU documents and the interpretative, theoretical frameworks that have influenced them during this period. We have shown that the effects of the quality of childcare services on child development as well as the responsibility of the states in sustaining the costs of children's services have been addressed primarily from a social investment perspective. Nevertheless, there is ample reason to wonder whether the social investment philosophy can be reconciled both with gender equality issues and with a fundamental appreciation of the rights of all children. In our reconstruction and in our conclusions, we suggest that this may well be impossible.*

Key words: *equal opportunities, children's rights, social investment state, early childhood education and care, human capital*

Introduction

The Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) debate began early in the 1980s in the EU. The context of the debate and its political and social aims, however, have changed during this long period, often following different or even contradictory trends regarding both the very conception of childhood and the social functions of ECEC services. Despite all of the enlightened advisory work done by the Childcare Network and its coordinator, Peter Moss, in the decade 1986-1996, the EU never really adopted a holistic approach to ECEC, at least until the recent

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Recommendation of February 2013. The EU has dealt with this issue in light of the economic benefits that could be derived from it – first, in terms of increasing women's employment, and then in keeping with the social investment state approach, that is, seeing children as fundamental assets for a future, competitive knowledge society. The social costs of minor care, schooling etc. are, in this sense, simply an investment in human capital: today's children will grow up to be tomorrow's workers, taxpayers and guarantors of pensions in an ageing society, to the advantage of the present generation of citizens. We could say there is a social vision at work here, as our narration will show. The child is seen as an evolving subject, a potentially productive adult, whom society and school must prepare so that the future needs of society may be met – a task that may be accomplished, it is claimed, by means of the omnipresent mantra of flexibility.

The main aim of this paper is to show how children's present well being, children's rights and participation, and children's education – so important from the perspective of childhood studies – have, for the most part, been neglected. Only a children's rights approach is apt to foster long-term, deep and effective reforms in the interest of children's well-being, especially under the condition that it incorporates a "relational", rather than an individualistic view of rights in general, as proposed by Jennifer Nedelsky (2011). According to this "relational" view, rights are not merely meant to protect the single individual as a free chooser, consumer and user, much in the sense of "negative freedom", as we might suggest, but rather, effective instruments for structuring relationships between people, in order to allow them to flourish and grow in ways that would otherwise be unattainable. Focusing on the relational context and approach also allows one to understand that the child needs to entertain significant relations with the figures who teach or look after him or her, so that the social environment is friendly and adequate to the child's growth. Greater attention to the relational context would also appear to explain why and how early childhood policies have, on the whole, been much more effective in the Nordic countries (where childhood poverty is almost incomparably lower with respect to the USA) and, more generally, in social contexts where a working welfare system provides for much less pronounced social inequalities.

The paper is divided into five parts. In the first part, I will show how the childcare debate was initially linked to EU gender equality and female labour participation policies. In the second part, the complex and articulated proposal of the Childcare Network is examined, highlighting its progressive nature and unrivalled qualities. In the third part, the focus shifts to the EU adoption of the social investment state perspective and its vision of the child as future worker and human capital. In the fourth part, some encouraging signals are identified in the February 2013 Recommendation "Investing in children: Breaking the cycle of disadvantage", which seems to move away from a narrow-minded economic view of the child. In the conclusion, I will further explain the reasons for concern regarding the trend toward conceiving ECEC policies with a purely instrumental economic aim.

