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The (de-)institutionalisation of empowerment. The complex remake of child and family welfare arrangements in Western Europe

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1 Introduction

Throughout contemporary Europe, commitments to empower children rest on strong collective norms which propel varied forms of public action and inspire various occupational groups. The prevailing expectation is that young people should benefit from equal opportunities for growing up decently and in line with what is deemed indispensable for human development (Kilkelly and Liefaard 2019). This conviction also engages international organisations such as the United Nations. Although the above norms translate into regulatory frameworks aligning with specific welfare state traditions, we are dealing here with a cross-national agenda which has entailed an amplification and professionalisation of such frameworks, that is, an ongoing *institutionalisation* of activities with a potential to empower children.

Among other things, the underlying commitments comprise a pledge for ensuring a faultless protection from ‘unacceptable’ harm; a guarantee of educational services; and, at least implicitly, the promise of preventing (extreme forms of) material hardship during childhood. Such commitments undergird distinctive welfare arrangements in domains such as public education, family policy, and social work (Abrahamson et al. 2005; Saraceno 2022). Collective responsibility for related efforts is taken for granted, given a general (official) consensus that human development in younger years is largely determined by conditions rooted in the wider social fabric of modern society. Children are viewed as ‘innocent’ in their early life course and to deserve systematic support to counterbalance adverse living conditions (Wallace 2001). This general understanding is also inherent in mainstream pedagogical concepts (Loizou and Charalambous 2017) and many legal acts (Freeman 2018).

At the same time, however, child neglect and maltreatment, as well as various forms of social exclusion and material inequality, have remained eminent topics in the public and academic debate about the situation of young people in contemporary Western societies (Chzhen et al. 2017; Bradshaw and Nieuwenhuis 2021). European welfare states continue to grapple with phenomena such as endemic child poverty; a rising number of out-of-home placements; constant school dropout; and early leave from vocational training schemes. Moreover, some countries are faced with a high number of young citizens not in education, employment, or training (NEETs). Internationally, public authorities respond to this by special policy measures, including post-school educational programmes and short stays in work settings, but these measures have rarely produced sustainable outcomes (Ellison 2021).

From this angle, current Western European welfare states appear incapable of meeting the aforementioned commitments and pursuing the empowerment agenda in more comprehensive ways. The reasons for this are certainly manifold, yet as will be argued in what follows, they may also reside in movements of *de*-institutionalisation within what is subsumed under the

umbrella term of child and family welfare arrangements in this article. In other words, recent change in this universe is paradoxical in that it reflects both an ongoing institutionalisation *and* the partial de-institutionalisation of mechanisms susceptible to empower children. This contention can be inferred from a cross-national analysis of those rationales which are inherent in current welfare arrangements related to child well-being – especially when the emphasis is placed upon early childhood education and child protection schemes, both particularly critical to the development of young people in 21st century post-industrial societies.

The following review takes stock of scholarly contributions from all over Europe in order to examine current dynamics of change in the above arrangements, drawing on empirical data and theoretical reflections contained in that material. The evidence is read through the lens of an analytical framework which helps decode the paradoxical transformation of the welfare state settlement over the last decades. The review falls into four sections. The first part charts the theoretical concepts used throughout, notably the terms institutionalisation and de-institutionalisation; the paradigm of empowerment; and the understanding of what constitutes a child and family welfare system. This is followed by the portrayal of welfare state developments which signal an ongoing institutionalisation of child empowerment in Western European welfare states. The underlying compilation of cross-national evidence has no comparative ambition, nor can it be exhaustive in picturing all relevant developments in greater depth, let alone for particular jurisdictions. Rather, the analysis is geared towards describing *similar trends across national boundaries* – regardless of obvious international differences familiar to those studying the many 'worlds of welfare reality' (Ferragina et al. 2015) in Europe. This also holds for the third section which delineates regulatory change with a potential to *de*-institutionalise mechanisms of empowerment related to children and young people. The conclusion will briefly discuss driving forces behind the coincidence of institutionalisation and de-institutionalisation, as well as the prospects of the empowerment agenda in the near future.

