

Presentation. Who Benefits from childcare expansion? Equal opportunities, social investment and social innovation in early years education and care

Margarita León
Lara Maestripieri

Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona. Departament de Ciència Política i de Dret Públic
IGOP

margarita.leon@uab.cat; lara.maestripieri@uab.cat



Recommended citation: LEÓN, Margarita and MAESTRIPIERI, Lara (2022). "Presentation. Who Benefits from childcare expansion? Equal opportunities, social investment and social innovation in early years education and care ". *Papers*, 107 (3), e3124. <https://doi.org/10.5565/rev/papers.3124>

Abstract

The aim of this special issue is to investigate inequality in access to Early Childhood Education and Care services (ECEC) by looking at the extent to which access rules, cost of service and type of provision constitute a barrier for certain socio-economic groups. The monograph engages with discussions on the role of policies addressing the needs of children and the future of welfare states from a Social Investment paradigm. All 8 contributions to this Special Issue were initially presented at the panel on Childcare and Equal Opportunities that we organised in the 8th Congress of the Spanish Social Policy Network (ESPAnet-Spain). The articles present empirical evidence from two research projects: *Investing in children: Politics, Policies and Outcomes*, financed by the Spanish Ministry of Science (CSO2017-88906-R) coordinated by Margarita León; and *Models of early years education and care and labour market participation: a study of social innovation in the city of Barcelona* financed by RecerCaixa and coordinated by Raquel Gallego and Sheila González.

Keywords: Early Childhood Education and Care; Equality; Social Investment; Social Innovation; Local welfare; social policies

Resumen. *Presentación. ¿Quién gana en la expansión de los servicios de cuidado infantil? Igualdad de oportunidades, inversión social e innovación social en las políticas de atención a la temprana infancia.*

El objetivo del presente monográfico es investigar la desigualdad en el acceso a los servicios de educación y atención a la primera infancia, indagando en qué medida los costes, el tipo de servicios y su diferente organización en España pueden constituir una barrera para determinados perfiles socioeconómicos. Los diferentes artículos integran y desarrollan las discusiones teóricas sobre el papel de las políticas y servicios dirigidos a las necesidades de la infancia y el futuro de los estados de bienestar, desde el paradigma de la inversión social. Los ocho artículos fueron inicialmente presentados en el panel sobre Infancia e Igualdad de Oportunidades que organizamos en el VIII Congreso de la Red Española de Política Social (REPS, Espanet-Spain). Los artículos presentan evidencia empírica de dos proyectos de investigación: *Investing in children: politics, policies and outcomes*, financiado por el Ministerio de Ciencia, Innovación y Universidades (CSO2017-88906-R) y coordinado por Margarita León; y *Models of early years education and care and labour market participation: a study of social innovation in the city of Barcelona*, financiado por RecerCaixa y coordinado por Raquel Gallego y Sheila González.

Palabras clave: cuidado y educación en la primera infancia; igualdad; inversión social; innovación social; servicios locales de bienestar; políticas sociales

Summary

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Winners and losers in the expansion of childcare. Equal opportunities, social investment and social innovation in early years education and care

In early March 2021 we put together a panel on Childcare and Equal Opportunities at the 8th Congress of the Spanish Social Policy Network (ESPANet-Spain). The congress took place in Bilbao but our two sessions were remote, as so often happened that year. The purpose was to put together the preliminary findings from two research projects: *Investing in children: Politics, Policies and Outcomes*, financed by the Spanish Ministry of Science (CSO2017-88906-R) coordinated by Margarita León; and *Models of early years education and care and labour market participation: a study of social innovation in the city of Barcelona* financed by RecerCaixa and coordinated by Raquel Gallego and Sheila González. The majority of the contributions to this special issue are fruit of these two research projects. The two teams, both based at the Universitat Autònoma of Barcelona's Institute of Government and Public Policies, joined efforts to produce a survey on access to childcare services and preferences for different forms of childcare provision. It also aimed to investigate the relationship between the participation of women in the labour force and the use of childcare. Given the restrictions caused by the COVID-19 pan-

demographic, the survey was eventually carried out online, and received a total of 1,219 responses from mothers with children born between 2017 and 2020, living in the metropolitan area of Barcelona. Several of the papers published in this monograph have used this survey as their primary source of data.