Childcare and gender equality

The childcare debate was initially linked to EU equal opportunity programmes. The first Equal Opportunities Action Programme not only mentioned parental leave but also stressed the need for efforts to increase public investment in childcare. In the document we read that member states "should examine the possibility of extending parental leave and leave for family reasons (in parallel with efforts to consolidate public facilities and services)" (EU Commission, 1982-1985). Childcare is a crucial issue for women's liberation and the participation of women in the labour market and, as such, it is an essential part of the EU strategy towards full employment. According to Inge Bleijenbergh, "European Commission "femocrats" put the topic of childcare on the agenda in an effort to extend equal treatment policy from labour market policy to the broader field of welfare provisions" (Bleijenbergh et al, 2006, p. 320). In 1986, even the European Parliament was involved in the debate. It adopted a resolution regarding the necessity of investment in childcare services by member states in order to promote and realize equal treatment for men and women, equal opportunities for all, and the well-being of children. It also called upon the European Commission to issue a directive to this end. The Commission, however, never acted on the proposal, but rather, six years later, in 1992, issued the Council Recommendation on Childcare, in which four main areas of intervention were identified: "1. The provision of child-care services; 2. special leave for employed parents; 3. environment, structure and organization of work; 4. the sharing of occupational, family and upbringing responsibilities arising from the care of children between women and men" (art. 2, 92/241/EEC). The Recommendation makes it clear that intervention in the aforesaid areas must be concerted in order to achieve the desired results. Meaningful and deep changes must also be undertaken with regard to the work environment and organization, the division of domestic labour between men and women, as well as childcare services and parental leaves where necessary. In short, it was asserted that greater flexibility in working hours must go hand in hand with greater availability of childcare services, as well as their quantitative and qualitative improvement – requiring, in turn, the increased availability of qualified and well-trained staff members (Urban, 2012). The issue as a whole, however, was pursued no further.

Since then, the aim of expanding the services available for the care of children has remained linked, more or less directly, to an increase in the employment of women. Stating the problem in these terms, however, has meant that the EU – having adopted a strategy of soft governance, based on the open method of coordination, where contentious social policy issues (such as those pertaining to the family) are concerned – has put all of its collective efforts into achieving only quantitative targets. In 2002, the EU Barcelona Council set the targets of providing childcare by 2010 to at least 33% of children under 3 years of age, and at least 90% of children between 3 years old and the age of compulsory schooling. The focus on exclusively quantitative targets, without any indication of fundamental qualitative or general targets of education and care, leads us, once again, to conclude that the child is seen merely as an obstacle to parents' working life. The problem is thus limited to finding a place in which to "park" the child, and/or someone who can take care of him or her (without excluding solutions such as that of the French registered childminder). The childcare market is just an opportunity to create new jobs, albeit mostly unqualified and low paid jobs, as in the "childminder" case. Investment in childcare is thus meant to help reach another goal by 2010 (60% employment rate for women), both by removing an obstacle to women's participation in the labour market and by creating new jobs (especially for women) in childcare services.

The childcare network: The road not taken

In the 1980s, with the late Margaret Thatcher in power in the UK, and rampant privatization, conditions were not conducive to the expansion of European social policy. One of the first acts by the Commission of the European Communities, in 1987, was the creation of the Childcare Network, established as part of the Second Equal Opportunities Programme. European institutions, however, took little account of the excellent work produced by the Network, the high quality of which was affirmed in the reprinting of its papers by the Childcare Resource and Research Unit of the University of Toronto in 2004 (see the reference to its work in OECD [2006] and in contemporary literature, for instance, Penn, 2009).

The Council Recommendation of 31 March 1992 on childcare was the product of a compromise. First, choosing to enact a non-binding recommendation rather than a directive, which would have been binding for member states, signalled the Council's intention to use a soft instrument of power that would not be seen as an imposition by member states. The Recommendation was, in fact, rejected by the United Kingdom – the attitudes of which were known to be hostile and critical at the time (Bleijenbergh *et al*., 2006). Second, linking childcare, the labour market and economic efficiency was less likely to arouse conflict and friction than the straightforward suggestion of a direct link between universal childcare services and children's well-being.

Nonetheless, the 1992 Council Recommendation on childcare retained a principle, that was revolutionary at the time. It stated the need of policies for the direct intervention by member states *and* the EU in childcare services. According to Maria Stratigaki (2004, p. 43): "The official recognition that policy areas external to employment and the workplace, such as child care, had an impact on the labor market was a significant step toward the expansion of the scope of EU gender equality policy in new policy areas".

