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Early Childhood Care and Education Policies that Make a Difference

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The history of formally organized early childhood education and care (further: ECEC) is as long as the history of compulsory schooling. In several countries early childhood care and education from birth to compulsory school is integrated in one unified system (e.g. in Denmark, Sweden or Jamaica). However, a majority of countries have a historically constructed split system in which the “care” for the youngest is separated from the “education” of the older children (Eurydice, 2019; Kaga, Bennett, & Moss, 2010; Moss, 2013; Urban, Vandebroeck, Lazzari, Peeters, & Van Laere, 2011). Provision for the 3 to 6-year olds (further: preschool) seems to be considered—historically and almost universally—as focused on education and is increasingly viewed as a preparation for later education or as the first step in life-long learning (e.g., European Commission, 2011; Naudeau, Kataoka, Valerio, Neuman, & Elder, 2011).

In contrast, provision for the youngest (further: childcare) has been the subject of very diverse policies in the course of its history. In several countries, formally organized childcare for babies and toddlers emerged in the nineteenth century as a means to combat child mortality as well as an instrument to allow cheap female labor in the period of the first industrial revolution (Vandebroeck, 2006). In that period, children enrolled in childcare were

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exclusively from poor working-class families, and their parents were considered to be in need of being civilized, among others by childcare workers and preventive health care services (De Wilde, Vanobbergen, & Vandenbroeck, 2018). Throughout history and into the present, childcare has been and continues to be a subject of labor policies. Under the influence of feminism in the 1960s and 1970s, the focus of these labor policies shifted from the needs of poor working-class mothers to ensuring equal opportunity policies on the labor market for men and women alike. As a result, the socio-economic profile of childcare users changed significantly since the 1970's. In those countries where childcare was established as a working-class facility, more and more middle-class families started to enroll their babies and toddlers (e.g., in Belgium, France, the Scandinavian countries) and governments consequently invested in increasing the number of available places. Sweden was the first country where childcare was considered a universal right for families. These investments came to a halt during the economic downturn of the 1980s, especially in continental Europe.

Typically, countries that did not invest substantially in the sixties and seventies (e.g., the United Kingdom or The Netherlands), realized only later that a childcare policy was a necessary condition for a labor policy. Therefore, these countries attempted to increase the number of places only later, after the economic crisis, with limited public means through privatization and a market-oriented system, assuming that the market would create places where the needs are higher and that competition for the parents as customers would also increase the quality of childcare. A typical example of this model is the Netherlands, where since the 2005 childcare reform private (for profit) companies took over small private childcare facilities in what was presented as a promising market, and six years later almost half of the childcare places in The Netherlands were owned by only 5% of the providers. It was believed that the market would solve the Dutch problems of accessibility and quality. However, we now know that the expectations of such policies were not met: access to childcare became more unequal (Noailly, Visser, & Grout, 2007), quality decreased and the levels of quality only recovered after substantial interventions by the government (NCKO, 2005, 2013).

By the end of the twentieth century, childcare policies were increasingly influenced by iconic longitudinal studies, such as the Abecedarian project, showing the beneficial effects of childcare participation on later development (e.g., Barnett & Masse, 2007). Under the influence of Third Way and neoliberal policies, ECEC increasingly became politically framed as a means to realize equal opportunities and to combat the intergenerational transmission of poverty by national (e.g. Field, 2010) and international policymakers

(e.g., Paes de Barros, Ferreira, Molinas Vega, & Saavedra Chanduvi, 2009). In that vein, the educational function of not only preschool but also childcare became increasingly recognized next to its economic labor market-oriented function. As a result, it is now not only the quantity of childcare (numbers of available places) but also its quality that is a matter of political concern (e.g., European Commission, 2018). In sum, childcare for the youngest children originated as an instrument to combat child mortality, exclusively reserved for the poorest of working-class mothers. It evolved into an instrument to reconcile employment and parental responsibilities for all parents and consequently, the users became more middle-class families. While childcare retains its economic function, it gradually was also considered an educational environment, just as preschool already was, and subject to policies that aim to combat the intergenerational transmission of poverty. In many countries this paradoxically means that governments stress the social and pedagogical functions of childcare for poor families, while at the same time these families hardly have access to places of above-average quality (Vandenbroeck, 2019).