Why is a monograph on childcare and early years education relevant? Early childhood education and care (ECEC from now on) has expanded across the globe over the last two decades. It is right at the centre of attempts to recalibrate welfare states by shifting the emphasis from passive *ex-post* to active *ex-ante* social policy. In most European countries, expansion of ECEC is part and parcel of a relatively new activation dimension of social policies that partially replace more traditional welfare approaches to children and family support through tax breaks or direct benefits. In fact, the fast pace at which ECEC enrolment has grown in many countries over the last two decades contrasts with the stagnation of direct transfers to families with children (Euroship)¹. International organisations have also pushed for this paradigm shift. For instance, since the early 1990s the European Commission has been urging member states to increase ECEC spending and coverage, as well as pushing them to reorient parental leave and tax relief policies that discourage the employment of mothers.

Investing in ECEC is important for three main reasons. Firstly, good-quality affordable ECEC is a pre-condition for the participation of women in the labour market. Combined with other policies (mostly leave schemes and transfers) pre-school services alleviate the conflict between employment and forming families which was the main reason why mothers of young children used to either temporarily or permanently give up their jobs in the past. Secondly, ECEC is today also seen as a good pro-natalist policy in the sense that empirical evidence suggests that welfare states that support childbearing and work-life balance generally have higher fertility rates than welfare states that do not. Thirdly, ECEC is seen as a strong ‘equaliser’, offering children from different ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds a fairer chance later on in life. In a context of widening social inequalities, policies addressing the needs of young children might compensate for unequal conditions at birth. ECEC can potentially compensate for the lack of resources suffered by disadvantaged children’s families, which, as we now know, has a negative impact on children’s cognitive and non-cognitive development and educational achievement later on in life (Heckman, Pinto, and Savelyev 2013). The relevance of all these challenges has thus pushed many national and subnational governments to rethink welfare protection for children and families, and to increase what in the past were extremely low budgets for these services. While there is wide cross-national and cross-regional dispersion in the type of policies that are put in place, as well as in how generous they are, the expansion of pre-schooling is certainly a common trend, even if it adopts different terminologies. International organisations –from the OECD to the European Commission– have also been urging countries to provide more attention and resources to policies that address the needs of children and families (León 2017).

1. <https://euroship-research.eu>

However, the benefits of expanding ECEC cannot be taken for granted. This kind of expansion faces some important dilemmas, some of which this monograph explores.

The first dilemma relates to the need to reconcile two set of goals simultaneously. These goals can complement each other, but might potentially also lead to conflicting policy designs, especially in contexts where demand clearly outweighs supply. On the one hand, childcare services that are put in place to facilitate and protect the employment of mothers will presumably give preference to children in dual earner households. This often results in a strong social bias in favour of middle-class families, as we will later see. On the other hand, childcare services that aim to reduce or alleviate the impact of child poverty need to establish special entry requirements that give priority to specific vulnerable groups. Furthermore, when families need to pay for these services, as is often the case, means testing ensures a certain redistributive capacity.

The second dilemma is related to the previous one, and refers to the distributional impact of childcare services. The issue of who benefits from them has become an essential question that a number of recent empirical studies try to address. In a context of growing income inequality, it is becoming increasingly clear that policies that are *a priori* universalist (with no access restrictions) can actually be regressive because they mainly benefit social groups that are in advantageous positions. This is becoming true for a growing number of social policies, but it is especially the case of ECEC. Use of ECEC is segmented across income, occupational and education categories. As a result, far fewer children from lower socioeconomic backgrounds use them, showing that enrolment is strongly dependent on household income (Abrassart and Bonoli, 2015). In the United Kingdom, for instance, more than double the richest households use ECEC compared to the poorest (Ibáñez et al., 2021). Overall, this raises the question of how many children who would benefit most from participating in ECEC actually access the services.

The third dilemma relates to the quality and type of provision. It is, to begin with, not possible to refer to ECEC as part of a Social Investment strategy if the actual quality of the provision is not taken into account. This means adhering to more standardised quality criteria such as ratios and the working conditions of the staff. Ratios are relevant across all compulsory schooling, but they are even more crucial when referring to infants. Whether children of a very young age access institutionalised care with a ratio of one adult per 3-5 children or a ratio of one adult per 10-15 children has enormous implications for the quality of the attention given. There are other less tangible elements that are also equally relevant for the quality of ECEC, such as ones that have to do with processes: the type of interactions that take place between families and the school, the availability of free play time, spaces to rest and sleep, creativity, etc.

