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Quality ECEC For All

Why we can't afford *not* to invest in it¹

The economic, educational and social rationales of ECEC

There is substantial evidence for the benefits of early childhood education for economic, educational and social reasons.² The economic arguments are related to changing demographics: all affluent countries will face an increasing ageing of the population — including both a growing number of old and very old citizens and a decrease in the number of employable citizens — which means that spending of the social welfare system (in pensions and medical costs for instance) inevitably will increase, while income of the social security will not.

It is that demographic and consequently economic challenge that formed the basis for the Lisbon agreement in Europe, aiming at reaching maximal employment for both men and women. As part of this plan, the European council decided in 2002 that it was economically unavoidable to invest in ECEC to ensure that both men and women could combine their parenthood with employment. It therefore established the Barcelona benchmarks claiming that nations states should take the necessary measures to realise that there was sufficient provision for 33% of the 0-3 population and 90% of the 3-6 population. Today all European Member States accept this as a

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necessary condition for the future of the national economies as well as for equal gender rights and more than half of the European Member States have reached the targets for several years.³

These economic necessities are merely rationales for the *quantity* of ECEC, as any place could serve the economic needs, independent of

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quality. Yet, the educational mission of ECEC as a healthy start for lifelong learning has increasingly been documented.⁴ There is now sufficient robust evidence that high quality ECEC has beneficial effects on all aspects of development⁵ and that these effects can be measured beyond primary school.⁶

However, it has also been documented that these beneficial effects will only occur when ECEC is of high quality. Low quality can cause toxic stress that may negatively influence brain development.⁷ These educational reasons formed the rationale for the European Commission to acknowledge that Europe could not suffice with having quantitative standards such as the Barcelona targets. Subsequently, a working group, consisting of representatives of all Member States formulated, in 2014, a series of key principles for a European Quality Framework. These include quality benchmarks on five domains: accessibility, workforce professionalization, curriculum development, monitoring and evaluation, and governance and funding. Despite the large consensus on the beneficial educational effects of high quality ECEC, there is much less evidence on its equalizing effects, as most longitudinal studies have compared children from poor families who use ECEC to children from equally poor families not making use of ECEC (or making use of lower quality ECEC).

Therefore, while it is clear that investing in quality is beneficial for all children, and particularly for children living in more difficult conditions, it would be naïve to think that ECEC alone will result in more equal societies. Notwithstanding this nuance, it should be clear

that the educational mission of ECEC is inextricably intertwined with its social mission and that ECEC can make a substantial contribution to equal opportunities. That is not so much the case because children learn pre-academic skills at an early age, as it is not a matter of the Olympic games of development. Rather, the unique contribution of ECEC is in what it offers regarding non-cognitive skills (e.g. self-containment, curiosity, perseverance, empathy) that will beget later learning.

As a result, it is very worrying that low-income children are less likely than their more affluent counterparts to receive high-quality non-parental care and that 'affordability can outrank quality'.⁸

Unequal access: a problem of families?

Initially, the problem of unequal access was (and sometimes still is) researched as the result of demographic variables of families, looking at differences in preferences between less and more affluent families or between ethnic groups. As a result, inequalities in enrolment were predominantly understood as the result of parental *choice*.⁹ This paradigm has been severely criticised as being embedded in a neoliberal policy context in which social problems are translated into individual responsibilities and public goods are commoditised. As Burman argued, the concept of *choice* frames parents as consumers and can mask practices of coercion within the language of choice, as it implies equal access to the market that denies actual structural positions of disadvantage. This criticism is backed by empirical studies that have shown how differences in parental preferences are also moulded in differences in availability, as one can hardly desire what is not available.¹⁰ This more recent vein of studies suggests that enabling practices are more sustainable than coercive ones.

Studies that adopt a broader ecological perspective and not only look at the interaction between parental behavior and environmental constraints, but also include the policy level are, however, more scarce.¹¹ Yet, such an ecological approach is necessary, acknowledging a multitude of factors on various levels: the micro-level of families, the meso-level of services,¹² the macro-level of neighbourhoods and the exo-level of policies, as well as the interactions between these levels.

