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Early Childhood Education and Care Services: A Route Out of Poverty? Opportunities and challenges in a Souther-European city

SPAIN



Sergi Sánchez Castiñeira

University of Barcelona

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COST Action IS1102 SO.S. COHESION - Social services, Welfare State and Places

The restructuring of social services in Europe and its impact on social and territorial cohesion and governance

In the last 20 years social services have experienced significant restructuring throughout Europe, involving cuts in public funding, devolution (from central to local governments), and externalisation (from public to private providers). Among the reasons for such changes have been stressed the fiscal crisis of the State (on the supply side) and the need to ensure greater efficiency, wider consumer choice and more democratic governance (on the demand side). Although relevant research is available on such processes, the recent global financial crisis and the awareness that, among services of general interest, social services are a major vehicle of social and territorial cohesion have brought social services back on the EU agenda.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sergi SÁNCHEZ CASTIÑEIRA is PhD candidate in Sociology at the University of Barcelona, Spain. He has worked as a senior policy officer in the Municipality of Tarragona and as a social worker in the Municipalities of Barcelona and London. He has also been a lecturer in Social Work at the University of Barcelona. His research interests cover poverty and social exclusion, with particular attention to the institutional processes that are currently framing child poverty in Southern-European countries. Among his technical reports, Sánchez, S. and Gimeno, N. (coord.) (2011). *Diagnosi social participativa de la ciutat de Tarragona 2011*. Ajuntament de Tarragona, and Sánchez, S. and Gimeno, N. (coord.) (2011) *La Renda Mínima d'Inserció en el municipi de Tarragona: Anàlisi i Proposta de Treball*. Ajuntament de Tarragona.

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Early Childhood Education and Care Services: A Route Out of Poverty?

Opportunities and challenges in a Southern-European city.*

Sergio Sánchez Castiñeira

ABSTRACT

Access to quality early childhood education and care has become a prime policy recommendation to address child poverty and social exclusion. However, vulnerable families tend to use less Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) services. Besides, we do not know how these services actually improve the life chances of the poor families that are already attending them. This case study shows an overview of the role of public ECEC service policies regarding child poverty in the city of Tarragona (Spain) in the context of a financial and economic crisis. First, descriptive analysis of quantitative data at the local level generated by this research answers to what extent and which types of low-income families benefit from public childcare, and how do those services adapt to the social and economic circumstances of those families. Second, semi-structured interviews to ECEC managers are carried out to understand the experiences and the barriers that low-income parents face to access the services, and to point out the potentialities and the current limitations of these services when trying to be more socially inclusive for the low-income families that are already attending them.

*

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1. Introduction

The difficulty of reconciling (female) work with childcare has been identified as a key factor increasing the risk of social vulnerability in families with children (Taylor-Gooby, 2004; Ranci, 2010; Escobedo, 2014). This is especially so in the case of lone parent families and of families in which parents have a low level of education and occupational skills (Esping-Andersen, 2002; Flaquer, 2014). On the other side, it is established that economic conditions and social relationships during early childhood are of central importance for adults' outcomes (Duncan et al., 1998; Shonkoff and Phillips, 2000). In turn, social policy actors currently focus on “new social risks” such as child income poverty, which call for investments in early childhood services or training (Jenson and Saint-Martin, 2006). Indeed, a shift of paradigm has occurred in the last twenty years as social policies are reconsidered as social investment (Giddens, 1998; Esping-Andersen, 2002). In this social and political context, the European Commission promotes access to quality Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) to achieve the Europe 2020 goal of lifting 20 million people out of poverty and social exclusion (European Commission, 2013).