In this chapter, this paradox will be further developed. In the next section, we elaborate more on the evidence for the educational and social functions of preschool and childcare. Subsequently, it will be discussed how quality matters for the pedagogical function of ECEC, and how accessibility matters for the social function of ECEC. This chapter ends with a discussion what types of policies successfully combine social and pedagogical concerns, ensuring good quality and accessibility for all.

How ECEC Can Make a Difference

After the Second World War, three major longitudinal projects started in the United States (US), one of which addressed childcare (the Abecedarian project in 1972) and two focused on preschool (HighScope Perry Preschool in 1962 and the Chicago Preschool project in 1985). The projects were part of a broader policy to address what was believed to be the “socio-cultural handicaps” of the black population in cities as Chicago and was in official documents labelled as “the negro problem” (Beatty, 2012). Together with other studies, these projects showed that children benefitting from high-quality ECEC were better off later in their lives than children who did not attend (Barnett, 2011; Burger, 2010; Camii, Vargas, Ryan, & Barnett, 2010). The studies have been used to argue for considering ECEC as a means to close the achievement gap. However, as Morabito, Vandenbroeck, and Roose

(2013) explain, as these first studies compared poor children with equally poor children, their results do not really learn anything about the equalizing potential of ECEC. Yet, since these early US-based studies, European studies have confirmed the positive individual benefits of attending high-quality ECEC in the domains of cognitive development, socio-emotional development, and school career for all children and for disadvantaged children in particular (Lazzari & Vandenbroeck, 2012). We give a few examples, without aiming to be exhaustive. For a more complete overview of European studies, see Vandenbroeck, Lenaerts, and Beblavy (2018). In Norway, the 1975 childcare reform was used to study the impact of childcare availability on children's educational attainment by Havnes and Mogstad (2011). The study concluded that childcare attendance was significantly associated with educational attainment in the long-term (30 odd years later). Subsample analyses indicated the largest effects on education for children with low educated mothers. In Northern Ireland, the team of the EPPNI study (Melhuish et al., 2006) concluded that preschool enhances cognitive development, social development, and behavioral competences, and that higher quality preschool is associated with better intellectual outcomes. Felfe and Lalive (2011) conducted a longitudinal study on a national data set of (former) East and West Germany, following 800 children from age two to ten. Similar to the Northern Irish study, Felfe and Lalive (2011) found that children who attended ECEC centers achieved significantly higher scores on all cognitive and non-cognitive indicators. Children from lower SES benefitted more when accessibility to ECEC centers was improved. The results are consistent with German research by Spieß, Büchel, and Wagner (2003) as well as Becker and Tremel (2006). In Italy, Brilli, Del Boca, and Pronzato (2011) confirmed that an increased accessibility for vulnerable children (i.e., by childcare rationing) had positive effects and that the impact is highest for children with mothers who had the lowest formal educational levels. In Switzerland, Lanfranchi, Gruber, and Gay (2003) looked at the impact of ECEC in migrant children with Albanian, Turkish, Portuguese, and Italian backgrounds, as well as Swiss backgrounds and suggest that children who attended ECEC were significantly better assessed by their kindergarten and primary school teachers in first class in terms of their linguistic, cognitive, and special skills than children who grew up exclusively in the circle of their own family. One of the largest studies in Europe is the Effective Pre-School, Primary and Secondary Education (EPPSE) project in the United Kingdom (UK). The study started in 1997 and followed more than 3000 children since then (Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford, & Taggart, 2014). From these and other studies, there is now robust evidence that all children benefit from ECEC, as ECEC

has the potential to increase language development, pre-academic skills, cognitive outcomes, as well as social and emotional development. Evidence on the equalizing potential of ECEC is less conclusive, but it is clear that the developmental benefits are most salient for children from more disadvantaged families. The EPPSE study sheds more light on this. It shows that beneficial effects of ECE are present for all children, and as such the gap between higher and lower social statuses is not diminished (Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford, & Taggart, 2004). However, it also indicates that children from lower SES who attended high-quality preschool score above what primary school teachers estimate to be the minimum level to be successful in school, while children from lower SES who did not attend ECEC did not reach the same level. In contrast, all children with higher SES attain the minimal level, regardless of their attendance of preschool. In sum, while high-quality preschool does not necessarily close the achievement gap, it does make a salient difference, particularly for children from lower social statuses.