The European Commission Childcare Network's approach was even more forward-looking than the Council's Recommendation. In its 1990 and 1996 papers, it put forth a complex and advanced proposal. For the Childcare Network, coordinated by Peter Moss, the expansion of care services for children 0-6 years old was an issue that went far beyond the perspective of women's employment. It dealt with children's rights and the well-being and needs of all children, irrespective of their parents' working status, asserting that childcare services must be accessible to everyone – including disabled children – affordable, flexible and differentiated to maximize family choices.

The Childcare Network's papers suggest the merging of care and education in childcare services, viewing care and education as inseparable from one another. The merging of these two elements enjoyed the warm support of the OECD as early as the 1970s (Kaga, Bennett, Moss, 2010), and marks a break from previous tradition, which was based on a strict separation between education and care. In the past, childcare was conceived merely as a welfare issue concerning the children of the working class, who were more likely to end up on the street, if left to themselves.

The 1996 report contained a proposal for a ten-year action programme. The Childcare Network identified forty qualitative targets in childcare services, taking into account the perspectives of three different actors: families, professionals and children. It stated that a minimum of 60% of childcare staff should have adequate professional training, consisting of "at least three years at a post-18 level" and incorporating "the theory and practice of pedagogy and child development" (target 26), and that all staff "should have the right to continuous in-service training" (target 27). With gender parity in mind, it was suggested that a minimum of 20% of the staff employed should be men (target 29), stressing the fact that childcare is not only a women's issue. Both in the family and in childcare services, men should be involved: "We see an increased presence of men in services, working directly with children, as a means to challenge gender-stereotyped roles, as being beneficial for children and as a means to encourage greater involvement by fathers" (Childcare Network 1996, p. 30). Target 34 asserts the fundamental role of parental participation and collaboration in the services. Quality assessment in childcare services should be the product of a participatory and democratic process in which parents, staff and, where possible, children all have a voice. Quality is not a neutral concept and cannot be defined without considering different values and beliefs, which is the primary reason why decision-making processes should be fully participatory.

One of the main negative aspects of the early institutionalization of children's life is that placing children among their peers, in a protected environment, separated from the outside world, has a negative impact on their development (cf. Kjørholt, 2012). The 1996 Childcare Network report emphasises how important it is to maintain a strict link between services and the local community. Services should respect the ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic diversity of the community and "recruit employees who reflect it" (target 36), and should challenge gender, race, disability, and ethnic stereotypes (target 14).

Children's present well-being should be at the heart of childcare services, taking precedence over future scholastic performance. Although "there is a widespread conviction that nursery education or kindergarten is not only positive in its immediate benefits to children and parents, but it also mitigates against later school failure", the report argues that "it is the quality of the nursery education or kindergarten, its philosophy, and its perceived benefits *in the present* that is the most important" (Childcare Network 1996, 22, italics mine). The Childcare Network's position in this particular instance is highly meaningful in light of the fact that the same years saw the rise of the widespread trend, in the United States, of seeing the child in terms of human capital investment (Childcare Network, 1990, II) – a trend destined to prevail in Europe as well, at the beginning of the new millennium.

The 1996 Childcare Network report put forward a broadly-conceived, general educational philosophy, inspired by the egalitarian and democratic model of countries such as Sweden and Denmark, but also by the Reggio

Emilia experience. It focused not only on the cognitive but also on the emotional, relational and creative development of the child. Pre-school services should be clearly distinguished in their aims from those of primary schools.

