

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND SOCIAL INCLUSION: OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES AT THE LOCAL LEVEL

Sergio SÁNCHEZ CASTIÑEIRA

*Department of Social Work and Social Services, University of Barcelona,
Barcelona, Spain*

ABSTRACT

The European Union promotes universal access to universal high-quality early childhood services to increase the life chances of disadvantaged children and to help families to get out of poverty (European Commission 2013). Yet, this policy can only be successfully implemented when contextual factors are considered. This case study of the Spanish city of Tarragona points to the local-level policy, governance, and organisational conditions that prevent ecec services from being more accessible and responsive to impoverished families. A survey of local teachers as well as semi-structured interviews with teachers, social workers and low-income families were employed. The results indicate the shortcomings of an insufficient and a homogeneously designed public ECEC system in a local context with high territorial disparities. ECEC services did not meet the needs of many vulnerable families because of insufficient offer, discriminatory access criteria, lack of outreach, unrecognised costs, estrange

supplementary services, non-integration with other welfare actors, and little participation of the families.

Keywords: early childhood services; integrated social services; social inclusion, poverty, social integration, access to education, public agencies

Introduction

The difficulty of reconciling (female) work with childcare has been identified as a key factor increasing the risk of social vulnerability in families with children (Taylor-Gooby, 2004; Ranci, 2010). This is especially so in the case of lone-parent families and of families in which parents have a low level of education and occupational skills (Esping-Andersen, 2002). Furthermore, it is well-known that economic conditions and social relationships during early childhood are of central importance for adults' outcomes (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). Social policy actors currently focus on "new social risks" such as child income poverty, which call for investments in early childhood services or training (Jenson and Saint-Martin, 2006). In this social and political context, the European Commission has promoted access to quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) to achieve the Europe 2020 goal of lifting 20 million people out of poverty and social exclusion (European Commission, 2013).

As ECEC services offer "double dividend" by improving children's development and facilitating parental employment (Strategy Unit, 2002), they are especially beneficial for children from a disadvantaged social background (Bunăiașu, 2014). Quality ECEC services compensate for the fewer social and economic resources available to these children (European Commission, 2011). However, the most vulnerable families – lone-parent, large households, immigrant families- use less ECEC services (Bennet, 2012). Besides, there is little research about the organisational conditions that would make early childhood services more responsive to their needs (OECD 2012a). On the other side, ECEC

services can be aimed at other goals such as reconciling work and family responsibilities; promoting gender equality; helping parents to have the number of children they desire; and mobilising female labour supply (OECD, 2006; OECD, 2012b). Therefore, even ECEC services that could be considered of high quality in some regards could deviate from the specific needs of economically vulnerable families.

This study explores the orientation of public ECEC services for children aged 0–3 towards and their impacts on child poverty in Tarragona, a middle-sized Spanish city from the Catalan region. This case study focuses on policy, governance, and practice to show the barriers that disadvantaged families face at the local level in accessing and benefitting from ECEC services (Bennet, 2014). Such a highly contextualised research focusing on the implementation level enriches our understanding of ECEC services by showing how initial policy assumptions and purposes become inevitable reframed: first, as the local context presents specific socioeconomic conditions that are relatively independent from the regional and national context (Fraisie and Escobedo, 2014); second, as policy principles are translated into practical action (Brodkin, 2007). The article also contributes to filling a gap in ECEC debates by bringing the experiences and circumstances of ECEC services staff and families (Van Laere and Vandebroek, 2017).

ECEC SERVICES AND CHILD POVERTY

Two policy circumstances undermine the efficacy of ECEC services in reducing inequality and breaking the cycles of social disadvantage. First, the allocation of public resources for very young children is low in comparison to the levels of spending in the compulsory-education years (OECD, 2011). This occurs despite the wider consensus that interventions targeted early in life are potentially much more cost-effective than interventions targeted to underperforming adolescents or adults (Heckman, 2006). Second, imputation of

in-kind benefits to household incomes shows that childcare is the only benefit from which the richest profit more than the poorest in many countries as ECEC services tend to be relatively underused by the most vulnerable families (Bennet, 2012).