Markets are rarely equal

Countries that failed to invest in ECEC provision in the more affluent 1970s felt the economic necessity of doing so in later decades, within contexts of more severe austerity. As a result, several nation states (e.g. The Netherlands, Luxemburg, the UK) chose to expand the ECEC

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system through the private sector, avoiding substantial government funds. However, ECEC systems that operate on the market, even when accompanied by a voucher system for poor families, have shown to be less effective in attracting poorer families.¹³ In The Netherlands, for instance, since the expansion of private centres and their marketization in 2005,

the number of provisions decreased in rural and poorer areas, while it increased in more affluent urban neighbourhoods.¹⁴ This does not mean that the problem of unequal access is limited to market-oriented systems. It is demonstrated that in more comprehensive welfare systems — typical of continental Europe — high quality ECEC is also more available in more affluent areas.¹⁵ Public policies that address the issues of availability, entitlement and cost of childcare provision — within a general regulatory framework for quality — are the most effective in reducing inequalities in enrolment. The implementation of the ‘maximum fee’ reform — that was introduced in Sweden between 2001 and 2003 — provides an interesting example of how the impact of background factors, such as parental occupation and migrant background, can be reduced by extending entitlement to free preschool attendance to certain groups of children.¹⁶

In addition, many countries are marked by a shortage of provisions for the early years and in most split systems, the shortage is more salient for the youngest children (0 to 3) compared to 3 to 6 year olds. In case of shortages, provisions might be rationed according to priority criteria that — not always deliberately — discriminate against children

from ethnic minority and poor families, such as priorities for working parents or for those who subscribe early on waiting lists. Parents in precarious working conditions can hardly plan their need for non-maternal care in advance. Moreover, the fact that immigrant families have less access to care through informal networks¹⁷ and more often work irregular hours, demands more flexible opening hours of services.

Five criteria of quality for all

Despite these obstacles, there are many examples of practices that overcome these difficulties and note significant progress in the enrolment of children from ethnic minority and poor families. An analysis of several successful projects (see Lazzari & Vandenberg, 2012 for a more elaborate view on these projects) reveals five crucial criteria for structural accessibility.

Availability

As families living in poverty are often less mobile than more affluent families, it is crucial that high quality services are located where poor families and ethnic minority families reside. This is not to say that ECEC provisions are to be targeted to families “at risk”. On the contrary, structural provisions addressing the general population (but with specific attention for specific needs of families) are more successful than targeted provisions, according to the OECD. In other words, policies based on a (children’s) rights’ perspective are more effective than policies based on a needs (or risk) framework. However, in cases of shortages, policy makers might decide to first invest in poorer areas, such as was the case with the Integrated Centres in England.

Affordability

In cases where public funding is structurally available, provisions are usually free, or parents’ fees are moulded according to income and are therefore more affordable. The criterion of affordability does not only refer to material resources but also to more “symbolic” forms of payment. For instance, when provisions are targeted to specific populations “at risk”, parents have to pay a symbolic price, such as

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being labelled or giving up part of their privacy, which may represent a significant threshold.¹⁸

Accessibility

Availability and affordability do not necessarily make provisions accessible, as multiple thresholds may implicitly exclude children from poor and immigrant families: language barriers, knowledge of bureaucratic procedures, waiting lists, or priorities set by the management. ECEC access policies should be planned at the local level, starting from the analysis of barriers that prevent children and families from disadvantaged backgrounds to avail of ECEC provision. This might entail outreach to families whose presence tends to be less visible in the local community.

Usefulness

Services also need to be useful, meaning that families experience the service as supportive and attuned to their demands. This refers to practical issues such as opening hours, considering the fact that immigrant families are more often employed in low-skilled, low-paid, jobs with irregular hours.¹⁹ It also means that the ways in which ECEC provisions are run make sense to the different parents and local communities. ECEC centres that develop a democratic and participative policy-making capacity are found to be the most effective in engaging with disadvantaged communities.