The child from the social investment state perspective

The Childcare Network report was released in 1996. The issue of childcare services, however, has continued to be on the EU agenda, albeit with a totally new approach. With the Lisbon Council of 2000, the EU decided to increase its efforts to strengthen the employment development strategy, now influenced by a new vision of the welfare state, which shifted its rhetoric from social protection to social investment. This new social philosophy had already been proposed at the international level in 1996 in a publication edited by Esping-Andersen and sponsored by the United Research Institute for Social Development, and then in a high-level conference organized by the OECD: *Beyond 2000: The New Social Policy Agenda* (Jenson, 2012, pp. 65-66). In the UK a somewhat different version of the social investment approach, influenced by Anthony Giddens' *The Third Way: the Renewal of Social Democracy* (1998), had been adopted by New Labour. At the European level, the new welfare state was officially promoted in a report edited by Esping-Andersen in 2002, and commissioned by the Belgian Social-Democratic minister for social affairs, after its first presentation in 1997, during a conference (organized by the Dutch Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment in cooperation with the European Commission) entitled *Social Policy as a Productive Factor* (Hemerijk, 2012, p. 46).

The new approach took many new elements in the social landscape into consideration: globalization; the shift from industrial to post-industrial society, with its less secure and more flexible jobs; the crisis of the "male breadwinner" model; the definitive entrance of women into the labour market; transformations taking place in the family, such as the multiplication of family forms, and the advent of the "precious child"; the by- now unstable nature of conjugal relations; and finally an ageing population in most countries. In view of these problems, the social investment state approach viewed giving each individual the capabilities and competences that would permit them to cope with new social risks effectively, and rapidly adapt to contemporary social changes and challenges – a fundamental social policy goal (Mahon, 2002; Morel, Palier and Palme 2012). This position implies a wholly non-critical acceptance of market choices, a subordination of politics to economics, and a subserviency of social politics to objectives dictated by an instrumental logic.

Although social politics have long been separated from economy, the very state/economy dualism on which that separation was based is now under discussion, so that one of the criticisms that may be levelled at the new welfare strategies is that they are “adapting people to the market rather than reducing their dependency on it” (Crouch, Keune, 2012, p. 46). If the welfare state need not be dismantled as neo-liberals ask, it is not just because its dismantling would cause growing social suffering, but because social spending contributes in a fundamental way to economic growth, when directed towards social investment (Morel, Palier, Palme 2012). Social policy thus becomes part of an efficient market.

One of the main instruments of the social investment state was supposed to be “life-long learning”, intended to improve the chances of re-employment during the course of any citizen's life – a very different idea from the classical German tradition of *Bildung*.

With social spending policy substituted by social investment policy, the future becomes the privileged temporal perspective – not for the purpose of assistance, but for investment. Choices must be assessed by measuring and quantifying future expected outcomes (Jenson 2009, 2012). It is hardly surprising that one of the sectors in which this paradigm has been most notably applied is that of early childhood education and care, and its social costs. Pressures in that direction have come from international organizations such as the OECD (2001, 2006), the World Bank (2003), and the UNICEF Innocent Research Centre (2008). Since 2001, the OECD has sponsored a series of comparative reviews, called *Starting Strong*, inspired by the belief that childcare services are a public good. In one economist's words, the idea is that “[t]he rate of return to a dollar of investment made while a person is young is higher than the rate of return for the same dollar made at a later age” (OECD 2006, p. 37).

In contrast to neo-liberal and Keynesian programmes, which consider childcare a purely private matter, the social investment state recognizes that society has an interest in dealing with minors and investing in them, and that the cost must be shared by society and not only borne by families who have chosen to have children (Jenson 2009). Family itself ceases to be considered “a haven in a heartless world”. The roots of such evils as child neglect, poverty, and even sexual abuse and violence are identified mainly in the domestic space. From a risk-prevention perspective, this is good reason why even early childcare can no longer be fully delegated to the family. In other words, society has an interest, in terms of human capital investment, that extends to the constant fight against the inter-generational transfer of poverty and inequality. The prevention of long-term negative effects of deprivation must also be taken into account. It is, indeed, within the discourse of the war against social inheritance that the accessibility of quality early childcare and education services is typically introduced and defended. Giving every child, but especially children from the poorest families, the chance of developing their cognitive capabilities from early childhood, must then be considered not a social cost, but an investment with a high future return. Such an investment, it was argued, would disrupt the inter-generational transfer of poverty and form more competitive, productive and competent human resources tomorrow, to face the social challenges presented by a constantly ageing population.