On the other side, ECEC services' action to lift families out of poverty might be also hindered if they do not promote the participation of parents and the wider community. Enhancing the continuity of children's experience across environments can improve not only parenting at home and the home-learning environment, but also the efficacy of the ECEC services (OECD, 2006). Parental engagement in ECEC services is still more beneficial for disadvantaged ethnic minorities, as the school can better meet their needs and aspirations while the families can assume new educational expectations (Bennet, 2012). Nevertheless, disadvantaged families tend to face more barriers to communicate with teachers and to participate in the schools (Van Laere and Vandebroek, 2017). ECEC services also have to take into account the wider social context of early childhood development. The needs of impoverished families are multidimensional, as the concept of social inclusion implies (Levitas, 1999). Therefore, the engagement of ECEC services with the wider community helps to provide more integral approach that better responds to the complex needs of impoverished families (European Commission, 2016). In this vein ECEC services should coordinate with other local social services to create a "continuum of services" to attend educational, economic, housing, health or relational disadvantages (OECD, 2012b).

In Spain, early education is divided into two stages (for under 3 years and for age 3 and over). Spanish education law guarantees public and free provision in the second stage (3–6) but it is ambiguous regarding public offer in the first stage (0–3) (Ley Orgánica 2/2006, art. 15). ECEC services for children aged 0–3 are under the responsibility of autonomous communities through their departments of education. This very early education stage has been further

decentralised to local authorities, which are responsible for provision, registration, and funding. In Catalonia, the regional administration provides municipalities with economic support to build up new centres. It also subsidises one-third of the cost of each place (€5,400 per year). The rest of the cost of the place is paid by the municipality (one-third) and by the family (one-third plus the costs of meals and care during lunch time, in case the child is not entitled to fee and food grants). The main criterion for a child to obtain a higher prioritisation for accessing public ECEC is the proximity of the centre to home or employment (also having siblings). Additional (and often quite definitive) access criteria are decided at the municipal level and could be as diverse as being employed, having a disability, or receiving social assistance.

The city of Tarragona had ten public ECEC nurseries during the 2013–2014 academic year, which were spread out across the city's districts (678 places in all). These public nurseries had only qualified staff and were open on workdays from Monday to Friday, from the beginning of September to mid-July. ECEC services ran from 9a.m. to 12:30p.m., and from 3p.m. to 5p.m. Complementary care and canteen services allowed children to stay from 8a.m. to 5p.m.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The city council did not register data about the families' socioeconomic profile or about how their use of the public nursery's services differed. I agreed with the ECEC head manager to create a questionnaire and distribute it to public ECEC teachers in the city. Teachers from six out of the ten public nurseries filled out the questionnaire for all their classes. This survey generated microdata that covered detailed information about 381 young children attending these public crèches.

Qualitative data were generated through semi-structured interviews with the head manager and with one semi-structured interview with each of the two managers of the municipal ECEC centres that were in the most

disadvantaged areas. This study was also informed by interviews to social workers and parents within a wider research project about public social assistance. I included a few questions about ECEC services in the 17 interviews and 8 focus groups that I carried out with frontline social workers from local social services. Additionally, the uses, disuses, and shortcomings of ECEC services were analysed through semi-structured interviews with twelve families.

RESULTS

Lazzari and Vandebroek (2012) present five policy criteria with which to assess ECEC services regarding their goals of fighting child poverty and promoting social inclusion: (a) the availability of inclusive early childhood services in disadvantaged areas; (b) affordability, or when ECEC services are free or highly subsidised for impoverished families; (c) accessibility—that is, that disadvantaged families do not face bureaucratic procedures or other practical issues that might prevent them from using available services (e.g., lack of information); (d) usefulness, in the sense that the services' daily operations are attuned to the specific circumstances and vulnerabilities of disadvantaged families (e.g., by providing flexible opening hours); and (e) desirability—that is, that the services negotiate the principles and practices of early care and education with the families as well as provide integrated services that match families' expectations. The following results are presented through these five criteria and a short discussion.