2 Empowerment and (de-)institutionalisation related to child and family welfare

Empowerment is a versatile, ambiguous term, as Martíneza et al. (2017: 405-409) demonstrate in their comprehensive literature review concentrating on young people. It is also a 'contested concept' (Starkey 2003: 273), since this notion has various connotations, including in political terms. That said, the term is often associated with 'professionally defined and service-focused approaches' to public service provision, including social work (ibid: 279). Under empowering circumstances, people are expected to gain 'control and power over their own lives in their life contexts' (Martíneza et al. 2017: 408), for instance at the workplace; in educational institutions; and in the political sphere. The empowerment of *children* is a case in point. It can be viewed as being deeply embedded in the normative order of modern societies which consider the related endeavour as a public mission and a domain of systematic interventions. In European welfare states, these interventions are commonly justified by evidence about the critical role of social influences in a child's personal environment, with early socialization being a strong predictor of ensuing life course opportunities. To be sure, public action in this universe often sits uneasily with these insights, even as extant interventions do often not ensure child empowerment in egalitarian ways. However, the fact remains that symbolic commitments to the respective empowerment agenda have grown very strong in the Western public sphere.

Child and family welfare arrangements are major instruments to make this agenda effective. Besides schools, they have become an important lever of social integration internationally.

Admittedly, within contemporary Europe, related activities are quite heterogeneous and unequally developed. In general, they comprise early childhood education and childcare; social work; assistance to 'troubled' parents; as well as public benefit schemes, given that monetary support can be crucial to child empowerment. Involved facilities are expected to be publicly regulated, accessible to all, and guided by a set of common principles – including expert (or 'professional') knowledge recognized as such. Insofar as the wider citizenry *conceives* of the agenda's multiple elements as a collective project geared towards influencing the life as a child in a classical family, one can refer to all of the above activities as belonging to an overarching ambit.

Yet in what way this ambit is an expression of *institutional(ised)* arrangements? From a social theory angle, institutions can, first of all, be conceived as 'purposive, regulatory and consequently primary cultural configurations, formed unconsciously and/or deliberately, to satisfy individual wants and social needs' (Hertzler 1946:4). These configurations serve as a regulator of social relations and tend to develop a certain self-preservation capacity, given the time required to create and revise socially binding agreements. Moreover, they often 'come with a (meaningful) sense form the past' and include 'collective cognitive scripts' that guide social action 'beyond conscious strategy' (Conran and Thelen 2016: 53; 54). At the same time, such scripts may translate into regulatory frameworks (professional rules; legal prescriptions; organisational templates) which modern societies establish to put the above agreements into practice (ibid.). Movements of institutionalization therefore include processes whereby the aforementioned cultural configurations crystalize in formal prescriptions with practical relevance – for instance, schooling for all according to a unified national model, or 'professionalised' social intervention under public control in the event of child abuse.

Importantly, these prescriptions, and institutions more generally, may be subject to incremental *change*, in part because they frequently reflect a provisional compromise emanating from ongoing social struggles in the wider society. Sum and Jessop point to the impact of power positions in this process, understanding institutions as 'complexes of social practices … associated with particular forms of discourse, symbolic media or modes of communication' (Sum and Jessop 2013: 34). Thereby, hegemonic social forces may manage to influence the mentalities of national or organisational collectivities, making distinctive institutional logics prevail over others. This resonates with scholarship on the ideational foundations of welfare state institutions more broadly, suggesting that the latter follow regulatory concepts which hold sway at a given moment in history but may become contested by alternative ideas once the latter are propagated by influential stakeholders (Béland 2016). Hence, institutionalised mechanisms of social interventions are not carved in stone.

From this perspective, such mechanisms might be subject to movements of *de-institutionalisation.* In the social sciences, this term serves to capture different though frequently interdependent dynamics. Applied to the internal world of organisations, the notion connotes the 'delegitimation of an established organizational practice or procedure' (Oliver 1992: 564), often in association with external – political or cultural – pressures. As argued by pragmatist strands of organisation studies, legitimacy struggles and conflicts between societal sectors and related belief systems can entail the transformation of long-entrenched mechanisms (Cloutier and Langley 2013). This transformation may be intertwined with shifts in the regulation of social relations at the macro level, as Stråth and Wagner (2017: 179/180) observe in their analysis of welfare state change during the last quarter of the 20th century. In their eyes, the political discourse about human rights and democracy, proliferating from the 1970s onwards, espoused 'a strong return to market freedoms' as well as individualised