The inherent limits of the social investment approach should be stressed, however, both from a gender perspective and from the perspective of children’s rights. The social investment point of view poses the risk that the poverty of mothers will be separated from that of their children. Furthermore, virtually no attention is paid to gender equality in these guidelines. The objective is women's employment, but no concern is shown for the kind of job women may have or find, or to whether they are part-time, flexible or precarious workers (as is so often the case). In short, one gets the impression that the very fact that women enter the labour market, whatever the cost, is a priority in and of itself, in terms of gender equality. The social investment approach exploits and manipulates both gender equality discourse and the discourse of children's well-being (Morel, Palier, Palme 2012). Seeing the child as an asset and an investment – as both the sociologist Esping-Andersen (2003, 2009) and the economist Heckman (2000) have proposed – is simply not the same as recognizing his or her agency and citizenship here and now. Rather, it is like seeing children merely as tomorrow's responsible and productive adults (Lister 2003).

An unintended and undesirable effect is a sort of obliviousness to the child’s *present* well-being, not to speak of the fact that there are children who will never become productive adults in the full sense. What shall we do with severely mentally or physically disabled minors, who will never be fully cooperative beings? To cite a further example, many studies have shown that results are more effective if investments are made in children at a very early age, and less effective at a later age (Kjørholt and Qvortrup 2012). If only outcomes and results are to be considered, should our investments privilege younger children and disregard older ones? For that matter, we may ask, why invest in making tomorrow's more productive adults and not in tomorrow's democratic citizens, or tomorrow's more cooperative and responsible individuals?

From a pedagogical point of view, the new philosophy of social investment favours a "school-oriented curriculum" approach, rather than the more traditional "educare" approach (Moss 2012; Kjørholt e Qvortrup 2012). The former, popular in France and the UK, privileges the child's cognitive development through the teaching of maths, sciences and the enhancement of linguistic capabilities. The latter, which is preferred in the Nordic countries – some recent trend reversals in Denmark and Norway notwithstanding – privileges a "child-centred" education, focusing on the creation of a child-friendly environment and more explorative, playful activities, following a celebrated pedagogical tradition dating back to Rousseau, Fröbel, Montessori and Pestalozzi.

ECEC and children's rights

The EU's so-called "Lisbon Strategy" seems to adhere to a mode of discourse typically – and authoritatively – originating in the USA and the UK, and soon fostered (as well as globally disseminated) by such international organs as the World Bank and the OECD. The philosophy of social investment in minors is increasingly associated with the general project to "make Europe, by 2010, the most competitive and the most dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world" (European Union 2000).

As far as childcare services are concerned, we find the most typical expression of the adoption of a social investment philosophy in the EU first in the Commission Communication titled *Efficiency and equity in European education and training systems* (2006), which for the first time extends the perspective of life-long learning to pre-school children (Jenson 2008), followed by *Early Childhood education and care: providing all our children with the best start for the world of tomorrow* (2011). In the latter document, a purely economic way of thinking is still dominant, although, by 2011, many had already declared the Lisbon Strategy a complete failure, and various pleas for a radical change in policy were heard – including a declaration by President José Manuel Barroso, who, in his preface to the Europe 2020 strategy assessment, described the economic crisis as a "wake up call" to Europe, compelling it to accept a radical departure from previous policies, or face inevitable decline (quoted in Urban 2012, p. 497).

In 2011, the Commission, once again, addressed the ECEC question, with an eye to tomorrow's world market: "Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) is the essential foundation for successful lifelong learning, social integration, personal development and later employability" (EU Commission, 2011, p. 1). The main concern remains Europe's economic competitiveness, and the possibility of economizing by cutting social costs.