Availability

During the 2013–2014 school year, the overall public and private childcare coverage rate in the city was 42%. Nevertheless, private day-care services were no longer subsidised due to public spending cuts; therefore, disadvantaged families had to resort to public ECEC, which presented rather low overall coverage rates: 6.3% for children aged 0–1 year old in the city, 16.5% for

children aged 1–2 years old, and 29.2% for children aged 2–3 years old. In the last instance, the most decisive socioeconomic criterion for accessing the service was that all the adults in the household be employed in the formal market. Such a condition for access partly explains why low-income families (that is, those who had obtained reductions to the service fee) were also underrepresented in municipal ECEC services: 11% of users were low-income, while the poverty rate in the city was 20% at the time (Sánchez, in press).

This priority criterion, which tends to increase social inequalities (Vandembroeck, De Visscher, van Nuffeland Ferla, 2008), had been agreed on by the management team in 2008, when new public nurseries were being established. At the economically critical time of the interviews in 2013, the head manager acknowledged that such an ECEC system should be more inclusive of the increasing number of low-income families in the city. However, the management team claimed that such a change would mean that “many families” might not understand that they were left out of childcare despite “needing” it (as they “worked”), yet other families who would not “need” it (unemployed families) would benefit from it. Therefore, in a context of scarce public resources, public nurseries were basically framed as services for balancing family with work. At the time of financial crisis, the head manager also defended the need for this criterion because of concerns that the municipal budget might not be able to afford to subsidise many users.

The low overall coverage rates and the access criterion explain why low-income families did not access public childcare in non-disadvantaged areas, where employment had not become a rare resource (see table 1). However, those factors could not fully explain the barriers that low-income families faced in accessing the public nurseries in disadvantaged areas which had not filled up all their openings, specifically El Llimoner (60%), La Nina (76%), Sant Josep (77%), and Pomar (92%).

Table 1. Families' socioeconomic characteristics and level of attendance and service usage in six public nurseries in Tarragona for the 2013–14 school year.

Public ECEC nursery	Economic level of the area	Number of children	Children from a low-income family rate	Children from a foreign origin rate	Enrolment rate	Part-time rate	Canteen service rate	Early entry service rate
La Nina	Low	76	20	32	76	40	61	1
Sant Josep		43	59	39	77	29	Not available	Not available
El Llimoner		20	30	35	60	20	70	0
Pomar		70	11	35	92	19	54	2
La Llacuna	Medium (mix)	53	13	28	100	42	59	13
La Plana	High	76 ($t=331$)	0	0	100	8	91	34

Source: Own elaboration.

Affordability

In principle, public fees are scaled according to household income, down

to a minimum of €16 a month. Therefore, the municipal ECEC system was designed to be affordable for all families. In practice, some circumstances made low-income families perceive those services as an expense that they had to regretfully eliminate, or even as completely unaffordable childcare or educational option. If families found it hard to make ends meet and envisaged informal care arrangements being available, they could consider ECEC as dispensable. A few years ago, Parent 1 was employed full-time, and his two young daughters were attending public nurseries. At the time of the interview, he was unemployed, the family lived on a €426 monthly benefit, and he perceived that the service fee, plus other ECEC related expenses, was “too much”:

Family 1: As I am unemployed, I have told my wife, “Do not take the child to the nursery; we cannot afford it”.

Interviewer: €16 is a lot...

Family 1: Sure, €16 monthly [...] plus diapers, that is too much. Expenses add up bit by bit to eventually become too much money.

A potential gap in communication between disadvantaged parents and ECEC staff may have favoured that managers were sometimes unaware of the difficulties that these families could face in complying with some apparently trifling requirements:

It is hard for them to bring those [changes of clothes and materials], especially the diapers. It is always the same. They are usually families from abroad. Maybe because of their culture, they put just the exact number of diapers that the children need for that day. I certainly try to make them understand, “You have to bring a whole pack”. Eventually they bring it, but soon after, we must tell them again to bring more than just two diapers (Manager 1).

