



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Integrating social innovation and public policy: lessons from early childhood education and care in Barcelona, Spain

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Abstract

Social innovation has broadly been defined as citizen-led initiatives aimed at improving community welfare through collaborative relationships. However, numerous studies demonstrate that social innovation might actually create new inequalities. In this paper, we address the following questions: how might socially innovative projects influence public policy? How can we understand a policy shift leading to institutions not only giving support to social innovation projects but even promoting their own social innovation schemes? Is institution-led social innovation different from citizen-led efforts? If so, how? We provide evidence of local public policy change occurring in 0–3 education and care in Barcelona between 2015 and 2021. We explain how this happened, examining who redefined the issue and how, how the policy domain was reorganized, and how the policy subsystem was restructured. Our conclusions show how and why citizens and institutions define social innovation differently and how innovative 0–3 policy in Barcelona was adopted.

Keywords: early childhood education and care; local governance; new municipalism; public policy; social inequality; social innovation

Introduction

Social innovation and public policy have developed into distant – although not incompatible – concepts, both in research and in social and political debates. In theory, social innovation is what is reflected in citizen-led initiatives that offer new products and services that aim to satisfy social needs (BEPA 2011). These initiatives are tailored to the needs of the people who actively engage in promoting and managing them, who claim that they meet their needs more effectively and efficiently than existing institutionalized (public and private) provision models, thus

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making them alternatives to public policy. By contrast, public policy as an intervention framework is led by institutions and steers between the goals of ensuring equal rights for all residents and adapting to diversity and demands for flexibility. Thus, the ultimate goals of social innovation and public policy may actually be difficult to reconcile.

Public policy may certainly impact social innovation in different ways: public investment in social innovation could highlight the Matthew effect (Merton 1968) rather than leading to positive returns in terms of equality. Or conversely, public intervention might mold social innovation into a policy with redistributive aims, by prioritizing disadvantaged collectives' access to it. The capacity of the public sector to learn from social innovation could produce positive spillovers into traditional services, transforming them to respond to the changing needs of specific target groups or the public in general. Thus, social innovation is a win-win game only if the public sector learns from it instead of merely delegating services to it.

Moreover, the socioeconomic bias seen in socially innovative projects and in public participation in local welfare policies not only introduces tensions in the distribution of scarce public resources but also poses a challenge to policymakers (Gallego and Maestriperi 2022a). Thus, how might socially innovative projects influence public policy? How can we understand the policy shift that has led institutions not only to give support to social innovations but even to promote their own social innovation schemes? Is this institution-led social innovation different from citizen-led efforts? If so, in what way?

Recent research has highlighted these considerations in the area of early childhood education and care (ECEC) (Hufkens et al. 2019; Neimanns 2021; Sekeráková 2019; Yerkes and Javornik 2018; Mahon et al. 2012), and we use the case of social innovation in ECEC in Barcelona to explore these arguments and contribute to future comparative research. With the recent rise of “new municipalism” (Blanco and Gomà 2020, Russell 2019, Thompson 2021), citizen-led social initiatives proliferated and found a politically receptive local administration. We provide evidence of a local public policy change in 0–3 education and care between 2015 and 2021. We explain it based on Baumgartner and Jones' punctuated equilibrium model (2009): how the issue of social innovation was defined and by whom, how the policy domain was reorganized, and in consequence, how the policy subsystem was restructured. Our aim is to show how policy change occurs. This is instrumental to showing: (i) to what extent government ideology and/or public support for social innovation can trigger the renewal of public services, tailoring them more to the public's needs; (ii) how the social innovation discourses developed by citizens and by institutions differ; and (iii) the challenges socially innovative policies face in simultaneously addressing equal rights and diverse needs.

Social innovation and policy change

Social innovation and local welfare are two intertwined concepts. Social innovation refers to initiatives that promote new solutions grounded in social relationships in order to answer welfare demands made by civil society. Applying a “socially innovative” analytical framework to local welfare (Moulaert et al. 2013) implies

endorsing diverse and localized welfare initiatives that systematically engage communities in their functioning, integrating social logics that go beyond public and private provision (Brandsen and Evers 2019), and involving actors such as social entrepreneurs, third-sector organizations, and community and family networks (Häikiö et al. 2017). This approach disrupts the traditional state-led top-down provision model, and public actors go from being providers to taking on enabling roles.

The association between social innovation and local welfare is explicitly promoted by European Union policy (2010). When stances on social innovation are not particularly disruptive, the provision of capacitating services may be externalized to nonprofit organizations (O'Donnell and Thomas 2017); while more disruptive stances (Ayob et al. 2016; Kazepov et al. 2019; Moulaert et al. 2007; Moulaert 2013) may involve the direct participation of citizens in the decision-making process, contributing to the co-production of welfare services. Here, the relational and community dimension of social innovation triggers an empowerment process that is capable of restructuring prevailing social relations, going beyond the mere privatization of social services (Häikiö et al. 2017; Kazepov et al. 2019; Gallego and Maestriperi 2022a, Maestriperi and Gallego 2024)

Scholarly research indicates that public actors can learn from socially innovative practices to enhance the policy development process (Moyson et al. 2017; van Buuren and Loorbach 2009). The localized nature of most social innovation initiatives (Ewert and Evers 2014; Kazepov et al. 2019) makes each local welfare system contingent upon the context within which it is embedded: these projects align with and complement institutions by performing tasks that they are permitted to undertake or that are not fulfilled otherwise (Baglioni and Sinclair 2018). Consequently, socially innovative initiatives constitute a valuable source of information for policy learning, offering potential solutions for addressing diverse and heterogeneous needs, as well as dynamic channels for facilitating citizen participation and strengthening governance networks.