mentalities within the public policy realm in more recent times. Indeed, a good deal of those collective arrangements which governed the social order in European societies up the 1990s became subsequently reorganised in institutional terms – most prominently those related to waged labour and the responsibilities of the public sector. In the social policy literature, such processes have often been discussed under the umbrella concept of 'dismantlement', understood as a partial restructuring of institutions which govern social protection and social intervention (see Jensen et al. 2019). Processes of dismantlement are complex, yet to the extent welfare arrangements become less taken-for-granted, less wide-reaching, and less equivalent across a given jurisdiction, they reflect dynamics of de-institutionalisation and are prone to make the empowerment agenda more selective and less inclusive overall.

Concerning child and family welfare, de-institutionalisation can occur in various ways. Traditionally, this term was used to describe the closure of care homes and transitions to community care. From a theoretical perspective, however, the notion may also denote substantial changes in methods and missions underlying modern welfare arrangements. This may, for instance, concern the role of early childhood education or childcare settings (oscillating between custody and educational tasks); the design of organisational models (e.g. a public monopoly for childcare); or shifts in welfare benefit schemes (say, tightened conditionality of income replacement). In all these contexts, long-entrenched understandings and practices may become replaced by *less* institutionalised arrangements, with methods or missions being diluted or abandoned. Admittedly, such dynamics often twin with processes of *re*-institutionalisation, but as we shall see, a frequent result of de-institutionalisation in current times is greater variability and less reliability concerning the child empowerment endeavour.

3 Institutionalised empowerment in child and family welfare systems

When considering the agenda of child empowerment in the modern world, a good starting point is scholarship dealing with 'children's citizenship' (Devine & Cockburn 2018: 144f; Wallace 2001). This scholarship is drawing on Thomas Marshall's observations on 'citizens in the making' (Marshall 1992: 16), as well as welfare arrangements addressing the latter. As Devine and Cockburn (2018: 143) posit, the 'acceptance of meritocracy and inevitability of social stratification', as well as moral expectations stressing obedient social behaviour, were long fundamental to these arrangements. 20th century Europe, however, saw rising expectations concerning the personal rights of children, acknowledging the critical role of social factors for shaping their life course (Kilkelly and Liefaard 2019). Relatedly, the institutionalisation of organised education – most notably the expansion of mandatory schooling – was lying 'at the heart of citizenship formation' during that time (Devine and Cockborn 2018: 146).

In the new Millennium, access to childcare or early childhood education and welfare programmes for families are viewed as major building blocks of juvenile citizenship. Welfare arrangements with a potential for empowering young people are multifaceted, ranging from income support (education-related grants or loans; family benefits) over investment in the educational infrastructure to case-oriented (means-tested) social assistance. The precise nature of these arrangements and their combination vary among European welfare states, but each of the latter has built up distinctive instruments of child and family welfare provision. These instruments have also come to cover young people at the transition to adulthood, with programmes aimed at facilitating their access to gainful employment (Chevalier 2016). Some countries (have) remain(ed) reluctant to create direct entitlements to young beneficiaries (e.g. stipends to enrolled university students); some also enforce age limitations for family allowances or social assistance – while others are more generous in this respect. To be sure,

welfare arrangements throughout this area – referred to as active inclusion programmes at EU level (Scalise 2020) – have often been unable to eliminate disruptive forms of work integration trajectories in advanced Western societies. Nonetheless, even with modest outcomes, related efforts bear witness to the extension of collective commitments to empower young people in 'institutionalised' ways.

More substantially, Western Europe has seen growing efforts to unburden parents in their educational role (Willekens et al. 2015). Classical welfare arrangements for families have been 'progressively accompanied by new policy instruments which sometimes overshadow' older programmes (Daly and Ferragina 2018: 267). While 'coinciding with a phase of welfare state *decline'* in other areas, family policy has been 'among the fastest growing areas of social expenditure' in recent times (ibid: 268; 255). As programmes in this area have (more or less) redistributive effects, they can favour poor households, especially when offering flat-rate family allowances. Furthermore, governments and other social forces have sought to facilitate the reconciliation of work and family life; to improve child-income support to families; to extend parental leave schemes (concerning both the duration and the level of payments); and – last not least – to develop early childhood education facilities.