The management team was in favour of all users paying a fee, even if minimal, for them to “value” and “get involved with” the service. This belief was also shared by social workers from the municipal social assistance department, who hardly supported clients with paying the minimum fee for public childcare.

It could be the case that public agencies did not perceive most disadvantaged parents as actually valuing public services, such as early education (Sánchez, 2020). In any case, these professionals' stance seems at odds with the constrained decisions that impoverished families were taking daily. Ultimately, it also undermined the implementation of an ECEC system based on the child's rights.

Another economic barrier to accessing public early childhood services was that families would lose the right to reduced public fees if they had any debt with the council (e.g., a traffic fine, the council tax). As impoverishment and indebted processes are entwined (Dearden, Goode, Whiteldand Cox, 2010), this general Council norm may have the unintended consequence of penalising some families because of their poverty. In this case, impoverished families suffered from dealing with Municipal policies that have disparate goals and principles (an inclusive one in the case of the ECEC services policy, and a punitive one in the case of the general Council policy). This incongruence was exacerbated by a lack of coordination between Departments within the Council that prevented that, when justified, some vulnerable families were exempt from that penalisation. In any case, the local government did not consider ECEC services a basic need (or right) of the population, as they did with public social assistance, to which it did not apply such a constraining penalisation.

Accessibility

Barriers related to outreach action and bureaucratic procedures prevented some disadvantaged families from enrolling their children in the available services (Wall and Jose, 2004). Information about the public ECEC services was not published in the primary languages of most immigrant families, and it was mostly spread through formal channels, such as the council's website. Furthermore, other local public services dealing with disadvantaged families (e.g. Health, employment, or social assistance) did not display ECEC information on their noticeboards, nor were their professionals usually informed about or

encouraged to disseminate such information. This institutional flaw in reaching out to disadvantaged families and providing information to the wider community was partially mended by neighbouring and ethnic networks, which made some disadvantaged families aware of available high-quality early childhood services (Sánchez, 2019). Informal relations might have also made enrolment processes more manageable:

Among them [mothers], everyone knows each other; word of mouth is quite common around the neighbourhood [...] They often come with friends who had previously brought their children to the nursery in order. (Manager 1)

Existing complex or discretionary administrative procedures could demotivate enrolment in public early childhood services:

There was a misunderstanding, and the papers were misplaced in [name of the nursery]. Every time I went there, they told me I had to bring a different type of document. They asked me for payslips, for my official “working life report”. I eventually became fed up, and I decided to wait another year to take the child to the nursery. (Family 2)

Eventually, another barrier to access was that the registration for entry in September had to be made earlier in May, which penalised families which were economically unstable, or which had difficulties planning ahead.

Public Social Assistance as a Broker of Access to Public ECEC for Disadvantaged Children

Social workers from the municipal social services departments (social assistance) dealt with most of the highly deprived families in the city. In principle, they should be a key institutional actor in informing disadvantaged families about, referring them to, and economically supporting them in attending public early care and education. From the ECEC management team’s point of view, disadvantaged families were not always supported or motivated by social workers to resort to ECEC services:

Many families coming from social services ended up not enrolling in childcare, either because they left the area or because they were not pushed enough by social services, and because they do not see the need to use childcare. Sometimes, they fill in all the applications, but they do not show up again. (Manager 2)

Turning the focus to the views of these social workers provides an unexplored angle with which to understand the institutional barriers that prevented disadvantaged families from accessing childcare in Tarragona's local welfare system. These professionals did not frame ECEC services as a right for their clients, from which children would directly benefit in terms of cognitive and social development, or by which parents would enhance their employment opportunities. In fact, social workers believed that taking full-time "responsibility" of a child could benefit vulnerable parents. In daily practice, social workers only conceived the use of ECEC services by disadvantaged families in very specific cases. First, access to ECEC services was promoted when full-time family care could be detrimental to the child:

Sometimes the family is under too much tension. If you provide a more controlled environment, more educational, more relational, more experiential, such as the nursery, then you help the children to partly avoid the consequences of a detrimental situation at home. (Social Worker 1)

Second, public early childhood services were sometimes used to partly fill the holes in the public safety net in a context of welfare cuts and helplessness: "If the family has no financial resources, then the social worker gives children access to basic food. Nurseries provide breakfast, lunch, and snacks" (Social Worker 2). Third, from a social worker's professional stance, ECEC services were not helpful *per se* but only as one of the interwoven measures of an "action plan", which was usually related to parenting and/or employment goals.