Through policy learning, social innovation becomes institutionalized (Gallego et al. 2024); in other words, it is integrated into the local public body's standard practices, thereby completing a cycle of policy innovation. Institutionalization refers to the capacity of local social innovation schemes to influence public discourse and shape policy development. The literature on social innovation observes that successful projects have the potential to be scaled up and become integrated into the conventional local welfare provision, thereby consolidating policy change (Kazepov et al. 2019). Existing studies point out two ways in which this might happen: on the one hand, by transforming public discourse and legitimizing broader and more diverse practices and solutions; on the other, by officially consolidating these welfare provision initiatives beyond the local level as legitimate alternatives (Häikiö et al. 2017).

However, empirical studies are increasingly challenging the rhetoric of social innovation. The support given to innovative welfare provision projects by municipalities over the last years has often been accompanied by public investment cuts in traditional welfare solutions. The state's reduced role, triggered both by the economic crisis and by a neoliberal understanding of collection and (re-) distribution of resources, is supposedly partially compensated for by civil society

and the private sector; but having more welfare actors does not necessarily mean more support becoming available to the whole population. Cuts have often encouraged a pro-profit turn in a sector that deals with people's fundamental needs (Maier et al. 2014; Oosterlynck et al. 2013; Pol and Ville 2009). When funding for welfare is cut, the requirements for accessing services become extremely rigid, and only people with multiple problems are covered, while many others in need are left out. Social innovation has so far not been able to solve this dilemma (Martinelli 2012).

In addition, research has shown a clear middle-class socioeconomic bias in socially innovative projects and in citizens' demands to participate in local welfare policy (Avelino et al. 2019; Arampazi 2022; Cruz et al. 2017; Eizaguirre and Parés 2019, Novy and Weinzerl 2019). This bias not only introduces competition for scarce resources but also poses a challenge to policymakers. If policy innovation models itself exclusively on social innovation schemes, there is a significant risk of developing services that will primarily serve certain segments of the population (the most participative and active), thereby neglecting the most vulnerable, socially excluded and least able strata of the population.

Social innovation holds great potential, but it can only provide a transformation in terms of redistributive welfare if the proposed solutions are scaled up and include populations outside the limited audience of innovators (Häikiö et al. 2017: 281). This is why an assessment of the impact of social innovation on socioeconomic inequalities should include its capacity to be institutionalized and become part of public policy (Martinelli 2012; Baglioni and Sinclair 2018; Gallego et al. 2024, Maestriperi and Gallego 2024). The capacity of the public sector to learn from social innovation could generate positive spillover effects for traditional services, enabling them to intercept and address the current needs of the general public or the needs of specific target groups. To be socially sustainable, social innovation can only be promoted *within* and *with* the state (Martinelli 2012) by policy change.

When policy change does occur, such as in the case of ECEC policy in Barcelona, the direction of the policy shift necessarily affects its impact. Following Baumgartner and Jones' punctuated equilibrium model (2009), when decisions concerning a particular policy domain – or range of issues – are always made by a stable policy subsystem, the potential for policy change is low. "A subsystem is a definable institutional structure responsible for policy-making, together with formal arrangements and informal relations that influence participation in the venues where decisions are made (Barzelay 2001:59)". Thus, policy change stems from an agenda-setting process through which policy subsystems are undermined. In this model, agenda-setting is a process of conflict expansion (Schattschneider 1960) that begins with policy entrepreneurs – actors of change – mobilizing other actors outside the policy subsystem. Mobilization involves challenging the image of the issue, i.e. promoting ways of defining the problem differently (Loseke 2003). It also involves reorganizing beliefs about how issues are interrelated, i.e. changing the policy domain structure by defining more areas encompassed by it. These processes lead to discrediting the existing institutional arrangements through which policy is routinely developed (Baumgartner and Jones 2009, Barzelay 2001:60). As a result, elected officials may advocate for developing a new image for an issue, reordering the policy domain affected, and restructuring the policy subsystem. In this way, a

disequilibrium is put in place, leading to a higher potential for change. This may be followed by a situation of partial equilibrium, characterized by a flow of decisions that are consistent with the new policy direction and leading to new practices becoming institutionalized.

Following this framework, we analyze a case of policy change: although changing the policy agenda of the local government was not the primary aim of the socially innovative ECEC projects that we analyzed in Barcelona, it was indeed the outcome they obtained, through a policy process led by the local council and which included them as participants. Their struggle for recognition and legitimation encountered a favorable political environment in the shape of the political movement known as new municipalism, of which Barcelona en Comú¹ is a leading member (Blanco and Gomà 2020, Russell 2019), and which bases its success on the capacity to mobilize community-based cooperative ventures in a city. Within new municipalism, emerging political alternatives offer a “politics of proximity”, attempting to transform institutions and distribute power, to promote forms of social and solidarity economy (including the commons and community), manifesting a “becoming common of the public” (Russell 2019). As recognized by Brandsen and Evers (2019), the governance style of local authorities is a fundamental element in offering recognition and stability to socially innovative practices. In addition, institutional factors such as the level of decentralization within the state structure and a historical tradition of working with the third sector imply easier transferability towards different models of public service provision (Busemeyer and Seitzl 2018). This case analysis will show that the presence of both institutional and social actors can span boundaries and help make this transfer a successful one (Brandsen and Evers 2019).