Research, however, also suggests that not all ECEC matters to the same extent. A famous example is the study of Caille (2001) in France, who showed that children attending *école maternelle* (preschool) at the age of two did not fare better in primary school than those enrolled at the age of three, when controlled for socio-economic status. The study of Driessen (2004) as well as the meta-study of Fukkink, Jilink, and Oostdam (2015) also suggests that the beneficial effects of preschool for 2 to 4-year old underprivileged children of the Dutch *peuterspeelzalen* were disappointing. These counter-intuitive results show that, while ECEC matters, not all ECEC matters in the same ways and that quality plays an important role.

The impact of ECEC is not limited to its direct impact on children's development. There is abundant literature showing that living in poverty is harmful for children's development (for an example from neuro-research, see Neville, Stevens, Pakulak, & Bell, 2013; for a broader overview see for instance Zaouche-Gaudron, 2017). Poor families tend to live in neighborhoods with poorer provision, more frequently employing staff that shows inadequate behavior toward children (Webster-Stratton, Reid, & Hammond, 2001). Living in adverse circumstances also has a negative impact on children's health and learning opportunities. In addition, job insecurity has a negative impact on the well-being, stress, and marital conflicts (Brotman et al., 2013) and may therefore negatively influence parental skills. It is well documented that social support is one of the more universal and salient forms of parenting support (Jack, 2000; Sarason, Sarason, & Pierce, 1990). ECEC can be an important source of social support for all parents and for parents in more vulnerable situations in particular, when it can serve as a meeting place

where parenting experiences are shared. It is increasingly a focus of international policy makers that ECEC contributes to social support as well as to social cohesion. While empirical studies indicate that this may be the case, they also show that ECEC does not necessarily fulfil these roles (Geens, Roets, & Vandebroek, 2015; Geens & Vandebroek, 2013) and that professional support of the workforce is necessary to develop a vision on their role in relation to peer support of parents.

A special note needs to be made about the growing number of immigrant families with young children in European countries. ECEC has the potential to address essential needs of these vulnerable young children at a critical stage in their development as it represents the first and most intimate point of interaction between receiving societies and immigrant families with young children. They can (and often do) also play a central role in supporting their families' long-term integration outcomes (Vandebroek, Roets, & Snoeck, 2009). However, research examining successful strategies in serving young immigrant children and their families in early childhood remains scant (Park, Katsiaficas, & McHugh, 2017; Vesely & Ginsberg, 2011). In order to enable ECEC provision to fulfil these manifold expectations, ECEC policies need to properly address the issues of accessibility and quality.

Quality Matters

All studies that not only looked into the general impact of ECEC on children's outcomes, but also took account of the issue of quality, demonstrated that the impact of ECEC on children, parents, and communities is moderated by quality (e.g., Loeb, Fuller, Kagan, & Carrol, 2004; Melhuish et al., 2006, 2015; NICHD, 2002). The core of the quality of ECEC resides in the educational and emotional support that childcare and teaching staff provides for the children as well as on their relations with parents. In other words, quality is a function of interpersonal interactions, which is called *process quality* (La Paro, Williamson, & Hatfield, 2014). Process quality, in turn, is conditioned by *structural quality*. While there is no one-on-one relationship between single structural quality dimensions and process quality (see Slot, 2018, for a systematic literature review), some structural quality conditions are necessary (but not always sufficient) conditions to realize process quality. One of these conditions is related to the workforce: staff competences and qualifications, and working conditions (Urban et al., 2011; Vandebroek, Laevers, et al., 2016). Cross-sectional as well as longitudinal studies indicate a relation between staff qualifications and competences and childcare quality