The case study

All the articles in this monograph have Spain as their unit of analysis from a multilevel (state, regional and municipal) perspective. The study of recent

Table 1. Children under three in formal childcare (%) and public spending on ECEC

	Children aged less than 3 years in formal childcare (%)			Public spending on ECEC (0-6), % GDP		
	2005	2008	2019	2000	2010	2019
EU 28		28.0	35.5			
Estonia	12.0	17.0	31.8	0.12	0.34	0.76
Germany	16.0	19.0	31.3	0.33	0.46	0.60
Hungary	7.0	7.0	16.9	0.59	0.65	0.73
Italy	25.0	28.0	26.3	0.48	0.52	0.56
Norway	33.0	37.0	50.1	0.69	1.21	1.33
Spain	37.0	38.0	57.4	0.43	0.54	0.50
U.K	29.0	35.0	38.6 *	0.64	0.77	0.65

Source: Ibáñez et al. 2021, p. 14

ECEC developments in Spain is interesting because it appears to be a very dynamic policy field in the country. Early Years Education in Spain is divided in two main levels: a first and second cycle. The latter consists of three full years of non-compulsory universal full time pre-school education. In the early 1990s it became integrated within the national education system and the coverage rate is practically 100%. Every child has the right to be offered a place in a public pre-school the year they turn three. This is free of charge and the characteristics of the provision are equivalent to those of elementary education, including the qualifications and working conditions of teachers and staff. Because of this, these three years of pre-school play an important role in terms of equal opportunities of children from different family backgrounds. By contrast, the first cycle of Early Years Education has evolved in a radically different way. There is a much weaker commitment on the part of the state to guarantee public provision, and its evolution is strongly constrained by the three dilemmas explained above. All the articles in this monograph focus on this first cycle, which for the sake of simplicity we refer to as ECEC.

Despite its rather timid beginnings, the expansion of ECEC over the last two decades in Spain has been quite spectacular. As the table below shows, the enrolment of children aged under three in formal childcare has increased from 37% in 2005 to 57.4% in 2019. It is now well above the EU28 average (35.5%).

This rapid expansion occurred simultaneously with a leap in women's participation in the labour market, and is thus a key factor in the growth of the dual earner model in the country. However, the positive aspect of this expansion is overshadowed by the fact public spending is still well below that of countries that have much lower enrolment rates. Comparatively speaking, the pace of increasing coverage has been much faster than the pace of increasing spending (see table 1 above). This implies that an important part of this expansion has happened through an increase in market-based supply, which

has a more limited capacity to address disadvantages among different groups of children. The limited public provision triggers greater social segmentation, which rather than reducing inequalities might end up strengthening pre-existing social divides.

This is particularly worrisome in a country like Spain that has one of the highest rates of persistent risks of child poverty in Europe. Although child poverty reached its peak between 2014 and 2015, the evolution over time reveals how structural it is.

Child poverty is the result of the combination of two factors. On the one hand, high levels of unemployment and unstable employment, which lead to households with low or fluctuating incomes and on the other hand, the limited redistributive capacity of the welfare state, especially regarding young people and children. Cash transfers for families with children are by far the lowest of all social security transfers. This is further aggravated by the absence, until May 2020, of a common and homogenised safety net at the national level, only palliated by a number of regional minimum income schemes, as well as diverse and fragmented support measures offered by different levels of government. Given this context, it becomes paramount that childcare services should serve not just work-life balance demands, but problems of poverty and social exclusion. And yet, several articles in this special issue stress that social inequalities in access to childcare remain extremely high. ‘Excluded’ children often come from disadvantaged households in terms of education, income, and family type. Understanding the distributional impact of different admission criteria, as analysed in various articles of this monograph, becomes highly relevant.

The case of Barcelona, described at length in several of the contributions to this volume, represents a good example of efforts to increase public, high-quality provision and attempts to increase the uptake of low-income families, and especially those with migrant origins.

The regulation and financing of nurseries (*escoles bressol*) is the responsibility of the Catalan regional government. The sector has however been under-funded for over a decade. Since 2015, Barcelona City Council has been increasing its share of the budget, covering up to 62% of the total cost of public municipal nurseries in 2017 but even so, public supply is well below the level of demand.

Regional and local authorities have become increasingly aware of the strong bias in access to ECEC services or the ‘Matthew effect’— and have progressively incorporated mechanisms to a) give preference to children of disadvantaged background and b) introduce new systems of income-based fees. As explained in Navarro-Varas (2022) the city of Barcelona introduced a sliding-scale mechanism in 2015 whereby families pay differently according to their resources, ranging from a maximum of 395 euros/month to a minimum of 50 euros/month. Navarro-Varas concludes that the new system has produced a more balanced presence of children from different family backgrounds, therefore reducing the impact of the structural inequalities of parents or households on children’s education in the early years.