Methodology

The aim of this article is to understand how policy change occurred in the case of ECEC in Barcelona. To this end, we reconstruct the policy trajectory behind the inclusion of social innovation in ECEC policies in the municipal agenda of Barcelona City Council, basing ourselves on Baumgartner and Jones’ (2009) punctuated equilibrium model. This will help us understand: (i) to what extent government ideology and/or public support for social innovation can trigger the renewal of public services, and in what way; (ii) how institutions’ and citizens’ discourses on social innovation differ; and (iii) what challenges socially innovative policies face when simultaneously addressing equal rights and diverse demands.

The rationale for the case is well explained by the peculiarity presented by the ECEC system in Barcelona: it is one of the few big European cities whose school-based nursery system is completely under municipal public provision, both in how the services are directly managed and how the workers are employed. This model

¹Citizen platform founded in December 2014, led by the person who became mayor, Ada Colau, who until then had been leader of the Platform for people Affected by Mortgages (PAH). Barcelona en Comú is made up of the confluence of recently created citizen movements and platforms within the framework of the “indignados” movement formed in 2011 and existing left-wing parties: Iniciative for Catalonia-Greens, United Left and Alternative, Constituent Process in Catalonia, Equo and We Can.

was the result of investment by socialist (1979–2011) and by left-wing new municipalist (2015–2019) local governments. Public ECEC provision resisted neoliberal pressure for externalization, especially strong during the austerity crisis (2011–2015) when the center-right *Convergència i Unió* was in power. In the following sections, we analyze how, although the new municipalist governments preserved the hegemony of public provision, they also led a policy change to renew ECEC: they established innovative and participatory public services inspired by citizen-led social innovation and developed a differentiated discourse on institution-led social innovation.

The empirical evidence presented in this paper has been collected under a project named “Models of education for the under-threes and participation in the labor market: a study of social innovation in the city of Barcelona” (Gallego et al. 2024). This study analyzed social innovation in ECEC in Barcelona (free-education nurseries, care groups, and childminders), and contrasted it with what it eventually inspired: municipal public playgroups (*Espais Familiars* – EFCM). EFCMs are run by two or three educators (paid with public money), and parents meet in them, usually twice a week, to discuss issues related to parenting while their children play and are looked after together by the whole group. Unlike the social innovation ECEC initiatives in Barcelona (Gallego and Maestriperi 2022a, 2022b, Maestriperi and Gallego 2024), EFCMs are particularly addressed to socioeconomically vulnerable families, but in the last few years, they have become more diverse, with the increasing participation of middle-class families who opt to not school their children at such a young age.

Currently, around 650 children use EFCMs, and over 16 initiatives are distributed in an uneven way throughout the city. By 2024, Barcelona City Council plans to open 16 more of them, aiming to reach at least 1,500 children, with a more even distribution across neighborhoods. The public nursery network in the city (102) looks after around 8,500 children every year (21% of the under-threes in the city), and a similar number of places are offered by the network of registered private nurseries (195). Some EFCMs are housed in public nurseries outside normal opening hours. The number of children taken care of in socially innovative projects – such as childminders, care groups, and free-education nurseries – is rather more difficult to determine, given that the current regional regulations do not officially acknowledge their existence. In the 2021–2022 school year, there were 29 childminders and 19 other projects, including care groups and free-education nurseries, registered with the main associations that represent socially innovative programs in Barcelona. However, there may well be others that operate that do not belong to the associations; it is impossible to determine how many there are since there is currently no register of them in the city.

Although the fieldwork for the above-mentioned project is far more wide-reaching, and includes interviews with educators and mothers, as well as a survey fielded to women in Barcelona who have children under three (Gallego et al. 2024), in the current article, we analyze 14 interviews with key informants held between 2019 and 2021. These were semi-structured interviews that lasted between 30 and 50 minutes. The guide for each interview was tailored to the specific key informant, but all interviews covered the relationship between social innovation schemes and the school-based system (public and private nurseries), as well as public playgroups and

their role in tackling families' diverse needs. The key informants include the following: representatives from the main association of socially innovative projects in Barcelona (interviewed in 2019 and 2021), representatives of educators in public family playgroups (2019), council officials responsible for ECEC (2021), decision-makers and policymakers for childcare policy in the last two council mandates under Barcelona en Comú (2021), and representatives from private and public childcare associations (2021). The aim of the interview was to reconstruct the political process behind the change that occurred with the introduction of the *Espais Familiars*. We thus interviewed all the actors that played a part in the process: policymakers, public employees, and representatives of the main civil society stakeholders.

We conducted a thematic analysis (Xu and Zammit 2020) to highlight the most important issues emerging from the political process behind the adoption of the *Espais Familiars* in Barcelona during the two mandates of the Barcelona en Comú mayor, Ada Colau. This approach to the analysis of qualitative data is fully inscribed in an inductive methodological approach.