as well as with children's developmental outcomes (Clarke-Stewart, Vandell, Burchinal, O'Brien, & McCartney, 2002; Early et al., 2007; Fukkink & Lont, 2007; Sylva et al., 2004). Also, a literature review conducted by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) concluded that "staff who have more formal education and more specialized early childhood training provide more stimulating, warm and supportive interactions with children" (2006, p. 158). Several EU Member States have qualifications at a bachelor level (ISCED 5), such as the Danish *pedagog*, the Swedish teacher, the French *Éducateur de Jeunes Enfants*, or the Belgian *Pedagogie van het Jonge Kind*. However, the OECD (2006) also found that in many European Member States the actual qualification levels are much lower.¹ Better qualified staff is often not recruited by ECEC providers because of lack of funding, while in most countries a large proportion of the workforce also consists of unqualified assistants (Van Laere, Peeters, & Vandenbroeck, 2012). This relates to a second crucial structural quality criterion: working conditions. As Early et al. (2007) found, staff qualifications only make a difference if working conditions are adequate. If not, turnover rates are usually high which jeopardizes process quality. Adequate working conditions include decent salaries, paid time off from the children to document, reflect and plan, and the opportunity for continuous professional development. A systematic literature review (Peleman et al., 2018) as well as practical experiences in several countries (Vandenbroeck, Urban, & Peeters, 2016) demonstrated that continuous professional development compensates for a lack of pre-service qualification, provided it is long-term and sustained. In reality, however, these conditions are seldom met (Eurydice, 2019). Particularly in split systems, qualifications and working conditions of the workforce caring for the youngest children are less than adequate (see also European Commission, 2018). Next to the workforce, there are of course other structural conditions for optimal process quality, including adult child ratio's, space, and safety requirements.

In addition to workforce characteristics and working conditions, the pedagogical curriculum is the second most important aspect of process quality. There are many differences in how ECEC is conceived of. Some countries consider ECEC merely as a preparation for compulsory school and focus on adult-centered activities aiming at reaching specific developmental outcomes. Others adopt a more holistic social pedagogical approach, favoring play based and child-centered experiences (Bennett, 2005; Samuelsson, Sheridan, & Williams, 2006). In addition, curricula differ in how they conceive of

¹See also <http://seeepro.eu>, a website with a comprehensive overview of the different degrees and qualifications in ECEC being organized in EU Member States.

the relations between parents and staff (Janssen & Vandenbroeck, 2018), as well as in how to deal with the increasing diversity of children and families (Janssen, 2020). In-depth observational studies (Slot, 2018; Slot, Lerkkanen, & Leseman, 2016; Vandenbroeck, Laevers, et al., 2016) show that process quality is best served by an *educare* approach, integrating care and education, where adult-centered and child-centered initiatives are balanced and where there is room for children's perspectives, while adults scaffold and extend the children's experiences. This obviously also requires higher levels of staff competences.

Sadly, those observations time and again show that while the emotional support of babies and toddlers is moderate to good, the educational support is often significantly lower and may well be below the quality level that is necessary to expect long-term positive outcomes. Two US-based studies (La Paro et al. 2014; Thomason & La Paro, 2009), for instance, found that language support was on average inadequate. In the Netherlands, Slot and colleagues (2016) found similar results. A Belgian study of 400 childcare facilities (Hulpia et al., 2016) showed that educational support varies from moderate to low, with quality of feedback given to toddlers even being completely insufficient. Portuguese (Cadima et al., 2016) and US-based (e.g., Jamison, Cabell, LoCasale-Crouch, Hamre, & Pianta, 2014) observational studies show that also in the youngest baby-groups the quality of educational support is significantly lower than the quality of the emotional dimensions. What the levers are for the improvement of educational quality may differ from one country to another. Yet they most probably include adult-child ratios, qualifications, and professional support for staff, curriculum development, and monitoring.