Internationally, the expansion of early education services appears as the most spectacular development in this universe. Related social expenditure is 'on an upward trajectory' almost everywhere (Daly and Ferragina 2018: 263), as various countries have increased subsidies to parents or non-state service providers, as well as an extension of non-charged 'free hours' of childcare. Such efforts are 'at a pivotal point in its history' internationally, featuring 'new programmatic, workforce, and curricular initiatives' (Kagan & Roth 2017: 138; 142), but also sophisticated approaches to quality assurance (Elwick et al. 2018). With the continuous professionalisation of pedagogical work in these settings (Oberhuemer 2015), previous boundaries between education and care have become increasingly fuzzy. It holds true that children from better-educated and wealthier households seem to benefit most from these efforts in terms of personal advancement (Kulic et al. 2019: 570). Nonetheless, policies in this field have often sought to target families from lower class backgrounds. At least, official policy goals comprise commitments to raise these children's educational attainment and thereby reduce 'their chance of falling into poverty as adults' (Lewis and West 2017: 334, dealing with the U.K.). In various countries, special measures have addressed this particular clientele under the label of 'proportionate universalism', meaning that early childhood education or childcare services are universal but offer additional support when children have special needs (Vandenbroeck 2020: 182). From this perspective, family policy broadly speaking has been amplified in various respects. Some observers go as far as to posit that Western European countries have become 'child-oriented societies' (Gál et al. 2018), also with regard to the sacrifice of private human effort; social time; and downward intergenerational transfers.

This observation is confirmed by scholars studying the proliferation of the 'social investment' approach to public welfare provision (Hemerijck 2015). While related policies have floundered in some places (see Kazepov and Ranci 2017, dealing with Italy), the very idea of collectivities 'investing in human capital and capabilities' (ibid: 242) has gone viral internationally. In essence, these policies resonate with the concept of child empowerment, although they have equally sought to promote adults, for instance by easing the flow of life-course transitions and fostering the demand-side of capitalistic labour markets. Programmes under this banner have often sought to strengthen childcare services (writ large) and supporting working parents, in part by interconnecting welfare benefits and incentives to

place children in (extended) early education arrangements. In this context, child empowerment is often considered as a transversal agenda, extending to a wide range of services including 'maternity and child health clinics, school health care, municipal day care, preschool and primary school' (Vuorenmaa et al. 2016: 290, referring to Finland).

Obviously, *social work* is a major player in this universe. With the latter's ascent during the 20th century, public assistance to looked-after children and adolescents – including those under custody by the youth justice system – became increasingly professionalised (Lawrence and Lyons 2013). Again, child protection is a case in point (Merkel-Holguín et al. 2019). After World War II, related activities became a building block of the (local) welfare state which was partnering with non-profit service providers in many places. The range of activities in this field never ceased to grow and has lately come to include new components such as family midwife services or publicly subsidised community work with disadvantaged users. To be sure, child protection services may comprise activities which address the social behaviour of *parents*, rather than concentrating on empowering children. Moreover, it is an empirical question to which extent provided services actually serve the interests of children, as, in modern welfare capitalism, expectations against social work have always included a mandate to discipline its clientele and to socialize people into the extant societal order. That said, in most parts of Europe, organisational capacities in social work have grown markedly over the last decades, including when it comes to child and family welfare provision.

In recent times, social policies have increasingly addressed the living conditions of disadvantaged children, with the inherent empowerment agenda becoming more ambitious. This, for instance, pertains to prescriptions concerning the direct participation of children in welfare organisations writ large (Heimer 2018, referring to Sweden; Albus and Ritter 2018, dealing with Germany). Moreover, the technologies used in the child protection endeavour have become more fine-grained (Merkel-Holguin et al. 2019). While having ambivalent implications (see below), related initiatives have cast child protection work in a more comprehensive set of enforceable obligations – concerning, for example, law-abiding procedures and duties to document all activities undertaken (Buckley 2017; Bode and Turba 2020). Among other things, this is aimed at increasing the child welfare services' accountability to the wider citizenry. All these developments signal a growing resoluteness of Western societies when the latter respond to child neglect and maltreatment with the help of institutionalised mechanisms.