The policy trajectory of early childhood education and care in Barcelona: what might be the role of social innovation?²

Institutionalization of early childhood education and care (2000–2015) and the emergence of social innovation

Until recently, citizen-led social innovation in ECEC did not even appear in the policy agenda of Barcelona City Council. Since the early 2000s, this policy has been marked by the construction of a network of municipal public nurseries (*escoles bressol*), of which there are currently 102 (Ajuntament de Barcelona 2021). This network was launched under the first mandates of the Partit dels Socialistes de Catalunya (PSC) after the end of Franco's dictatorship, and grew rapidly during the term between 2007 and 2011, when the PSC had already been running the City Council for over forty years. This growth was due, on the one hand, to the PSC's term in Barcelona between 2007 and 2011 coinciding with its sister party, the Partido Socialista Obrero Español, being in power in Spain and providing an economic injection for ECEC services from European funds.³ On the other hand, this mandate also coincided with a left-wing coalition in the regional government of Catalonia, formed by the PSC, Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya and Iniciativa per Catalunya (IC), which also provided ECEC funding to local governments.

²In this section, information has been mostly driven by the interviews mentioned in the "Methodology" section. Thus, information reported has been provided by key informants. For a matter of space, we have omitted the extracts of the interviews.

³In contrast to 3–6 education, whose access is universal and free in Spain since 2002, 0–3 ECEC is not. Regulation and funding competencies are shared by central, regional, and municipal government levels, with the latter being responsible for arranging and managing provision. ECEC is characterized by fragmentation, diversity and weakness. Since the mid-2010, several regions and municipalities have introduced sliding-scale pricing systems (or free- access in some cases) either for under-threes or only for two-year-olds, for public providers and, in some cases for private providers. On average, coverage reaches 36% of under-threes (18% attending public providers and 18% private ones, which are regulated but far more expensive). Social innovation coverage is very low, with non-available data on attendance.

However, during the subsequent (2011–2015) mandate in Barcelona City Council (led by the center-right Catalan nationalist coalition – *Convergència i Unió* – CiU), the construction of public *escoles bressol* according to the previous model was halted, and three nurseries were built under a private management model.

The *escola bressol* model is highly respected, both by families from all manner of social backgrounds and by education professionals: coverage of demand ranged from 52% to 56% from 2011 to 2019, and reached 64% in 2020 due to a decrease in demand. The model is based on the direct public provision of the service, with homogeneous standards in all aspects of management, operations, and quality. Despite efforts to expand it, it currently serves only 21% of under-threes in Barcelona (in 102 nurseries), while another 24% attend private nurseries (in 195 nurseries); the rest are either not in education and are taken care of within family networks, or attend non-institutionalized forms of childcare services, in socially innovative projects similar to those that exist in other countries (Ajuntament de Barcelona 2021). Despite the good reputation enjoyed by the *escola bressol*, sector professionals also point out its weak points, such as high caregiver–child ratios, cuts to services, job insecurity in recent years and the consequent stress caused to workers, and the need to review and update some pedagogical projects.

In parallel to this municipal ECEC policy, the first socially innovative ECEC projects began to emerge in Barcelona in the early 2000s, started by groups of families. These projects have presented themselves as alternatives to institutionalized public and private options (Gallego and Maestriperi 2022a, 2022b). In them, parents find features that are lacking in the institutionalized options: the constant involvement of parents – in most cases, mothers – in the projects on a daily basis means a wider-reaching parenting experience; non-school environments with flexible adaptation processes; innovative pedagogical projects based on ideas from Pikler, Montessori, Waldorf, and others; and a network of community support (from other families, educators, etc.) for parenting.

Some families choose these projects as their first option; others, because they are not able to access public nurseries (unfulfilled demand for them has oscillated between 35% and 50%), eventually choosing these innovative options whose prices were similar to private nursery places.⁴ Consequently, when these socially innovative childcare projects were launched, they were already skewed to medium and medium-to-high socioeconomic profiles. Plus, only mothers with the possibility of adapting their working lives and logistics to these conditions could even consider this option, as the opening times of these projects are very limited compared to school-like private options. They were soon organized into nonprofit associations: in 2005, several free-education nurseries and care groups created a grassroots network, and in 2009 the Xell platform (Xarxa d'Educació Lliure – Network of Free Education) was founded to represent them; in 2013, Llars de Criança (Parenting Homes) was formed to represent childminders, followed in 2017 by the nonprofit Societat Cooperativa de Mares de Dia (Cooperative Society of Childminders).

⁴Prices of both regulated private providers and citizen-led social innovation initiatives are similar, and range from 300 to 600 euros a month (Gallego and Maestriperi 2022b) which represents between 15% and 21% of the gross average salary in Barcelona in 2022 (2.820 euros) (Ajuntament de Barcelona 2024).

Demands have been made through these associations for the following: more recognition of the schemes' educational and care work; the need for regulation in order to end job insecurity for professionals, to guarantee the safety of families, children and workers, and to be able to receive public funds to support their work; and respect for the different types of projects, which do not fit the current regulations for school-based activities in this sector. The demands have expressed all sorts of different nuances and viewpoints; for example, Xell and Llars de Criança have identified more with an approach based on associations and self-employed work, and Cooperativa de Mares de Dia with nonprofit cooperativism. An added complication is that the project leaders tend to change frequently, either because their involvement fills a short, intense period of their working lives, or because pressures caused by being reported for unregulated working practices lead them to close the projects.