As ECEC services offer “double dividend” by improving children's development and facilitating parental employment (Strategy Unit, 2002), they are especially beneficial for children coming from a disadvantaged social background. Quality ECEC services compensate for the fewer social and economic resources available to these children (European Commission, 2011). However, the most vulnerable families – lone parent, large households, immigrant families- use less ECEC services (Social Protection Committee, 2012). Besides, even if it is widely assumed that quality ECEC services have a positive impact on those poor families that are already users, there is little evidence of the specific social and organisational conditions that ECEC services should have in order to better help those families (OECD, 2012b). Indeed, ECEC services can be also aimed at other goals such as reconciling work and family responsibilities; promoting gender equality; helping parents to have the number of children they desire; and mobilising female labour supply (OECD, 2006; OECD, 2011). Therefore, even ECEC services that could be considered of high quality in some regards could deviate from the specific needs of economically vulnerable families.

This research explores, in a context of economic crisis and public services retrenchment, public ECEC services' orientation to and the impact on child poverty in Tarragona, a middle-sized Spanish city from the Catalan region. The research focuses, on one side, on the material and symbolic barriers that some low-income families face to accessing to ECEC services; and, on the other side, on the socio-economic, cultural and organisational conditions needed for the ECEC services to improve the social outcomes of already attending low-income families. It is based on a questionnaire filled in by practitioners of public crèches and interviews with managers of public crèches located in two disadvantaged areas of the city of Tarragona. Indeed, such a highly contextualised research focusing on the implementation level enriches our understanding of ECEC services by showing how initial policy assumptions and purposes become inevitable reframed: first, as the local context has its specific patterns of social, economic, demographic and political developments that are relatively independent from the regional and national context (Mingione et al., 2002; Fraisse and Escobedo, 2014); second, as policy assumptions and purposes are translated into practical action (Lipsky, 1980; Brodtkin, 2008).

2. ECEC services and child poverty

In spite of the well-known benefits of ECEC services in reducing inequality and breaking the cycles of social disadvantage, two key circumstances undermine its real impact. First, the allocation of public resources for very young children is low in comparison to the levels of spending in the compulsory-education years (OECD, 2011). This occurs despite the wider consensus that interventions targeted early in life are potentially much more cost-effective than interventions targeted to underperforming adolescents or adults (Heckman, 2006; Waldfogel and Washbrook, 2010). Second, ECEC services tend to be relatively underused by the most vulnerable families (Social Protection Committee, 2012). In fact, public action seems to promote this trend: imputation of in-kind benefits to household incomes shows that childcare is the only benefit from which the richest profit more than the poorest in many countries (*Ibid.*).

A recent literature review has pointed out the key factors that can promote or hinder the participation of low-income families (Lazzari and Vandenberg, 2012):

- Availability of services in the local area: services for very young children tend to be disproportionately distributed among areas.
- Affordable prices.
- Accessibility: facilitating bureaucratic processes, giving the information, etc.
- Usefulness: the extent to which the services are attuned to families' needs (in terms of goals but also the service schedule, for example).
- Desirability for disadvantaged groups: the extent to which parents and the services share their perspectives and goals.

Childcare efforts to lift families out of poverty might be jeopardised if they do not promote the participation of parents and the wider community. Enhancing the continuity of children's experience across environments can improve not only parenting at home and the home-learning environment but also the quality of the ECEC centre. It can be boosted through the exchange between parents and practitioners of information and the adoption of consistent approaches to socialisation, daily routines, child development and learning (OECD, 2006; OECD, 2012). Parental engagement in ECEC services is still more decisive in the case of low-income families, who face more difficulties in providing their children with emotional support and cognitive stimulation (Heckman and Lochner, 2000). Therefore, including parents as key players in the development of young children and involving them in the services have been two of the demanding tasks that ECEC services have been facing in recent years (OECD, 2006).

ECEC services have to take into account the social context of early childhood development. Society requires that those services promote varied objectives, such as the equal opportunity of women or the social inclusion of vulnerable families (OECD, 2006). The needs of disadvantaged families are actually multidimensional, as the concept of social inclusion implies (García et al, 2008; Levitas et al, 2007). Then, "community engagement" is a key factor to attain several aims including the increase of the life chances of young children. Besides ECEC services, other different services – social services or health but also neighbours, ONS and other civil society stakeholders – can work together and create a "continuum of services" to better support parents and tailor services to young children needs (OECD, 2012).