As a matter of fact, one of the aims of ECEC is articulated as “increasing the equity of educational outcomes and reducing the costs for society in terms of lost talent and of public spending on social, health and even justice systems” (*ibid.*). The document focuses on policies aimed at increasing the *quality* of services and not just their quantity, but even that is evaluated by means of quantitative standards, such as those fixed by Pisa and PIRLS – international tests the value of which is still the subject of considerable debate in the current literature. In the words of Mathias Urban, there are two main presuppositions that the documents seem never to abandon:

“- children (especially from 'disadvantaged' communities) are *deficient*.

- children (in general) are potential *future contributors* to the economy” (Urban 2012, p. 503).

Once again, in line with the social investment state philosophy as discussed above, ECEC is considered an instrument with which to fight poverty. For example:

“Research shows that poverty and family dysfunctions have the strongest correlation with poor educational outcomes. There are already big differences in cognitive, social and emotional development between children from rich and poor backgrounds at the age of 3, and, if not specifically addressed, this gap tends to widen by the age of 5. Research from the USA shows that the beneficial impact of ECEC on children from poor families is twice as high as for those with a more advantaged background. ECEC is therefore particularly beneficial for socially disadvantaged children and their families, including migrants and minorities” (EU Commission 2011, pp. 3-4).

This approach suggests that: 1) the institutionalization of minors below three years of age is to be favoured in particular where dysfunctional, poor and disadvantaged families are concerned – although the general perspective is still couched in universalistic terms; 2) the investments to be privileged are those involving minors under three years of age, or of pre-school age in any case; 3) the effects of social environment, poor nutrition, degraded social and living conditions can be overcome through systematic recourse to early childhood education and care interventions (Urban 2012). Research conducted in the USA is cited repeatedly throughout the document, and although it insists on the elaboration of curricula that seek a balance between the development of cognitive and non-cognitive capabilities, the Commission, in fact, favours a very standardizing and uniforming conception of education, rather than focusing on diversity, differentiation and the child's freedom to experiment. We see no reference in the text to minors’ participation and rights, nor there is any awareness of the proven fact that any intervention strategy is ineffective, as long as the issue of minors' poverty is confronted without paying attention to different family conditions, and without considering the essential connection between the well-being of the family as a whole and that of the minor.

The Commission's 2011 Communication is thus clearly faulty, in that it fails to assess and define the function of childcare services within a broader policy framework. The framework that is needed is one that proves capable of actually addressing the general issues of social welfare policies (including parental leaves and pre- and post-natal support to families) *from the overall perspective of the best interest of the child* (on this subject, see Eurochild 2011). The complete absence of references to minors' rights in the Communication is all the more surprising because Europe had already made significant steps in this direction, beginning with art. 24 of the Chart of Fundamental Rights (2000), and considering the fact that the Lisbon Treaty, in art. 3, explicitly refers to the promotion of minors' rights as an EU objective. The 2010 Stockholm Programme, titled "Europe of Rights", followed by the 2011 EU Agenda for the Rights of the Child, have confirmed this new trend. The agenda is an ample and articulated document, the outcome of extensive debate and consultation. It is true, however, that here, discourse concerning children's rights seems to have been introduced primarily with the aim of devising repressive criminal policies. There is still no real effort to promote broader social intervention strategies in this field, nor is the ECEC question ever contemplated in connection to minors' rights.