These projects were started and were later expanded, in the absence of a regulatory framework that linked them to ECEC, i.e. they were not included in the City Council's early years policy. Regulation in educational matters is the responsibility of the Catalan regional government, which is against regulating these projects as they are not sufficiently large to be considered schools (mostly because they have small multi-year groups instead of having three groups by age). Although the City Council can support associative projects by giving them limited and intermittent funding as solidarity economy initiatives, it cannot do it on a regular basis if the activities carried out are not acknowledged as school activities. The lack of recognition and institutional support has meant that the possible benefits derived from these socially innovative projects have mainly been personal benefits, such as the empowerment of mothers and families who participated in them to satisfy their demands and needs. But it has also led to costs at the personal level: the mothers have suffered a negative impact on their working lives and on their economic independence; the educators have precarious contracts and working conditions; and the lack of financial support available puts the projects' economic viability at risk, making them forever provisional (Gallego and Maestripieri 2022a).

The social innovation issue: its emergence and promotion (2015–2019)

With the arrival of the recently created left-wing political formation Barcelona en Comú to Barcelona City Council in June 2015 and its renewed mandate from 2019 to 2023, the political discourse of new municipalism (Blanco and Gomà 2020, Russell 2019, Thompson 2021) permeated politics, as reflected in their electoral program, further discourse, and municipal policies once in office. The new government was interested in initiatives such as the previously mentioned social innovation childcare projects: these were aligned with their ideology, one that was based on favoring grassroots initiatives and citizen participation. A Social Rights Office was created, bringing together the following departments: Social Services, Social Action and Inclusion, Housing (previously in Urban Planning), Health (for the first time in this area), and Education (which had been left out of this area for years). The Commissioner of Education appointed by Mayor Ada Colau, Miquel Àngel Essomba, began by addressing the most pressing issues. He responded to demands that investment in the *escoles bressol* network should be reinstated and that

the three nurseries the previous government had started to outsource should be brought back into the public network.

In early 2016, the City Council began to unfold its political project for ECEC along three fronts: by introducing a sliding-scale public pricing system based on family income; by building more *escoles bressol* to increase the number of public places; and by promoting innovation in the educational process. A participatory process called “*Impulsem el 0–3*” (A Push for 0–3) was organized with the entire educational community, in particular the *escoles bressol* educators. Its work was multifaceted, and included reinforcing the *escola bressol* model and adapting it to tackle diverse needs and inequalities, within the framework of the *Pla de Barris* (Neighbourhoods Plan).⁵ In addition, the plan included more diversification; for example, it increased the number of family playgroups (5 until then) promoted by some City Council Districts and the Municipal Institute of Education (IMEB) and the Municipal Institute of Social Services (IMSS) in previous mandates. This process culminated in a conference held in May 2017 and the publication of the *Impulsem 0–3* plan.

Meanwhile, however, no specific line of action was defined for non-institutionalized, citizen-led social innovations. At the beginning of the mandate, associations representing citizen-led social innovation schemes laid out their demands for funding. The Education Commissioner held a conference in February 2016 to hear and debate the plethora of views and concerns regarding ECEC. The conference participants included people representing *escoles bressol* educators and others representing childminders, care groups and free-education nurseries. A study was also presented that had been commissioned six months earlier from an academic research group. This 2015 study covered 35 groups led by childminders and 71 care groups in the city, and also covered regulated services: 97 *escoles bressol*, 31 partly publicly funded nurseries and 156 private nurseries (internal document commissioned by the IMEB).

The conference’s final report included various different positions on ECEC: *escoles bressol* as the only public model; private nurseries becoming subject to more regulation;⁶ and both types of providers agreeing not to recognize the third option, i.e. the socially innovative projects (childminders, care groups, and free-education nurseries) as education and care services. The reason given for this was that they were actually de facto nurseries that were operating outside the regional ECEC regulations (creating unfair competition for regulated private providers), and were employing staff who did not have the credentials required by the current educational law, thus potentially leading to safety risks for children. Even so, the report laid out a basis for a vision that potentially included all the services.

Subsequently, Barcelona City Council’s Education Commissions created a working group that included representatives from the education, social economy, security, family policy, and equality sectors. As a result, regulatory proposals were drawn up that would guarantee and respect social projects, but without undermining the quintessentially public nature of education for the under-threes

⁵The Pla de Barris offers funds and an institutional framework to different local initiatives aimed at improving the different neighbourhoods, especially more disadvantaged ones.

⁶The Catalan Association of Nurseries and the Association of Nurseries of Catalonia represent most regulated private providers.

that Barcelona en Comú wanted to establish. The goal was to recognize these groups in the associative sphere – not the educational one – and to establish a way for these groups to gradually become part of the public ownership structures of the City Council.

In this way, a balance was sought in order to achieve an agreement within the political organization of Barcelona en Comú outside the City Council. This brought together people representing all the different currents of thought expressed at the February 2016 conference. The internal debate led to the various sides doubling down on their positions, highlighting the controversial nature of a very politically sensitive issue within the Barcelona en Comú organization. With the municipal elections approaching, it was chosen not to make the report public, and efforts were redirected towards the *Impulsem el 0–3* plan.