The purposes of ECEC services are no self-evident (Dahlberg, Moss and Pence, 1999). Indeed, ECEC services have been considered an unclear sector in European social states, generating confusion about their policy goals and how they should be organised and financed

(Andreotti et al., 2004). In a context of diversification of childcare services but also of insufficient resources, ECEC services face the pressures caused by the need to juggle multiple and, sometimes, contradictory requirements: “The tension between a more complex and flexible articulation of family and professional time and the interests of the child; the tension between the integration of the most underprivileged families (single-parents and the unemployed) and concern about the social mix; the tension between increasing the number of places and guaranteeing and improving the quality of service” (Andreotti et al., 2004). Indeed, government initiatives that are based on just one dimension of ECEC services, such as balancing family and employment, could eventually lead to segmented services according to the socioeconomic characteristics of the children. This is the case of Ireland, where public invest in childcare goes to specific services either for poor children or for children of working parents (Hayes, 2008). In the case of tackling child poverty, such a targeted approach fails to get to a lot of poor children, it tends to deliver low-quality services, and it can further stigmatise children in risk of social exclusion (OECD, 2006). Childcare services that set very low thresholds of income for access may, in fact, exclude low-middle class families from childcare altogether, because their income becomes both too high to access the public childcare services and too low to afford the private ones (Andreotti et al., 2004).

3. Quantitative analysis

This section describes, first, the level of childcare coverage of the city; second, the extent to which public ECEC services in the city of Tarragona are used by low-income families (differentiating by household type and country of origin); and third, how the new socioeconomic profiles of family users may be changing the functioning of the service. The analysis also discriminates these social effects according to the location of the crèches and paying especially attention to the economic level of the area.

3.1. Methodology

Most of the information is provided by a questionnaire on the socioeconomic situation of families attending public ECEC services in the city and on the extent and types of use of these services. The questionnaire has been distributed to each municipal ECEC service in the city and each practitioner has filled in the information regarding each of the children attending her class. Six out of the nine municipal crèches – including the four public crèches situated in the most disadvantaged areas of the city- have filled out the questionnaire. The three municipal crèches not included in the analysis belong to relatively affluent areas with a relatively low level of low-income families. These data do not include information about the only public ECEC service (crèche) in the city that is not municipal: a service from the Regional Administration that has 38 vacancies for children aged one to three, which is located in the same disadvantaged area as the El Llimoner and La Nina.

Besides, the local register of inhabitants has been consulted in order to ascertain the levels of coverage of public child ECEC services.

3.2. Results

3.2.1. Levels of coverage of public ECEC services

In the school year 2010-2011, the city of Tarragona had about 5200 children that could be eligible for formal early childhood services (that is, from 5 months old to three years old), but the actual childcare supply is of 1939 private and public places (Sánchez and Gimeno, 2011a).

Therefore, the rate of coverage of childcare in the city was about 37%. On the other side, the private sector was majoritarian (65% of the places). The low coverage of public ECEC services for very young children is compounded by the lack of subsidised ECEC services at this stage.

3.2.2. Low-income families attending public ECEC services

The share of children that have applied for free school meals in the in the six centres that answered the questionnaire is 18%. Applying for free school meals is an indicator of being on a low income, therefore, less than one in every five children attending these public crèches is considered to live in a low-income family. However, these figures do not include three out of nine centres (39% of all municipal places), which did not answer the questionnaire. These three crèches are located in relatively affluent areas and it can be assumed that they are not attended by poor families, due to admission criteria (see above). Drawing up an estimation of the low-income families attending public crèches that includes those three centres would lower the figure to 11%. If the rate of children from low-income families attending municipal childcare is related to the fact that, first, the rate of income poverty in Catalonia for children under 6 years old in Spain in 2012 were 22.5% (Rodríguez, 2013); and, second, the rates of income poverty in Tarragona were slightly lower those of Spain (Belzunegui, 2008); then, we can point out that the share of children from low-income families benefiting from municipal childcare is clearly below their relative weight in the city. This disadvantage is compounded by the fact that low-income families cannot afford private childcare (moderate-income families may also be excluded).