Comprehensibility

Finally, this criterion refers to the extent to which the meaning of ECEC provisions is matched with the meanings that parents attribute to these provisions. This implies that values, beliefs and educational practices of the provision are negotiated with families and local communities. Services that are committed to the recruitment and training of personnel from minority groups are found to be more successful in fostering participation of children from diverse backgrounds to ECEC (DECET, 2007; Peeters & Sharmahd, 2014).²⁰ There is evidence to suggest that the provision of integrated services combining care

and education, early childhood and family support programmes, special needs and mainstream provision within the framework of inter-agency collaboration might be most effective in answering the demands of local communities in contexts of diversity.²¹

To conclude: a word on progressive universalism

For economic reasons, for educational reasons as well as for social reasons of fairness and equity, it is clear that there is no quality without equity. Without equal opportunities to access high quality ECEC, the education system will (re)produce societal inequities from the earliest years on. As most affluent countries are facing a climate of economic austerity, governments tend to refrain from investments in social and educational matters. As there is an increasing awareness of the long-term costs of such budgetary constraints, there is a renewed interest for targeted approaches. However, we have documented that targeted approaches (be it through vouchers or otherwise) are seldom efficient. First, they yield little support from the middle class as they may reiterate discussions of the “undeserving poor”. It may be noticed that these discussions are not new and that already in the liberal welfare states of the nineteenth century, these discussions were at the centre of debates, precisely because universal services were inexistent.²² Second, services targeted to the poor are all too often poor services²³ and, as Korpi and Palme (p. 683) claimed, if we attempt to fight poverty through target-efficient benefits concentrated on the needy, we may win some battles, but we will probably lose the war. Moreover, several studies have shown that the beneficial effects of ECEC are most salient in mixed groups, where children from diverse socio-economic groups share the same provision.²⁴

For all these reasons, there is a growing consensus that the way forward is a way of progressive (or proportionate) universalism. This means universal provision for all and within these services, special attention is devoted to children and families with additional needs. Especially in times of economic downturn, we cannot afford not to act in this way.

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ENDNOTES

- 1 The second part of this article is an adaptation from an article previously published as Vandebroek, M., & Lazzari, A. (2014). Accessibility of Early Childhood Education and Care: A state of affairs. *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, 22(3), 327-335.
- 2 Engle *et al.*, 2011; E Melhuish, 2011.
- 3 Directorate General for Internal Policies, 2013.
- 4 Council of the European Union, 2009.
- 5 Barnett, 2011; Burchinal, Vandergrift, Pianta, & Mashburn, 2010; Burger, 2010.
- 6 Sammons *et al.*, 2007; Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford, & Taggart, 2004
- 7 Groeneveld, Vermeer, Van IJzendoorn, & Linting, 2010; Gunnar, Van Ryzin, & Phillips, 2010.
- 8 Allen, 2003, p. 270 .
- 9 Hofferth & Wissoker, 1992; Peyton, Jacobs, O'Brien, & Roy, 2001; Shlay, Tran, Weinraub, & Harmon, 2005.
- 10 Henly & Lyons, 2000; Himmelweit & Sigala, 2004; Vandebroek, De Visscher, Van Nuffel, & Ferla, 2008.
- 11 Sylva, Stein, Leach, Barnes, & Malmberg, 2007.
- 12 *Ibid.*
- 13 Lee, 2006; Moss, 2009.
- 14 Noailly, Visser, & Grout, 2007.
- 15 Vandebroek *et al.*, 2008
- 16 Skolverket, 2007.
- 17 Wall & Jose, 2004.
- 18 Roose & De Bie, 2003.
- 19 Del Boca, 2010; Leseman, 2002; Wall & Jose, 2004.
- 20 DECET, 2007; Peeters & Sharmahd, 2014.
- 21 Geinger, Van Haute, Roets, & Vandebroek, 2014.
- 22 de Gérardot, 1820.
- 23 Unicef Innocenti Research Centre, 2008.
- 24 E. Melhuish *et al.*, 2006; Veen, Roeleveld, & Leseman, 2000.

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Speak Up for Child Care!

Reframing the child care conversation in Canada

Introduction

In Canada, the gap between research and national child care policy has existed for as long as child care itself. While a robust and growing body of empirical research supports public investment in high quality, affordable child care from a number of perspectives — from child development to an economic perspective, the ‘evidence’ has failed to inform policy action. Furthermore, demographic data clearly illustrates that four out of five mothers of preschool age children work while there are only enough regulated child care spaces for one out of five Canadian children. The purpose of this chapter is to examine the emotionally laden, political process through which national child care policy has been and continues to be the policy that never was.¹

Central to gaining insight into this counter-intuitive policy process is the work of cognitive psychologist George Lakoff, a pioneering American scholar who studies the relationship between the framing of political issues, unconscious cognitive and emotional process and political (in)action. Like many cognitive psychologists before him, Lakoff is concerned with how language is processed and understood by the human brain. Unlike his predecessors, Lakoff specifically focuses