Institution-led social innovation: discourse-building and decision-making (2019–2021)

In the May 2019 local elections, Barcelona en Comú was re-elected to head the municipal government, and the Mayor, Ada Colau, appointed a new Education Commissioner, Maria Truñó. She was the widely respected former director of the Childhood and Adolescence Institute, a research institute and think tank promoted by the municipal government. She had also been the rapporteur at the February 2016 conference. The municipal action plan included the Commissioner of Education being given the political mandate to continue the efforts that had begun with *Impulsem el 0–3*. Despite the various stakeholders' different stances, she understood there was general agreement on the council's commitment to public provision, as well as on expanding 0–3 services through diversification, as long as it was led by the public sector. Thus, she continued the *Impulsem el 0–3* strategy and immediately made it her first priority to win approval for an ECEC plan, later dubbed the “Pla per a l'educació i la criança de la petita infància” (Ajuntament de Barcelona 2021). This plan would involve the Commissioner generating synergies within the City Council, bringing together the Department of Health, Aging and Care, Culture, the Department of Education, Science and Community (to which the Commissioner for Education belongs), the Social Rights Area, and Barcelona Activa (the municipal public local development company). This transversality reflected a shared interest in the social dimension of the policies: education and care policies for the under-threes thus became “socio-educational”.

At the same time, recommendations were also sought from external experts. These included people who had analyzed these issues (*escoles bressol* educators), people with solid track records in the educational sector (Associació Rosa Sensat, Save the Children), people who had relevant responsibilities in government, representatives of innovative projects (Xell – not so much because of their pedagogical philosophy but as coordinators of family playgroups), Llars de Criança (representing childminders), and representatives from care groups (the Association of Family Playgroup Professionals etc.)

In just under two years, the City Council drew up a complex proposal that tried to include the different existing discourses on ECEC in Barcelona. As stated in the plan, the *escoles bressol* model continued to be prioritized, and building new public nursery

schools was planned (although in the end, only three new schools were actually built during that mandate); the social pricing system and increased funding would continue to be a priority, but the plan also emphasized diversifying options as a way of achieving universal access to ECEC. On the one hand, all the resources, projects, and assets operating in the city were identified and recognized, and public-private collaboration was contemplated through different mechanisms (subsidizing families who were unable to access the public system so that they could use private nurseries, giving support to non-institutionalized social innovation projects in the form of subsidies or leasing them spaces, etc.) But only these schemes' associative dimension was recognized, not their educational or care services. On the other hand, this discourse recognized and attempted to articulate a phenomenon that had been promoted by the City Council since the previous legislature: the creation of innovative projects, such as family playgroups promoted by the IMEB, by some Districts (decentralized City Council structures), and by the IMSS. These new projects shared some features with non-institutionalized, citizen-led social innovation projects – in particular, the involvement of families in care outside the home. The difference was that when they were offered by the public sector they could be used by underprivileged families (because of their low prices) and could be articulated within a network of public social services offering socio-educational, health, and social integration support. Thus, the plan envisioned ECEC services that not only focused on the child, or on the family, but also on the community; it contemplated creating key facilities for the community (12 new family playgroups were promoted in this second mandate), and the creation of local service networks in which ECEC was coordinated with health services, social services, educational services, etc.

In short, the discourse maintained the goal of universal care for the under-threes under the umbrella of the public system but also responded to the diverse needs and demands of families and children. As well as acknowledging the budgetary impossibility of making the *escoles bressol* model universal, it sought to find community responses to the collective problem of how to care for very young children within the framework of the public system.

However, the target of universal public nursery care came up hard against the barrier of budgetary limitations. Because of this, both at the level of discourse and in order to regulate access to new spaces and resources, it was decided to prioritize vulnerable families that were at the greatest risk of social exclusion (Ajuntament de Barcelona 2021). However, this approach did not contemplate the innovative social projects started by families that were not in this situation; they felt that their problems were not being addressed. These included the workers' employment insecurity and the shaky legal standing of their projects, not included in the official ECEC options in the city; in addition, the fact that the general public was unfamiliar with these projects led to a lack of trust preventing them from collaborating with the public sector.

Interpreting the policy shift in education and care for the under-threes in Barcelona: social innovation and policy learning

The approval of the ECEC Plan in April 2021 placed social innovation in local welfare at the epicenter of a potential shift in ECEC policy in Barcelona. Following

Baumgartner and Jones (2009), a situation of imbalance can lead to policy change, with the consequent institutionalization of a partial equilibrium situation in which a flow of decisions marks a new policy direction.

As shown by the trajectory of the ECEC issue, the policy subsystem underwent a deep restructuring process throughout the mandates of Barcelona en Comú, which headed the City Council from 2015 to 2023.⁷ This restructuring has not resulted in the formal reorganization of the institutional structure responsible for policy making, but instead in a reconfiguration of the informal relations that influence participation in decision-making bodies. In the previous PSC mandates, when the direct provision *escoles bressol* model was the principal policy that drove ECEC, the Council's Education Department had been the formal policy maker, and the IMEB had been its main policy development unit within the administrative structure of Barcelona City Council. This policy subsystem included the informal participation of education professionals, mainly from the *escoles bressol*.