It needs to be noted here that demand-side funding (i.e., funding parents who "choose" a place for their child on the ECEC market) has predominantly led to lower quality than supply side finding (funding provision), as marketization usually entails budgetary cuts on staff and limits the space of reflection and experimentation (Cleveland, Forer, Hyatt, Japel, & Krashinsky, 2007; Moss, 2009). In the Dutch case, the regular quality monitoring by NCKO (2005, 2013) showed that after the 2005 reform quality of both emotional and educational support dropped and concluded that even the physical safety of children in childcare settings was not safeguarded. In subsequent measurements, the emotional quality increased after substantial investments from the government, yet the educational support remained unsatisfactory. In her Ph.D. research on the hybrid Dutch childcare system (0–4 years), based on the comprehensive pre-COOL study, Van der Werf (2020) found that process quality in value-based non-profit providers is highest while it was lowest in large-scale for-profit providers, and this was the case for educational support,

emotional support as well as for how staff experienced their working conditions. However, the numbers of high-quality value-based non-profit providers have decreased between 2012 and 2017–2018 under the influence of the aforementioned process of marketization.

The commodification of ECEC is often legitimized by framing parental *choice* as an important issue. It is believed that parents—as consumers—will drive providers to ensure quality. However, time and again, research shows that parents cannot be considered critical consumers, picking the better childcare for their children. They lack the necessary information to do so (Marangos & Plantegna, 2006), may use other criteria than process quality and tend to overestimate ECEC quality compared to experts' ratings (Barros & Leal, 2015; Bassok, Markowitz, Player, & Zagardo, 2018; Grammatikopoulos, Gregoriadis, Tsigilis, & Zachopoulou, 2014; Howe, Jacobs, Vukelich, & Recchia, 2013; Mocan, 2007). Indeed, process quality—by definition—materializes when parents are absent. It does not come as a surprise that a recent study in Flanders found that there is hardly any relation between quality as measures by experts and parents' appreciation of the childcare used (Janssen, 2020). Moreover, in most countries there is a shortage of places in ECEC in general and in childcare in particular and as a result, parents hardly have a choice. As Burman (1997) rightly argued, the term “consumer” masks practices of coercion within the language of “choice,” and it implies equal access to the market that ignores actual structural positions of disadvantage.

Accessibility Matters

Obviously, there is no point in increasing quality when it only serves those who are already privileged. As the knowledge about the beneficial impact of ECEC use on children's outcomes increased, so did the concern among researchers as well as policy makers about inequalities in access. Children from vulnerable families (e.g., families in poverty, migrant or refugee families, Roma, families with children with special educational needs) are less often enrolled in high quality childcare services than their more privileged peers. While detailed figures are not available for all countries (e.g., France does not officially record ethnicity), there is abundance of evidence that this is a global phenomenon. Unequal enrolment has been demonstrated in the US (Hernandez, Takanishi, & Marotz, 2009) and in several European countries, including France (Brabant-Delannoy & Lemoine, 2009), Germany (Büchel & Spiess, 2002), Italy (Del Boca, 2010), the Netherlands (Driessen, 2004; Noailly et al., 2007), Belgium (Ghysels & Van Lancker, 2011), England

(Sylva, Stein, Leach, Barnes, & Malmberg, 2007), and some Nordic countries (Wall & Jose, 2004). Reports from country experts in all 28 European Member States in the framework of the European Child Guarantee project show that children from ethnic minorities, refugee children, children with special needs and children from poor families are underrepresented in childcare (Frazer, Guio, & Marlier, 2020; Vandenbroeck, 2019). Inequalities are most outspoken for the youngest children and this is particularly the case in split systems. While differential take-up between high- and low-income groups (or the so-called Matthew effect) is a general feature of ECEC in general and childcare in particular, the degree to which the take-up differs, varies significantly across countries (Van Lancker & Ghysels, 2016). In countries with high overall enrolment rates (Denmark, Estonia, Iceland, Malta) take-up of childcare by vulnerable groups is generally higher, illustrating that universal rights-based policies are more effective in reaching vulnerable families than targeted policies.