Day-care is a resource to me. I provide economic support to attend the nursery, or I make calls, or I coordinate with them only if I am putting

through one of the social action objectives that I have established to improve the situation of the family. (Social Worker 3)

Lack of human resources in social services limited the number of families that benefit from these types of interventions. On the other hand, a family disagreeing with the social worker's views could eventually mean them losing institutional support with which to access public early childhood services (Sánchez, in press). For instance, professionals from public social assistance programmes used to help parents to access ECEC services to enhance their employability only when they appreciated time constraints and a clear commitment to work:

From my point of view, if a lone parent is jobless, the child should attend childcare because that parent should obtain help to escape the difficult situation. If both parents are jobless; if one of them has never worked, not even before the crisis; or if she was a housemaker, then I don't think daycare is an essential resource (Social Worker 4).

Certainly, social workers did not think that ECEC services should be unconditional and universal. Nevertheless, this belief could be partly framed by a local context of lack of available ECEC services, in which they had to make ECEC services efficient by implementing their professional criteria.

Usefulness

Families widely believed that ECEC could benefit their children's autonomy and sociability. Some of the immigrant families highly valued that their child would learn Catalan and Spanish so that they could get ready for the second cycle of pre-primary education and become part of the wider community. A few of the most disadvantaged families also pointed to the benefit of temporarily leaving the child in a safe and nurturing place away from preoccupation and deprivation. On the other hand, most families did not consider that using the ECEC system would increase their chances of obtaining employment. There was general lack of job or training opportunities in the local context. In addition,

public nurseries' opening hours and days did not match the care arrangements needed by the low-skilled.

Table 1 shows that the public crèches with few or none disadvantaged families had higher levels of overall enrolment and full-time enrolment. The canteen and drop-off services were also underused in the low-income areas. These results show a local public ECEC system that was designed and implemented homogeneously in the different territories (and seemingly biased towards a conventional framing of the function of balancing family and work), which might have failed to deal with some of the unemployed or marginalised families' needs.

ECEC managers were aware that nurseries in deprived areas needed to organise differently and to replace some supplementary services. However, they also expressed the feeling that the ECEC services could consequently “lose value”. Surely, they framed a rather restrictive definition of “quality” in ECEC services (Moss and Urban, 2011). Nonetheless, they could also implicitly fear that, with no further resources, public early education in the more disadvantaged areas could end up segregated and stigmatised, as was already widely perceived for primary and secondary education in the city.

Desirability

Family participation in the daily life of ECEC services can lead to the negotiation of values and practices in public institutions, which is essential for building inclusive and empowering societies (Moss and Urban, 2011). This integral view of social inclusion contrasts with the reductive definition of the goal of ECEC services that was shared by actors implementing this policy in Tarragona: “to improve the child’s development” (Manager 2). Their professional stance did not seem to conceive that their role could be also aimed at providing support to the wider family. This approach focused the practice on acting directly (and unilaterally) upon the child. Consequently, everyday practices did not

acknowledge that involving parents in the children's formal education would bring social and cognitive benefits, nor that engaging the family in the school's daily activities would increase the well-being of children and families (OECD, 2006).