The change in governing party after the 2015 local elections from PSC to Barcelona en Comú, and particularly Barcelona en Comú's second mandate beginning in 2019, led to a reorganization of the institutional arrangements through which ECEC policy was established. The Education Commissioner opened up the policy subsystem to include other political and administrative units of the City Council, such as the Social Rights Area, the Department of Health, Aging and Care, the Department of Culture, Education, Science and Community (to which the Education Commission belongs), the Childhood and Adolescence Institute (IIAB), the City Council Districts, and Barcelona Activa. Moreover, in addition to *escola bressol* professionals, external social actors were consulted: associations representing non-institutionalized socially innovative ECEC projects, academic experts, etc.

In Baumgartner and Jones's model (2009), the restructuring of a policy subsystem that eventually changes the content of decisions is the result of an agenda-setting process that begins with actors for change mobilizing other actors who are outside the existing policy subsystem. Citizens who had been participating since 2000 in socially innovative ECEC projects in Barcelona did not start to organize and fight for their alternative visions of ECEC until almost a decade later. Their projects continued to grow in number as a result of more families demanding ECEC models that were different from institutionalized ones, but they remained outside the policy subsystem. When Barcelona en Comú took power in Barcelona City Council, the city became a more favorable environment for grassroots initiatives and citizen participation. The new municipalist political program of the council was explicitly committed to reinforcing and diversifying ECEC, aiming to address increasingly complex and diverse needs from an equity perspective. This led to a creative tension that favored the public administration listening to the public's needs, and a space opened up for collectives who wanted to engage in active participation to exercise their agency at the local level.

In the case analyzed here, the main actor of change was a pivotal part of the extant policy subsystem itself: the Education Commissioner. In the first legislature, this figure decided to open a debate on ECEC with internal and external actors after

⁷In May 2023, local elections brought to office a new government led by the PSC, but the resulting government is in minority and no clear policy for the 0–3 education has been promoted so far.

receiving a report on ECEC written by academics that endorsed existing alternative projects, including ones in the city of Barcelona itself.⁸ The issue aroused intense debate and political interest within the political organization of the party in power; some believed fervently in the public *escola bressol* model, and others defended a vision that was open to redefining this public service from a diversity and community perspective. At this point, the Commissioner directed ECEC policy efforts towards the *Impulsem 0–3* (A Push for 0–3) program, and the debate continued.

However, an important point on which the City Council officials and professionals from both public and private nursery schools agreed was the legal limbo in which the innovative non-institutionalized ECEC initiatives found themselves. This proved to be the main stumbling block that prevented collaboration between the City Council and the social groups; thus, efforts were redirected to the more clearly defined *Impulsem 0–3* plan. In the second legislature, the new Commissioner built on the negotiations of the previous period (in which she had also participated as an expert with close links to Barcelona en Comú) and followed the government's mandate to open the policy subsystem up to effectively include new actors within the City Council itself. Contacts with external actors were soon intensified, including both institutionalized ECEC services (public and private) as well as non-institutionalized or alternative services.

According to Baumgartner and Jones's (2009) model, in this agenda-setting process, mobilization efforts involve challenging the very image of an issue, that is, promoting a definition of the problem that is different from the prevailing one (Loseke 2003). In the case of Barcelona, the image of 0–3 pre-school services had traditionally revolved around two elements: on the one hand, the work-life balance dimension, and on the other, the educational dimension, both combined with the care element. The solution that was proposed to help solve this definition of the issue was the expansion of the *escoles bressol* model.

This image of the issue was challenged by two different factors. Firstly, the emergence and gradual growth of alternative ECEC models in Barcelona went hand in hand with a new discourse about the 0–3 stage, sometimes explicitly associated with the term “social innovation”. Care groups, free-education nurseries, and childminders, despite in some cases recalling ideas from past decades, offered novel responses to new demands: the involvement of families in their children's care outside the home, flexibility regarding children's and parents' diverse needs, community support, etc. These were demands that the *bressol* model did not meet. In turn, the families that made these demands had high socioeconomic status. Specific responses to these new demands had been provided by the Districts of the City Council itself, the IMEB and, to a lesser extent, the IMSS, in the form of family playgroup spaces. Until 2003, there were only three municipal family playgroup spaces (IMEB); the IMSS created a fourth one in 2009, and then a fifth in 2011. However, during Barcelona en Comú's 2015–2019 mandate, seven more were created (three by the IMEB and four by various Districts), and from 2019 to early 2021, four more were created by the council, making a total of 16 (Institut Infància i Adolescència, 2017, Ajuntament de Barcelona 2021).

⁸Internal report commissioned by IMEB.

In addition, with Barcelona en Comú in the local government, not only was there a redefinition of the philosophy behind the 0–3 ECEC stage, but also a reorganization of beliefs about the interrelatedness of the issues involved, i.e. the policy domain structure was transformed by defining more areas that it encompassed. The Education Commissioner opted for framing the challenges regarding 0–3 ECEC as not about education or work-life balance; instead, the challenge was seen as one of making access to 0–3 care a universal right, with the service being understood as a comprehensive, multidimensional service for young children and families. The *escola bressol* model clearly cannot cover this alone, and although it is still promoted, complementary models have been put forward. As well as coordinating health, educational, and social services within local networks for early childhood care, all the projects in this area that have been started by civil society should be recognized and incorporated. The objective is both to reach people who do not use ECEC services, especially underprivileged families, and also to be able to adapt to the diverse needs and demands of the community. Therefore, what is sought is equity within diversity: a redefinition of the 0–3 stage as not only an educational service but also as a socio-educational, nurturing, and care service. With this in mind, family playgroup spaces have become a flagship instrument.