On the whole, the mandates for those organising child and family welfare arrangements in Europe have become more encompassing over the last decades. Public policy frameworks are expected to develop human capital in more comprehensive ways and to expand the role of socialized education for the sake of child empowerment. Related efforts address ever younger cohorts of a society's offspring, with a special eye on disadvantaged populations. Concomitantly, the very *idea* of universal rights to education and child protection have become ever more popular in the public realm. From this angle, the institutionalisation of child empowerment is an undeniable feature of 21st century European welfare states.

4 Movements of de-institutionalisation impacting on child and family welfare sytems

At closer inspection, contemporary child and family welfare systems exhibit considerable ambiguity since, in many instances, they put strain on the empowerment agenda outlined above. This becomes salient, first of all, when considering extant gaps between supply and demand within these systems. In various European countries, child-related welfare programmes broadly speaking have been hit by budget cuts, most prominently in the

aftermath of the financial crisis breaking out at the end of the 2000s (Chzen et al. 2017). Well-established programmes have become exposed to ‘uncertain futures’ (Lewis and West 2017: 337, referring to England). Examples include the reduction of childcare hours free of charge and shifts in government spending on child protection at the expense of preventive activities (Webb 2022), with more limited public support for ‘soft services’, such as open-door advice to families or community centres for the young generation. In many places, such shifts have affected those ‘in most need of special services’ (Vuorenmaa et al. 2016: 208, presenting findings from Finland).

Problems have also occurred in the childcare field (this term will be used in the remainder of this review to refer to early childhood education and child attendance settings alike). In many parts of Europe, demand growth outstrips the expansion of capacities in this field – which makes it hard ‘to meet basic quality goals’ in many places (Kagan and Roth 2017: 144). Service facilities are struggling with oversized groups of children and lack skilled professionals (Kelle and Mierendorff 2020, for the case of Germany). Gaps have also emerged concerning attempts to establish a ‘youth welfare citizenship’ (Chevalier 2016), given the modest outcomes of many programmes targeting disadvantaged adolescents. In many parts of Europe, income support offered to the latter is ‘highly stratified’ and concentrates on groups in higher education – whereas much less support is provided to lower-skilled youngsters after a school dropout and in precarious employment (ibid: 14; Unt et al. 2021). More generally, the educational system has remained imbued with entrenched social inequalities, particularly when considering the youngest. Its benefits often correlate positively with the socioeconomic positions of parents; indeed, the ‘link between children’s academic achievements and the socioeconomic status of their families’ has become *stronger* internationally over the last decades (Kulic et al. 2019: 558; 571). All this sets limits to the effectivity of programmes geared towards empowering children and their families.

At least indirectly, the above developments reflect dynamics of *de-institutionalisation* and epitomize a latent hollowing-out of those mechanisms by which welfare states (might) ensure the empowerment of an *entire* young generation. This becomes salient where the universal access to childcare cannot be guaranteed because of underfunded programmes; here, the promise of establishing new ‘institutionalised’ arrangements for all is broken as a matter of principle. Furthermore, public initiatives under the banner of the social investment approach, seeking to improve ‘human capital to enhance economic goals’ (Devine & Cockburn 2018: 144), exhibit an inbuilt bias, as they tend to prioritize skills in tune with these very goals – while neglecting other educational objectives which are (equally, or even more) critical to human development, for instance the development of capabilities for coping with unfavourable or oppressive living conditions. Once children are being simultaneously ‘structured as dependents in need of protection’ and ‘products in need of development’ (ibid: 149), the empowerment agenda depicted above elicits *selective* forms of educational promotion and *less inclusive* social support.

More generally, such phenomena indicate a structural imbalance within contemporary child and family welfare systems. Concerning childcare, the growing public service gap observed in some European countries – above all those in the South – can have severe implications for less affluent populations, especially those unable to afford high private co-payments (Kazepov and Ranci 2017; Woodrow and Press 2018). Across Europe, but also within national territories, publicly arranged childcare provision varies ‘in terms of service accessibility, availability, affordability and quality’ (Yerkes and Javornik 2019: 539), with particular imbalances in countries with a deregulated childcare infrastructure (e.g. the

Netherlands and the U.K.). These countries partially rely on a free (subsidized) market which entails a low degree of universality in childcare provision overall. In this context, decent childcare becomes contingent on 'market solutions' – that is, nannies or independent sector providers and high fees for parents. It stands to reasons that the induced fragmentation of childcare delivery runs against the idea of *streamlining* early childhood care and education services.