During the Cyprus EU Council Presidency there were some encouraging signs of change. In October 2012, with the *Investing in Children: Preventing and Tackling Child Poverty and Social Exclusion, Promoting Children's Well-Being* conference (held in Lefkosia [Nicosia] under the sponsorship of the European Commission), the Cyprus Presidency reiterated the importance of social expenditure in favour of children, even in a difficult phase of economic crisis, and warmly supported the adoption of a recommendation regarding minors' poverty. In February 2013, the Recommendation "Investing in Children: Breaking the Cycle of Disadvantage" was eventually issued. This document is explicit about children's rights, decisively including minors in the fight against poverty, and defining the necessary quality of childhood services. The issue of children's poverty was treated in a far more complex fashion than in 2011, demanding a holistic approach, focusing on the child in his or her local and family environment. The Recommendation also recognises the impossibility of fighting minors' poverty without supporting their families in the labour market (jobs must provide economic independence and, thus, the possibility of reconciling work with other aspects of life). Supporting the family also means allowing the child to live and grow up in acceptable environmental and living conditions – conditions that pose no threat to any aspect of his or her health. The issue of minors is again seen – as it was at the very beginning of the debate on the introduction of childcare services – as closely tied to the issue of equality in general, and balance between family life and the "job market world". It suggests that EU policies especially in the fields of education, health, gender equality and minors' rights be harmonized, and states that investment in the training of teachers at all levels, as well as cultural mediators, is necessary, in order to prepare them to respect diversity effectively, so as to favour, for example, the scholastic integration of Roma children, migrant children or the children of migrants. A primary role is also envisioned for communities and local actors, for the support of children through sport and recreational activities. This view is also meant to favour solidarity between the generations. The Recommendation specifically requests that a part of the "structural funds" from the 2014-2020 EU budget be employed for these purposes. Expenditure in favour of minors must, in other words, become visible in the EU budget. This was also the Children's Rights Action Group's original request.

Conclusions

The general ECEC question is still open and, as we have seen, various aspects of it remain far from clear. In conclusion, I will focus on two of these aspects, which appear to be of paramount importance. The February 2013 EU Recommendation adopts a "balanced approach to social investment", that is one in which both social protection strategy and social investment strategy are considered – the only correct (and humane) interpretation of the social investment state, according to Vanderbroucke and Velminckx (2011). This approach takes into account the fact that, in a strongly inegalitarian society, education can hardly be an instrument for achieving equality of opportunity. Even in this form, however, we may wonder whether a social investment approach and a children's rights approach are compatible, when their goals would appear to be at odds with one another. For the former, the aim is to increase the value of human capital in order to prepare better workers and employees for the future. This means striving toward an even more competitive society, with the risk of an "economic rationalization of early childhood education" (Hubenthal and Ifland 2011). For the latter, the aim is the children's present well being, the satisfaction of their need to play, dream, experiment, and cooperate with their peers in a basically serene and non-competitive environment. From a children's rights perspective, indeed, early childcare and education services must give every child the means to become a self-confident and fully participating individual. Furthermore, the social investment approach seems to stigmatise poor and disadvantaged families from which children must be saved, preferably before they reach the age of three, in order to prevent their becoming a future burden to society. It would also appear to devalue "informal learning and different forms of 'local knowledge'" (Kjørholt 2013, p. 246), aiming at a standardized formal education and emphasizing uniform assessment procedures and test scores in schools and even in nursery school. From the children's rights perspective, on the other hand, it is necessary to embrace a universalistic approach, oriented to every child's present well-being and to guaranteeing all children a rich and significant relationship with their families and communities in everyday life. In this last sense, the child is *already* an autonomous agent and citizen. It is thus imperative (and morally right in and of itself) to fight children's poverty wholly independently of their future – regardless of whether they will become productive adults – simply because they have a right to a good, decorous life and to realise their full potential.

The question thus arises, what combination of public and private contribution should be favoured in childcare services (a question already raised in the 2011 Communication), in light of the fact that global market investments in this sector have been huge, yet the results they have produced have been unfortunate or even disastrous, especially in the UK, Australia and the USA (Lloyd and Penn 2013). This a crucial question, particularly if we consider the following: In 2009, a new benchmark was fixed to the effect that at least 95% of young children should participate in pre-primary education (4 years old) (see: Council Conclusions of 12 May 2009 on a strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training [ET 2020] 2009/c 119/02). This seems to be a radical lowering of the age of compulsory education. As an obvious consequence of this choice, *all* children must have a right to good quality early child education and care, or those who are excluded will suffer further social disadvantage. What should be the aims and functions of institutionalized education for children aged 4 to 6? As the market shows severe limitations when used as a model and source for assistance and childcare, the state has an important role to play in guaranteeing equity in childcare services (Penn 2013).

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