Based on all this, the term “socially innovative” has been the one that best frames the new ECEC policy. Using this framework, the discourse has reflected a will to integrate socially innovative projects started by civil society groups into municipal ECEC policy, as long as these initiatives have a community-based vocation and not one that merely meets the needs of the people involved in each project. The goal is to allow the benefits they offer to reach the whole community. The credibility of this message is reinforced by the wish expressed by the City Council to work to fill the legal void in which these projects find themselves. Regulating the services is the competence of the Catalan Government and, to date, no new laws have been passed in this sphere: a decree on childminders was drawn up, but processing it was halted by the events related to the independence referendum that took place on 1 October 2017 in Catalonia.

However, constructed in this way, this discourse is in tension with citizen-led socially innovative projects. For the professionals and families that participate in them, having their projects officially recognized would make them visible ECEC options for everyone, expanding families’ choices. And integrating them into the network of ECEC options would include them in mechanisms such as offering subsidized places so that underprivileged families could also choose to participate in them. According to representatives of the citizen-led projects, the City Council’s initiatives, which are primarily aimed at families at risk of social exclusion, such as babysitting services or family spaces, are missing out on an excellent opportunity to take advantage of the know-how and social capital of citizen-led social innovation projects. Not being recognized also condemns many of these projects to suffering a precarious and sometimes all too brief existence.

Conclusions

Social innovation and its contribution to local welfare have been conceptualized and understood, both by its promoters and by researchers, as an alternative to public

policy –namely, as an alternative to the intervention of the institutions. Social innovation initiatives are born of mobilization and participation processes and lead to improvements in social relations, collective empowerment, and structures of governance. However, promoting these policies or not is a political choice. In other words, the regulatory “hands-off” attitude regarding some social issues involves a political decision that has social and economic consequences. In this paper, we have shown that the absence of a policy framework that includes social innovation may have a wide range of repercussions. On the one hand, social inequalities may increase because the outcomes of social innovation will benefit only the people who can access the projects and participate in them; these people are generally more educated and active than the average citizen. On the other hand, citizen-led initiatives may find it difficult to survive, and thus, civil society as a whole might be weakened. In addition, this hinders lesson-drawing and policy-learning outcomes that could improve public services. Thus, the challenge for public policy is how to resolve the conflict over scarce resources and how to make social innovation and diversity needs compatible with equity and redistribution.

This case study about social innovation in ECEC in Barcelona has shown how the public and the City Council have developed two different discourses about social innovation. People who are actively engaged in promoting and managing socially innovative ECEC projects define them as alternatives to institutionalized models of service provision (both public and private). Their distinctive approach to care and education for the under-threes and their governance features adapt to their perceived needs and align with their values. Thus, they claim a right to freely choose an education and care model for their children, a model for which they demand recognition and institutional support. In turn, the local council has engaged in a policy-making process aimed at promoting institution-led social innovation in ECEC. For the new municipalist left-wing party that was in office from 2015 to 2023, social innovation means aiming to provide universal access to this service – a new policy objective – with a special focus on underprivileged families. According to their discourse, this aim can only be achieved through the diversification of the options on offer; in fact, some new public models, such as *espais familiars*, include features that resemble pre-existing citizen-led social innovation projects. Admittedly, the diversification of the options on offer responds both to the need to adapt to diverse demands and to the fact that the direct provision model is not economically viable. The conflict over scarce resources has, so far, led the authorities to prioritize low-income families’ access to these new services – similarly to the direct provision model. Recognition of citizen-led social innovative projects is positively viewed, but it is still to be implemented.

With the new municipalism-led local council, the image of the social innovation issue and of ECEC itself was redefined by the insider actors themselves. This discourse-building effort was led by political appointees who changed the policy subsystem – i.e. the network of institutional actors responsible for policy-making – together with formal arrangements and informal relations that influenced participation in decision-making. Thus, the reconfiguration of the policy subsystem led to a change in the prevailing image of social innovation and ECEC issues. The new policy-led image of social innovation and ECEC involved a change in the policy domain structure, i.e. a reorganization of beliefs about the interrelatedness of issue,

brought about by defining more areas encompassed by the very meaning of social innovation and ECEC. Along these lines, new issues were seen as relevant for 0-3 education and care, including universal access, the integration of underprivileged families, gender equality, and meeting a diversity of needs and demands. As a result of this process, new developments began to take place. Whether they will be consolidated is a matter to be analyzed empirically in the future, since local elections in May 2023 led to a different party gaining office (PSC). Moreover, as we have seen, ECEC policy is subject to multilevel governance dynamics, and public and private providers share the view that social innovative projects should redefine themselves into regulated, institution-like providers (following the rules that they themselves follow), a view that the innovative schemes do not share since they consider themselves a different type of ECEC service.

Research has shown the tension between a public regulation of socially innovative projects (that may negatively affect their autonomy to innovate) and the aim of increasing policy accountability (O'Donnell and Thomas 2017; Gallego et al. 2024). This is particularly relevant in contexts of underdeveloped public services, such as ECEC, where the integration of piecemeal cases of tailored, capacitating services into wider, articulated welfare programs is proving challenging.

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