Contacts between practitioners and families took place through "informative" group meetings at the beginning of the course as well as individual interviews (usually once a year). The family dropped off and picked the child up from school daily, but the talks between practitioners and families tend to be restricted to practical issues and to the child's behavioural and cognitive development. Eventually, this child-centred approach excluded parents from celebrations in the nursery:

When we did parties or gathered for special occasions, children did not behave the same [if the parents were in]. You saw that children just wanted to stay with their parents, and children did not enjoy the activity. Now we hang pictures of the event afterwards, so the parents can see it. (Manager 1)

Not taking the chance to involve and to socialise with the parents also limits ECEC's potential for generating mutual support and community building (Geens, Roets and Vandebroek, 2017). Apart from the practitioners' professional approach, another factor that could prevent families' inclusion in the ECEC centres could be a lack of resources with which to deal with the complex issues that the families could bring to the nursery (Basic, 2018). For example, managers admitted that they are unable to confront the displays of prejudices against and among ethnic minorities that families had made on ECEC premises. Nevertheless, managers could also have prevented family participation in an attempt to reduce the duties and sacrifices that disadvantaged parents endure:

See, I think parents think, "I already have enough problems out there. I bring the child here to . . . well, not to forget him, but, in some way, to break away for a while" [...] They do not want, on top of that, to have to care

about things related to the nursery, to be afraid that the nursery will make requirements on them.(Manager 2)

In conclusion, a questionable child-centred professional approach for tackling poverty and inequalities could be also framed by the lack of institutional resources. Because ECEC services lacked integration with local employment, health, housing, or social services agencies, it was hard for them to envisage or even to take action on wider social issues that affected disadvantaged families.

DISCUSSION

This case study of the ECEC system in a Spanish urban context reflects the importance of considering the socioeconomic and institutional context of ECEC systems in order to understand their social outcomes (Moss and Urban, 2010). Quantitative data shows that many families in the city cannot benefit from public ECEC services because the overall coverage of places is clearly insufficient. These data also indicate that impoverished families should also face other specific barriers, since they are underrepresented in these schools (Lazzari and Vandebroek, 2012). In addition, the figures show that the public system of early childhood education in the city is territorially fragmented by the socio-economic profile of the families. The (relatively few) impoverished families that attend ECEC services are concentrated in schools that are in disadvantages areas. This segregation within the ECEC system puts to the test the current complementary services, which are orientated towards balancing family and work responsibilities, and not to the specific needs of the families that have been excluded from the labour market.

Listening to professionals and parents' sheds light on the institutional constraints for ECEC services to support households to get out of poverty. Public nurseries are partly unable to respond to the needs of impoverished families due to the following conditions: regulatory and bureaucratic structures that tend to exclude economically disadvantaged households; lack of human and

economic resources and insufficient coordination with other services; and a professional orientation that does not configure the needs of children in terms of the socioeconomic inequalities.

The results also gather the vision of social workers from public social assistance about ECEC services. Social worker's policy assumptions about the importance of the family, the goals of their profession and the conditionality of services frame (and limits) their use of ECEC services to support disadvantaged families. In a context of lack of ECEC places, social workers cannot conceive these nurseries as a universal service, and they must use their professional stance to maximise ECEC services' utility. Therefore, they only promote the access to nursery schools when they assess that these services will have a concrete and an immediate effect on the clients (e.g. to supervise a child "in risk", to free a mother from child care tasks in order to start a new job, etc.).

In conclusion, this study shows how policy practice is framed by economic, ideological, normative, organizational, relational resources available to face increasing and diversifying social needs. In this way, the results show the complexity and challenges that policymakers in designing ECEC services to fight against economic inequalities and disadvantages. To question the role of ECEC services in tackling poverty marks a substantial step in this public policy field since those services become framed as being capable of providing more integral support for the child and the wider family (European Commission, 2016). Furthermore, the promotion of social inclusion through formal education has the advantage of reducing the potentially stigmatising effects that other more focused public services can have on disadvantaged families (Paugam, 2002). Some signs of these positive outcomes stemmed from the interviews with ECEC actors on the ground. Clearly, the introduction of new types of social intervention into and the universalisation of high-quality ECEC services may clearly benefit disadvantaged families (OECD 2006). Yet, the European Social Agenda's

inclusion goals can only be fully implemented when contextual factors are considered.

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