The first and main reason for the unequal enrolment is the lack of places and the geographical inequalities in how the available places are distributed. The lack of available places entails waiting lists (e.g., in metropolitan areas in The Netherlands, Belgium, or Latvia) that affect especially those who have more difficulties in subscribing a long period of time before the actual enrolment date. This is the case for parents with precarious work, as well as for immigrant parents. The lack of available places often also entails privatization and commodification of ECEC: in times of budgetary restrictions, legislators may count on private investors to fill the gaps. Smaller or larger companies open up places where the gap between supply and demand is high, but tend to raise parental fees and therefore increase inaccessibility for vulnerable groups. In her Ph.D. research, Van der Werf (2020) also showed that larger for-profit providers tend to be significantly less inclusive to vulnerable families and to cultural and ethnic diversity issues.

The shortage of places for the youngest children may also be influenced by a historical legacy of family policies that favored family models where one parent (i.e., the mother) stayed at home and childcare was considered unnecessary and not educational in nature (Vandenbroeck, 2019). Shortage of places most often goes hand in hand with significant geographical disparities. The disparities may signify a gap between urban and rural areas (e.g., France, Hungary, Lithuania, Romania, or Slovakia). Yet, they may also occur within cities. Van Lancker and Vandenbroeck (2019) calculated that in many (yet not all) major municipalities in Flanders, higher income neighborhoods have more accessible childcare than lower income neighborhoods. Local municipal policies can make a difference when they carefully consider where to

provide or expand the number of publicly provided places, yet they not always do so. This does not mean that public childcare necessarily remedies shortcomings of market-based provision. In the city of Vienna, for instance, non-profit private providers tend to fill the gaps that public provisions leave in underprivileged neighborhoods (Pennerstorfer & Pennerstorfer, 2020).

Furthermore, Van Lancker and Vandebroeck found that over the last decade, the Flemish government predominantly invested in new childcare places where women's employment increased, and less in neighborhoods with lower average incomes, thus favoring labor objectives over the social and educational functions of childcare. Geographical disparities tend to discriminate also against Roma families and refugee families, as childcare centers are usually established at substantial distance from their settlements. As an example, in the Netherlands, only 35% of municipalities with an asylum center have ECEC available for refugee children (Vandebroeck, 2019).

Another major barrier to accessibility is affordability. Overall, in the 27 European member states plus the United Kingdom, 50% of non-users mention costs as the reason not to enroll their child in ECEC. In Cyprus for instance, the cost of ECEC represents on average 15% of net family income, but for poor and single parent families this is above 60%. In Spain, ECEC represents 5.6% of the disposable income for dual earner families, but over 15% for single-parent families. In Croatia, parental fees may vary between 8 and 16% of net income, according to varying municipal standards (Vandebroeck, 2019). Some countries offer free preschool (e.g., Ireland, albeit only one year). Yet, in England, the introduction of the entitlement for free years of preschool has not been accompanied by sufficient subsidies, resulting in an increase of parental fees above wages and inflation as well as an increased closure rate of nurseries and childcare providers. Moreover, the English policy of offering a free year of ECEC has mainly reduced fees for ECEC provision, yet failed in attracting a more precarious population (Campbell, Gambaro, & Stewart, 2019).

Over the last decade or so, it has become increasingly popular among policymakers to justify the organization of childcare in terms of parental *choice*. The language of choice often went hand in hand with deregulations and privatization of childcare services and consequently, with demand-side funding. Demand-side funding, meaning funding the parents instead of providers (supply side funding), takes different forms. It may be in the form of a tax deduction or other fiscal measures, as well as through various forms of voucher systems. As Cleveland and Krashinsky (2004) noted, those who favor demand-side funding typically believe that childcare markets work relatively well and that it is important to preserve parental choice. However,

studies in countries or regions so diverse as California (Whitebook, Kipnis, & Bellm, 2007), Canada (Cleveland et al., 2007), Taiwan (Lee, 2006), Hong Kong (Yuen, 2007), or The Netherlands (Noailly et al., 2007), showed that demand-side funding tends to increase inequalities in enrolment, despite the rhetoric of choice and despite the use of vouchers for poor families. As an example, the Dutch *Planbureau* (planning bureau) calculated that the marketization of childcare, introduced in The Netherlands in 2005, led to a decrease of providers in rural areas and poor neighborhoods of urban areas, and to an increase of providers in more affluent urban areas, leading to inequalities in actual choice (Noailly et al., 2007).