Secondly, institutional change in the *environment* of child and family welfare services is of utmost importance. Arguably, opportunities for young people to enjoy an empowering and safe childhood are interlocked with social rights awarded to their mothers and fathers. In many European countries, these rights have been curtailed over the last decades, most notably in the area of income replacement and employment protection. This has exposed numerous parents to stressful living conditions and volatile work trajectories (Dukelow 2021). Institutional frameworks susceptible to create secure living conditions for families (meaning an existence free of disruptive episodes) have eroded in many places. A key driver of this in the new Millennium has been the mantra of 'activation' which is often seen as the lynchpin of the contemporary 'welfare service state' (Bonvin et al. 2018). Thus, the widespread commitment to 'promoting mothers' employment' (Lewis & West 2017: 333) has often come with policies which encourage or impose the take-up of lousy jobs including during unsocial hours. This has been facilitated by a curtailment of social rights to both decent unemployment benefits and free choice of occupation in many places. The inherent 'culture of enforcement' (Jordan 2021: 59) – which also seems to be at work within generous welfare states (Ugreninov and Magnusson Turner 2021) – is imbued with punitive elements (notably, benefit sanctions) susceptible to disempower jobseekers and workers with insecure jobs. Consequently, disadvantaged parents may become debilitated as a source of empowerment for their offspring. From the perspective of these citizens, the hype around more comprehensive childcare and (early) education is belied by the experience of being trapped in precarious life situations, with children as 'automatic' victims (Sarmento et al. 2016). Importantly, related living conditions also arise from economic developments (low wages, unstable work, shrinking career opportunities for lower-skilled citizens) and disruptive social dynamics (instability of families; enforced spatial mobility), all combining with the above policies to increase the risk of (child) poverty.

We are faced here with a further, policy-driven movement of de-institutionalisation which tends to trouble what is commonly labelled a family's work-life balance and may have strong repercussions on the empowerment of children. True, child well-being and family wealth are anything but congruent (Main 2019). However, interrupted work trajectories, volatile flows of income, and pressures to permanently adapt to the vicissitudes of markets are prone to impede parents from developing a fruitful educational relation to their children, given constant uncertainty and emotional distress in their life course (Betzelt and Bode 2017). This distress is also produced in the parents' encounter with public employment services or social welfare departments whose orientations often appear heterogeneous and difficult to anticipate (Haikkola 2019; Brandt et al. 2021).

Thirdly, within child and family welfare systems, there has been considerable change in the conceptualisation of social interventions. Thus, the 'education of parents' (Saraceno 2022: 89) has become a new remit of family policies broadly speaking. Current childcare organisations are overwhelmed by multiple missions including child attendance, systematic competence raising, and special support to disabled or disadvantaged users. In this vein, the classical professional understanding of service provision – that is, a child-centred arrangement of 'free

and easy' learning through play and creative interaction in order to build self-esteem etc – is repelled to some extent (Ljunggren 2022, for the case of Norway). Concerning child protection, social welfare departments in various European countries have been found to intensify the monitoring of looked-after children, in order to be better prepared for emergency interventions. This twins with 'risk averse practice cultures' which lead agents to concentrate on visible and dramatic forms of child maltreatment (Morris et al 2018, 368, for the case of the U.K.). In this context, many parents are faced with a 'controlled' conduct of life once they have been suspected to neglect their children. This practice frequently comes along with a 'culpabilisation' of socially disadvantaged families and a public 'discourse of deficiency in parenting' (Devine and Cockburn 2018: 145). Here as well, the empowerment of children clashes with tendencies to disempower parents (see Schoch and Aeby 2022, dealing with Switzerland).