Table 1 clearly shows that families using the services that are from specific types of households or countries of origin are more prone to be low-income: lone parent families are low-income (52.6%) and families from African origin (from Maghreb 40%, and from the rest of Africa 73.3%).

Table 1. Share of children attending public (municipal) crèches total and by type of household and origin. Share of children applying for free school meals in each group. School year 2013-14.

	% Total	% Children applying for "free school meals"
% Enrolled children	100 (No. = 331)	18.1
% Children from lone parent families	5.7	52.6
% Children from large families	15.4	21.6
% Children from Spanish origin	74	10.6
% Children from Latin-American origin	8.2	18.5
%Children from Maghreb origin	9.1	40
% Children from the rest of African origin	4.5	73.3
% Children from Asian origin (Pakistani)	0,9	100%

Source: Questionnaire administered by the author.

In the poor areas of the city, socially vulnerable groups according to nationality are not underrepresented in public crèches. In fact, children of American and African (non-Maghreb) origin may be clearly overrepresented: 9.3% of children in public crèches are from American

origin and the share of American women from 16 to 45 years old in these areas is 6.1%¹; in the case of the African (non-Maghreb) children attending public childcare, the relative differences are still higher (7.4% and 4.5%, respectively) (see Table 2 below).

Table 2. Percentage of children using public crèches located in the most disadvantaged areas of Tarragona, by mother's nationality. Percentage of women aged 16-45 registered in the most disadvantaged areas of Tarragona, by nationality. School year 2013-14 (Encarnació, Montesanto, Pomar i Sant Josep).

	Mother's origin for children users of the public crèches	Origin of women between 16 and 45 years old in the area
Spanish	65.2	67.8
Latin-American	9.3	6.1
Maghreb	14.7	15.4
Rest of Africa	7.4	4.5
Asia(Pakistan)	0.4	0.1
Rest of Europe	3	6.1

Source: Questionnaire administered by the author and database from the Municipal Register of Inhabitants.

As shown in Table 3, differences in the share of low-income children between public crèches are, in part, the result of different levels of poverty in each corresponding area (Sánchez, unpublished report). However, these differences do not match the socioeconomic differences existing between their respective areas. First, a crèche that is located in a more disadvantaged area has a relatively low share of low-income families (Pomar, 11%). Second, the big difference of share of low-income families found in Sant Josep (58.5%) and La Nina (20%) – both disadvantaged areas- does not correspond to such differences in the levels of need in each area. On the other side, it is unexpected the relative low share of children from lone parent families attending most of these crèches (less than 5%), since these types of families represents about the 30% of the families beneficiaries of social assistance (Sánchez and Gimeno, 2011). Conditions related to the neighbourhood and the services in the area (including the public crèches themselves) may explain these different responses of the crèches regarding a very disadvantaged social context.

¹ The percentage of women between 16 and 45 years of age for each nationality registered in the area is used as an approximate indicator of the percentage of children under three for each nationality in the area. Suffice to say that African-born women tend to have a high number of children and, therefore, that proxy may be slightly biased, because it underestimates the relative weight of children under three of the African region. On the other hand, the available data only allows us to use age between 16 and 45 years, which is probably not the most accurate because most children tend to concentrate when their mother is about 30 years old (OECD, 2011).

Table 3. Percentages of families attending the different public crèches by socioeconomic characteristics. School year 2013-14.