This however also creates frictions as addressed in Maestripieri & Gallego, González & Saurí. In a context of public supply that is well below the demand, children from middle-class and wealthy backgrounds are de facto excluded from public municipal nurseries and have to resort to private provision that is not only more expensive, but often lower quality. Also, demand for a more flexible service with better capacity to adapt to the needs and realities of babies and toddlers, and greater space for agency and freedom to choose are reasons behind the growing demand for more diversified and ‘alternative’ approaches to childcare. Thus, possible tensions arise between different socio-economic groups which have varying degrees of negotiating capacity, something which might also undermine public support towards spending on ECEC.

Presentation of the articles

The collection of articles in this special issue demonstrates the relevance of studying early childhood education and care and its potential impact on fostering social equality. As already explained, the empirical evidence presented here has been collected thanks to the following two projects: ECEWELL, funded by the Ministry of the Economy (2017-2022) and the Primera Infancia project, funded by the private RecerCaixa foundation (2018-2021).

The first article, by León et al (2022) aims at evaluating the institutional design of pre-school education in Spain. This is a complex task, as ECEC services, despite having a common national legal framework, are provided at municipal level, and regulated and financed at regional level, with certain variations in terms of access and availability between different regions. The outcome of the analysis of seven Autonomous Communities (Andalusia, Catalonia, the Valencian Community, Galicia, Madrid, Navarra and the Basque Country) demonstrates how regional governments in Spain have rapidly transformed this policy from a mere scheme to help working women towards a more redistributive policy that takes into account social disadvantages such as low income, disability, gender violence, or single-parent households. However, the differences between regions are still significant, and, in many regions, a mixed system of public and private provision still prevails. The public provision alone is still insufficient to cover the increasing demand for these services, endangering equal access for vulnerable families who cannot afford to buy ECEC services on the market.

The article by Castellanos-Serrano and Perondi (2022) discusses the financial implications of the universalisation of ECEC services at the national level from the perspective of the economy, demonstrating the positive return in terms of women’s employment and tax revenues of this policy. The cost-benefit analysis carried out by the authors highlights that the universalisation of ECEC is a positive reform not only from a merely economic point of view, but also has the indirect benefit of improving equal opportunities in access to education for children and to employment for women. The analysis also demonstrates that this positive effect allows the quality of the services and the working condi-

tions of the workers in this sector to be improved. However, the authors argue for the need to improve the universalisation of ECEC in the context of more supportive parental leave schemes, which are now available in Spain for both mothers and fathers for a period of 16 weeks after the birth of the child.

The following articles focus on the case of Catalonia and, more specifically, on the case of Barcelona. The article by Navarro-Varas (2022) studies different access systems for nursery schools in cities within the metropolitan area of Barcelona. Different municipalities have the capacity to decide on these access system but even so, the author shows the extent to which rigid institutional designs have an impact on families' access to nursery places, especially women who have lower income potential. In fact, the process of decentralisation that has affected ECEC service has determined sharp variations in provision and access, not only among different Autonomous Communities – as argued by León et al (2022) – but also between different municipalities in the same metropolitan area, such as Barcelona. The sliding-scale pricing system adopted by Barcelona and other municipalities in the region (16 out of 36) offers a better way of addressing the needs of the most vulnerable families than the concurrent model – one fee for everyone, with grants and supports for families in need. However, reformulating the costs is not sufficient to alleviate pressure on the most vulnerable groups, although the author argues that this appears to be an acceptable compromise given the current economic and political costs of the management of ECEC services in the area.

The article by González and Saurí (2022) studies the mechanisms that determine mothers' decisions when they opt for a private or a public ECEC. The authors discuss the ambivalent role of ECEC in the public agenda of Barcelona City Council, either conceived as a measure of work-family reconciliation or as a measure to improve the education of the most vulnerable families in the city. However, in this balance there is no space for the families' agency. They might have their own agenda and preferences when opting for a public or a private childcare. Mothers justify their choice of externalising care because of work or because of the socialising role played by institutions, while only a minority of them claim their right to enjoy their lives as people beyond being mothers. But when it comes to choosing public vs. private childcare, the main reasons for opting for a public nursery are the following: the lower costs of the service (thanks to the sliding scale pricing promoted by the current council in Barcelona), the importance of opting for a public service and the quality of the service. In fact, the *escoles bressols* have a good reputation among mothers, despite having ratios of educators/children which are similar to private nurseries. Many of the mothers who opted for private childcare argue how this was a second-best option, as they could not access the public system due to lack of places. However, there is also a consistent number of dual-worker families with full-time jobs who opt for the private system as they need a more extended schedule and availability, including during the holidays. Still, decision-making at the household level is also determined by the socio-economic conditions of the families: higher skilled women with higher incomes could easily opt for a

private or a public nursery, depending on their own preferences in relation to the education of their children; conversely, low-skilled mothers – especially from migrant backgrounds – can only afford public nurseries.