While social work has always been fraught with tensions between support and control, such trends indicate dynamics of *de-institutionalisation* insofar as more emancipatory approaches gaining momentum in the last quarter of the 20th century tend to become diluted in the present times. In many places, the child and family welfare endeavour is subject to a re-conceptualisation of what Brockmann and Garrett (2022) refer to as 'traditional institutionalised social work order' which stipulates that agents meet both parents and children on a level playing field, with tireless attempts to make the former develop, or cultivate, resources amenable to the empowerment of the latter. A related source of de-institutionalisation resides in the current administrative orchestration of child protection activities (Bertotti 2016; Morris et al. 2018; Bode and Turba 2020; Olsvik and Saus 2022). Internationally, public authorities, while seeking to make child protection faultless and more reliable, have come to apply management models which put involved organisations and their agents under permanent strain. Novel approaches to managing child and family welfare services have expanded the span of internal control, as pressures to account for all actions undertaken increase. At many instances, activities have become formalized in technical terms, for instance with regard to quality norms; the programming of time slots; and detailed (digital) documentation or reporting (Albus and Ritter 2018, for the case of Germany). 'Formalistic procedures' have been introduced to make activities 'more measurable' (Buckley 2017: 84, dealing with Ireland) and to expose providers to external inspections on these grounds. Such dynamics, rooted in the mantra of New Public Management (NPM), have also emerged in active inclusion programmes addressing troubled adolescents (Betzelt & Bode 2022) and the childcare field (see Ljunggren 2022; and Paanamen 2022, discussing developments in Norway and Finland respectively). The irony here lies in the fact that attempts to further institutionalize social interventions come with pressures to disregard basic mechanisms of modern human service provision, including those engrained in the aforementioned 'traditional professional order' – for instance a focus on *individual* conditions and on *personalised* relationships to ensure patient and empathetic case work.

Under these circumstances, the task of child empowerment is increasingly accomplished by disempowered organisations (Bode and Moro 2021). This imbroglio becomes particularly salient with the widespread trend towards outsourcing child and family welfare provision to non-state organisations which rely on contract or project funding. While related arrangements can work smoothly when inter-organisational relations are trustful and long-term (Bode 2003), recent reforms have often destabilised previously entrenched partnerships. Internationally, a growing proportion of welfare provision is based on public commissioning (including after tender) and fixed-term missions, with 'production costs' being an important

touchstone for procurement bodies. Concerning the child protection universe, this particularly holds for preventive services and outreach family work at the periphery of that universe (for instance activities of community organisations), but also for the field of residential care (Shanks et al. 2021, dealing with Sweden). Relatedly, the contract culture established in the recent past has come to burden both non-state and in-house providers with formalized accountability procedures (Bode and Turba 2020, for the case of Germany). These procedures sit uneasily with the uncertainties inherent in social (case) work. Managers and case workers, urged to formally comply with imposed duties, tend to informally deviate from the latter when this appears unavoidable or provides a competitive advantage over (quasi-)market rivals. In this context, short-termism or 'trial-and-error' strategies abound. At the point of service delivery, mandates under the above culture may therefore entail disruptive forms of case work. All this results in a creeping de-institutionalisation of previously established child protection partnerships and of shared standards of professional practice. Similar tendencies are elicited by the privatisation or pluralization of childcare settings (Llyod 2019).

Concomitantly, relations among co-actors in a given service field are often volatile and imbued with an instrumentalist logic. Ironically, this goes along with growing pressures to intensify inter-organisational collaboration, involving, for instance, schools; healthcare agencies; non-state service providers; and social welfare departments. However, attempts to institutionalize such collaboration can have perverse effects under the above circumstances. In the child protection sector, the networking process has become more formalized over the last years but is often perceived as being diffuse, ephemeral, and distorted by a biased flow of information, given enhanced inter-organisational competition (Breimo et al 2017). With ongoing formalization (materializing in reporting requirements; routine meetings; inter-organisational working parties), network partners easily feel burdened with undesired extra tasks. Thus, collaborative processes critical to the child and family welfare endeavour, while being amplified in formal ways, become de-institutionalised in practical terms in the sense that involved agents shy away from truly engaging in these processes.

5 Conclusions

The recent remake of child and family welfare arrangements in Europe appears paradoxical. On the one hand, the last decades have seen greater efforts to empower young people, as well as strong convictions that all children deserve *institutionalised* opportunities for growing up decently. On the other hand, several movements of *de*-institutionalisation have produced circumstances under which these arrangements become less inclusive and more selective than in earlier times. Admittedly, the two dynamics often play out at different levels. The amplification and further professionalisation of the child and family welfare system, understood in this article as reflecting an ongoing institutionalisation of child empowerment, primarily manifests itself in (altered) welfare *programmes* – whereas movements of de-institutionalisation emanate from dynamics of programme *implementation* or connect with regulatory or even social change outside the child and family welfare universe (see Bode & Moro 2021). When viewed abstractly, however, movements at the two levels combine to affect the institutional character of the child empowerment endeavour. While some of the programmes mentioned above are geared towards making interventions more universalistic, other movements of institutional change are likely to have the opposite impact. Effects are mixed overall, yet *some* families end up to be disadvantaged in multiple ways – by the curtailment 'in-work benefits; stagnating wages and increased job insecurity'; and by reforms 'disproportionately affecting services targeted to supporting them' (Webb and Bywaters 2018: 15, dealing with the U.K.). For this clientele in particular, dynamics of *de*-institutionalisation

