

Introduction

European Family Support Network (EuroFam-Net)

This Special Edition of SW&SSR is dedicated to furthering our understanding of family support across Europe. The work springs from an informal group of scholars, practitioners and policy makers who met initially under the auspices of UNESCO in Paris in 2015. The group kept working and growing since then, creating *the European Family Support Network*. The network developed an application to the EU COST programme: this application (using the acronym: EuroFam-Net) was approved in 2018, and has funded a number of workstreams which involve representatives from 36 countries across the continent (they can be viewed on the website: <https://eurofamnet.eu/>).

The planning of the COST application involved the group thinking about basic concepts, shared values and undertaking some comparative work. The statement and the four articles in this special issue represent the early fruits of this work.

The European Family Support Network (EuroFam-Net) has worked as an effective community of practice. The group were pleased that we shared values, approaches, a common set of concepts and, most of all, a determination to promote effective family support.

The founding statement sets out our shared approach and was used to underpin the and inform the COST bid. The Statement takes an inclusive approach: we did not want to adopt a rigid ideological or methodological stance. We see family support as an open and inclusive style of practice and we wanted to reflect this in the position taken by EuroFam-Net.

Pat Dolan, Nevanka Zegarac and Jelena Arsi consider Family Support as a fundamental right of the child. Their article explores the crucial relationships in the triad: child's rights, well-being of the child and the family. These three interact and are central to the protection, and the overall well-being of the child, together justifying the key role of Family Support. The article provides an international overview of the type of support provided to families at the State level, in order to demand a change of paradigm. The authors argue that Family Support is a specific, environmental, critical approach, which is theoretically grounded and empirically tested in order to exercise and protect the well-being and rights of the child. International legal standards are observed in the context of contemporary theory and practice of Family Support. The conclusion provides the implications of such an approach, which is preventive, structural, sustainable and efficient.

Herrera, Frost and Devaney make the case for a theoretical and conceptual underpinning for Family Support as a social practice. They argue that the underpinning

theoretical base is under-developed and further work is required if family support is to become mainstream and sustainable. The authors aim to provide an overview of the role of theory in informing social practices before exploring the current state of the art. They then outline both relevant wide-ranging social theory and more micro-level psycho-social theory as both having a role in relation to family support. The authors conclude with an integrated model which has been accepted as an approach by the EuroFam-Net.

Avita Putnina undertakes the important task of assessing family change across Europe. Her article addresses major changes in the European family and the challenges this creates in supporting families. She writes persuasively in relation to the fragility and diversity of family relationships, individualization and shrinking size of households. She critically assesses the use statistical tools utilised in the way families are imagined in social policies. She explores how fertility, marriage and divorce rates are connected to the reproductive functions of society. Avita concludes that Europeans face the actual changes to families but that there are problems of understanding these profound changes.

The special issue concludes with an article from Churchill, Baena, Crosse, Jiménez and Millar who provide a comparative study. Over recent decades support for children, parents and families has evolved differently in the European countries, where the singular circumstances of each one of them have conditioned the development of the different areas related to family support services. The article reviews how some of those significant elements have evolved in England, Ireland and Spain. Once the epistemological framework is clarified, a historical journey through the three countries is made, which allows us to visualise the different milestones that have been influencing their national family support policy and provision. The various actions and decisions taken during those decades laid the foundation for the policies and services for children, parents and families with which they started the 21st century. Ultimately, the analysis focuses on the reforms and new national approaches developed over the last two decades that are oriented towards services that cut across the areas of child welfare, social services and family support. Differences in scope and timing are discussed, and a number of critical issues and shortcomings from rights-based perspectives are considered.

It is hoped that the Special Issue makes a valuable contribution to current debates around family support from a pan-European perspective.

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