Another salient example is Finland that in the 1980s introduced a Home Care Allowance (HCA) for parents who decide not to use ECEC. While the rationale is free choice of parents, low-income and single parent families use the HCA more often and for a longer period of time than on average, and the introduction of this policy will therefore probably lead to increasing the educational gap (Repo, 2010).

In relation to the shortage of places, managers of ECEC facilities are forced to set priorities of whom to enroll and who to refuse a childcare place. In many cases, the general rule is “first come first served.” This means that waiting lists are created that favor those with regular jobs that can predict their ECEC needs well in advance and that more vulnerable families tend to be excluded. In regions with split systems, preschool is often considered as education for all, while childcare for the youngest bears a historical legacy of serving female employment. As a result, governments may tend to prioritize childcare places for dual earner families. This inevitably results in favoring higher income groups and negative redistribution of public money to those who are already privileged.

In relation to the paradigm of parental choice, it is often assumed that the use of childcare is molded by parental preferences, suggesting that when certain populations do not use childcare, this may be the result of cultural differences and preferences, rather than structural barriers. In an important study, comparing structural barriers and cultural norms about motherhood, Pavolini and Van Lancker (2018) found however that cultural norms that favor mothers as exclusive carers entail lower childcare use overall, but only structural barriers are associated with widening the socio-economic gap in enrolment.

Discussion: Policies that Make a Difference

Childcare for the youngest children has historically been and continues to be a substantial part of family policies, albeit for different reasons. Originating as embedded in hygienist and labor policies, it is now a substantial element of social investment policies (Pavolini & Van Lancker, 2018) and of policies aiming at promoting equality of opportunities (Morabito et al., 2013). As a result, ECEC now entails much more than only caring for infants and toddlers while their mothers are at work. Beyond these economic and labor-promoting functions, it bears a social and educational mission. Consequently, two relatively new concerns have emerged: the concern of educational quality and of accessibility.

By the end of the twentieth century, many policymakers and officials believed that ECEC markets were a reasonable answer to these new emerging needs. It was expected that well-informed *consumers* would make critically informed choices; that supply would follow demand in a system of demand-side funding; that vouchers for low income parents could close the enrolment gap, and that the market would be able to level the playing field (Moss, 2008). However, we now know that the promises of marketization in ECEC did not materialize. To give but a few examples, staff turnover appeared to be significantly higher in voucher centers than in contracted centers in California (Whitebook et al., 2007); the number of childcare places was reduced in low-income areas in the Netherlands (Noailly et al., 2007); also in the Netherlands quality decreased (NCKO, 2005; Van der Werf, 2020); and the enrolment gap grew with the establishment of a voucher system in Taiwan (Lee, 2006). This is not surprising. ECEC in general and childcare in particular are, after all, not simply “markets” First, parents are often ill-informed and their evaluation of observable quality has hardly any relation with what we know about quality criteria that predict children’s outcomes (Janssen, 2020), as parents are by definition absent when emotional and educational supportive relations take place. Moreover, in most countries, childcare places are scarce and even scarcer in poorer areas, so the concept of choice is masking structural inequalities, as Erika Burman (1997) warned us a decade ago. Market-oriented provision in general and for-profit organizations in particular tend to reduce costs and the most salient cost of childcare is the workforce. That explains the phenomenon that the commodification of childcare tends to lead to downwards qualifications, decreased professional support, and lowering working conditions, resulting in decreasing staff satisfaction and increasing staff turnover.