peter out the formally organised ‘protection zone’ which 20th century welfare states had built up for sustaining both parent and their children.

At the end of this review, one might wonder *why* contemporary Western Europe is faced with these inconsistent trends. A tentative (!) answer to this question must take various dynamics into account. For one, the (selective) extension of empowerment efforts is fuelled by ongoing processes of cultural modernisation, with universal rights for children being increasingly invoked world-wide. At the same time, the growing demand for skilled white-collar employment has spurred the interest of business actors in human capital development and, by extension, in enhancing ‘socialized’ education (Menashi et al. 2019). Concomitantly, educational competition plays an important role (Lynch 2018), including when it comes to early childhood education. In what is widely conceived of as the modern knowledge society, middle class families which feel pressures to optimize their children’s skills advocate the expansion of educational programmes. For their offspring, the bar moves ever higher up concerning what makes a difference on the labour market, even as the *relative* value of educational certificates is shrinking even for young people with higher achievements.

At the same time, social divisions outside the child and family welfare system have become more pronounced in recent times and impede many parents from embarking on higher-level educational institutions as well as promising career trajectories. This population often seeks to achieve a secure lower middle-class position in the post-industrial status order or is even condemned to a precarious lives at the ground floor of 21st century welfare capitalism (della Porta et al. 2016). Importantly, these sections of the citizenry prove to be weak players in the contemporary political system (Elsässer et al. 2021) – whereas social forces associated with the corporate business sector and the better-educated sections of the middle class have been major backbones of the institutional re-structuring portrayed in this review. Related reforms, enacted by centre-left governments in many cases, have found considerable support by precisely these two constituencies of the electorate in Western European democracies (Gethin et al. 2022). Indeed, large proportions of the academic middle class are vanguards for the dual earner model and advocate a more wide-reaching institutionalisation of (certain forms of) collective education (Garritzmann et al. 2018). While they tend to be in favour of special programmes for disadvantaged children, they frequently display pro-market and pro-NPM-attitudes while opposing an extension of institutionalised social redistribution to the benefit of lower-class families (Attewell 2021). Moreover, the often stressful life conditions of the latter are widely ignored – even as better-off parents tend to avoid any co-education with socially disadvantaged children, considered as a potential stumbling block on the empowerment trajectory of their own offspring (Nast 2020).

As things stand now, the movements of de-institutionalisation portrayed in this review essay feed into modes of *re*-institutionalisation which are prone to consolidate this overall configuration. Thus, the fragmentation of early childcare services as depicted above is conducive to the normalisation of a ‘welfare mix’ which tends to privilege higher-income families keen to choose more sophisticated, privately-run educational institutions for their children. Likewise, concerning the child welfare field, the more market-oriented routines of public management established a while ago were welcome by those who claim a lean (allegedly cheaper) administration of welfare services more generally – along with a more ‘streamlined’ mode of social intervention driven by numeric performance criteria, similar to what is deemed the best way forward in the realm of private business (Bode 2019). The ensuing reorientation of educational and social work is conducive to a partial erosion of professional discretion in coping with the intricacies of ‘troubled’ family lives.

Given the unstoppable proliferation of the children's rights discourse, however, European societies may in the future become more aware of the paradoxical developments under study here, including their proclivity for doing things by halves when it comes to aligning policies with professed commitments. The apparent selectivity of the child empowerment agenda has raised public concern in recent times, especially with regard to soaring child poverty rates. New concepts for boosting the inclusive capacity of child and family welfare arrangements are under debate (Thévenon et al 2018). It remains to be seen whether these concepts will find sufficient political support, given the many other challenges faced by European welfare states in the third decade of the 21st century.

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