The article by Palomera (2022) studies the impact of socio-economic inequalities in accessing the ECEC services and to what extent public policies might play a role in alleviating the potential Matthew effect of ECEC. The study – which focuses on the region of Catalonia – demonstrates how socio-economic conditions play a role in the decision to apply for the service, as mothers with low education levels or migrant backgrounds tend to apply less for ECEC services given that price is the most important variable that determines their decision making. However, institutional design might play a role as well: the intervention of social services that supply grants that support ECEC costs or the sliding-scale pricing increase the likelihood that these families have to access ECEC. In fact, despite the higher likelihood of mothers with higher incomes applying for the services, the probability of low-income and high-income mothers effectively accessing the service is the same thanks to the institutional design. Having a job is in any case an important mediator in all this, as unemployed mothers and ones not actively seeking work apply less for the service, even less so if they belong to a high-income family. Still, mothers with migrant backgrounds access the service less – despite having the same probability of applying for a place as mothers born in Spain.

The article by Gallego and Maestripieri (2022) focuses on the socially innovative projects that are on offer in the city of Barcelona. The authors use this term to include the various projects (childminders, care groups and free-education nurseries) set up by private educators or cooperative groups that provide an alternative to institutionalisation, instead providing children with community-based care in which parents and educators cooperate. Despite the limited importance in terms of number (they each look after just a few children per year), these projects have led to innovation being partly included in the policy plan of the Barcelona municipality, and inspiring one of the most important policies of the last few years (the *espais familiars* - family playgroups). It seems that mothers who opt for these projects are fighting for the right to continue to be hands-on mothers throughout their children's early years, and share their experience in a community of peers, which becomes the main actor for providing welfare rather than an institution. However, the fact that socially innovative projects are not formally recognised as educational providers make their costs inaccessible for the most vulnerable population of the city. In this sense, the municipality's implementation of a service like the *espais familiars*, which is based on group support for fostering better support to mothers and child beyond the systems of *escoles bressols*, allow the public ECEC supply to be diversified and to narrow the income gap for accessing a non-institutionalised service in the city.

The last two articles in our issue analyse the current institutional configuration of ECEC in two Autonomous Communities and its impact on equal opportunities in access. The first article, by Martínez-Virto and Canals Botas (2022), presents the case of Navarre. In the last decade, this region has seen an

increasing number of policy interventions that aim to universalise the service and reduce inequalities in the access to ECEC. The first regional regulation (dated 2007) pushed the service towards taking on a strong redistributive and educational role compared to the earlier situation in which ECEC was a mere instrument for work-family balance. Two decrees in 2012 (D.F. 72/2012 and 79/2012) eventually increased quality (by reducing ratios) and funding, allowing the system to expand more widely. More recently, reduced fees and sliding-scale pricing have encouraged the participation of the most vulnerable households. At the present time, the region shows one of highest rates of children under three years old in Spain in nursery, with the percentage even higher in previously underserved areas, thanks to the inclusion into the system of *Casas Amigas* - small private projects managed directly by educators in their homes.

The article by Ancheta-Arrabal et al. (2022) studies the case of pre-school for two-year olds in the Valencian Community. Since the Generalitat Valenciana approved order 21/2019, the public nurseries in the region have opened enrolment to children who are two years old, in the framework of a reform that would like to achieve the universalisation of the pre-school education for all children older than two. This reform has been the outcome of a shift in the political government of the region, ever since the centre-left (a coalition between PSPV-PSOE, Compromís y Unidas Podemos) took power. The reform promotes the schooling of two-year-old children through public funding, as a free service offered to families. However, the analysis of the implementation of this measure showed that the free access for two-year-olds is available only in public institutions directly managed by the state, but is not always the case in private nurseries in which families are required to share the costs. In fact, the insufficient resources invested by the local government and the time required to implement this measure have up to now prevented any true universalisation of free 2-3 pre-school.

Taken together, the eight articles that make up this special issue offer the most complete analysis of equality in access to ECEC at this moment in time. They demonstrate the importance of institutional design in reducing the inequalities derived from the socio-economic conditions, but they also raise concerns about the capacity of the current design to meet the increasingly diverse needs of the families. The empirical evidence supports the view that the current national framework of the pre-school education in Spain needs to be overhauled, with measures and investment targeted to reduce differences in provision between areas of the country and to favour the most vulnerable families being able to access it.

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