Successful policies combine high quality and access for all. Such policies are policies that consider ECEC as a public good, rather than a commodity. They succeed in balancing the economic, social, and educational functions. Such policies consider childcare as an inextricable part of the educational system, be it with a holistic view on education, meaning a balanced curriculum in which care and education are combined, and adult-centered initiatives are balanced with child-centered approaches. That may mean that childcare and preschool are unified under the umbrella of education policies (as in Sweden) but it may also mean that they are part of a broader welfare policy (as in Denmark). However, it always means that there is a comprehensive policy about continuity between birth and compulsory school age and that ECEC is a public good and publicly financed. Childcare as a public good includes democratic discussion on what ECEC is for (e.g., Lazzari, 2012; Moss, 2014; Vandenbroeck, 2020).

In countries successful in ensuring accessibility and affordability for all families, rights-based ECEC policies overcome the binary opposition between universal and targeted services in a so-called “proportionate universalism” approach. Universal policies often lead to Matthew effects, meaning that ECEC provisions are more often used by higher income families than by lower income families and that, consequently, public money favors the already favored (Pavolini & Van Lancker, 2018). In contrast, targeted provision may reach disadvantaged families, yet often lack public support and all too often services for the poor are poor services. Proportionate universalism, then, a term originating from public health (Marmot, 2010) means that ECEC services are universal and offer additional support for additional needs within the mainstream provision. An example is that (universally accessible) preschools in Flanders may receive additional funding when enrolling more children from vulnerable families. It requires that ECEC places are seen as an entitlement for families, and also that there is an alignment between national and local policy makers (i.e., on the municipal level) that are familiar with local needs. Monitoring the balance between needs and services requires local knowledge about where to implement additional places. In Hungary, for instance, ECEC services receive 105% of normal funding for a disadvantaged child and up to 150% for children with additional needs. In Croatia, Roma parents are exempt from paying kindergarten fees. Successful policies also have introduced income-related parental fees and pay due attention to indirect costs such as costs for meals and transportation. In the case of shortages of places, such policies have implemented priority criteria that balance the economic and social functions by implementing quota for dual earners

as well as for vulnerable families. In some Flemish cities, for instance, (e.g., the city of Ghent), all childcare centers have one central enrolment policy that sets quota for different target groups, ensuring that the population using childcare is representative for the entire population of the city. In addition, several regions have engaged social professionals with expertise on the specific needs of the target group of vulnerable families to increase the sensitivity of childcare workers for working with vulnerable families.

Repeated detailed observations have demonstrated that quality in general and educational support in particular needs to be strengthened if we wish to include ECEC as part of equal opportunity policies. Therefore, central quality criteria are necessary, but insufficient if not met by central monitoring systems. Longitudinal studies in diverse countries have demonstrated that monitoring structural quality is not only a necessary means to ensure that vulnerable families have similar quality than more affluent families, but also that it serves to enhance the overall level of quality (Litjens, 2013; OECD, 2015). Standards may include structural quality criteria such as adult-child ratios, staff qualifications and remunerations, professional development opportunities, building expertise in working with children with special needs, or to work in contexts of diversity and multilingualism). The recent quality framework of the European Commission (2018) offers an outstanding example of a comprehensive set of standards.

Yet, we should always bear in mind that not everything that is measurable counts and that not everything that counts is measurable. Central quality standards also need to involve shared values (Urban et al., 2011). Inspiring examples in this vein are the Swedish curriculum (Skolverket, 2010) with its emphasis of the values of democracy; the Danish curriculum (Ministry of Children, Gender Equality, Integration and Social Affairs, 2007) with its focus on participation; the Australian curriculum and its value of belonging (Council of Australian Governments, 2009); the Berlin curriculum respecting diversity (Preissing, 2004) or the New Zealand curriculum on ecology (Ministry of Education, 1996), among many other possible examples. These examples show that how a community constructs the notion of childhood and the child is fundamentally implicated in the practices and policies of that community.

Developing a comprehensive vision on ECEC, that includes its historical economic mission; that balances this mission with contemporary insights about the potential long-term impact on children, families, and communities; and that includes shared democratic values can make ECEC into a powerful part of family policies. However, in order to be more than lip service, in a

majority of countries, this will need increased investments in both quantity and quality.

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