	Sant Josep	EL Llimoner	La Nina	Pomar	La Llacuna	La Plana
	Relatively disadvantaged areas				More affluent areas	
% Low-income	58.5	30	20	11	13.2	0
% Lone-parent families	9.8	5	2.7	4.4	9.4	5.4
% Large families	9.8	15	6.7	26.5	7.5	23
% Spanish origin	61	65	68	64.7	71.7	100
% Latin-American origin	4.9	30	4	11.8	15.1	0
% Maghrib origin	9.8	0	17.3	19.1	0	0
% African origin (non Maghreb)	22	0	6.7	1.5	0	0
% Asian origin (Pakistani)	0	0	1.3	0	3.8	0

Source: Questionnaire administered by the author

3.2.3. A socioeconomic analysis of the levels of enrolment and of the different uses of the public ECEC services

As shown in the following Table 4, taking into account the high quality of public crèches and their low cost in comparison to the private ones, the relatively low ratios of enrolment of some public crèches are remarkable: El Llimoner (60%), La Nina (76%), Sant Josep (77%) and Pomar (92%), all of which are located in the disadvantaged areas. On the opposite side, both public childcare services located in the non-disadvantaged areas have an enrolment ratio of 100%.

Being enrolled just on a part-time basis is relatively high at La Llacuna (41.5%), La Nina (40%) and Sant Josep (29.3%). At the other extreme, only 8.1% of children are enrolled on part-time basis in La Plana. Finally, about one every five children is enrolled on a part-time basis in El Llimoner and Pomar.

Regarding the use of complementary services in public childcare services, such as the drop-off time (from 8h to 9h), their use is very residual in the crèches located in the disadvantaged areas (<1.5%), compared to the other two crèches (33.8% and 13.2%)².

In relation to the use of the canteen service, apart from La Plana – where nine out of ten children use it – the rest of the public crèches show a share of children using it that goes from the 54.4%, in San Salvador, to 70%, in El Llimoner.

² It was not possible to gather data regarding the use of complementary services or the use of the canteen service for Sant Josep.

Table 4. Level of attendance and service usage in the public crèches. School year 2013-14.

	Sant Josep	EL Llimoner	La Nina	Pomar	La Llacuna	La Plana
Share of low-income families	58.5	30	20	11	13.2	0
Enrolment rate	77	60	76	92	100	100
Part-time rate	29.3	20	40	19.1	41.5	8.1
% Using drop-off time service	—	0	1.3	1.5	13.2	33.8
% Using the canteen service	—	70	60.9	54.4	58.5	90.5

Source: Questionnaire administered by the author.

There is a negative correlation between the share of children from low-income families attending a specific childcare service and the enrolment ratios and the use of the drop-off time. In the case of the use of the canteen and of level of enrolment on a full-time basis, the public crèches that have no low-income families show a relatively higher-levels of use and enrolment, respectively. These data suggest that public ECEC services that have become more oriented to attend to families on low-income face challenges related to attracting families to service (both low-income and relatively affluent), to keep them on a full-time basis and, finally, to maintain the current type of supplementary services.

Economic, political, ideological, social or organisational arguments warn against public ECEC services giving up their “work and family balance” function and, hence, renouncing attending to the relatively more affluent parents. First, increasing the level of subsidisation of low-income families in public ECEC services would further unbalance the already tight budgets that municipalities got for these services. Second, the idea that public ECEC services are aimed mostly at work and family balance is strongly anchored in public opinion. In fact, the shift to more anti-child poverty goals of the service may have an important political cost: the relatively more affluent families that would be negatively impacted by the measure may protest and mobilise against it. Third, it may be hard to change the current organisational and staff structures of public ECEC services, which are aimed at dealing with the needs of relatively affluent working parents (places full-time, existing complementary services, lack of structures for involving parents, lack of practitioners’ time and formation to directly support parents or lack of networking with other social inclusion services). Eventually, from the point of view of the fight against child poverty, it might be that the most prominent reason for some public ECEC services not to abandon their social function of work and family balance is the negative effects of becoming a “service for the poor”. ECEC services would not be a universal service anymore, so it would, paradoxically, lose one of its strongest assets to fight child poverty: poor families attend a service together with the rest of the families in a context where all of them are accepted primarily as a “parents” rather than as a “poor”. A universal approach of public ECEC services could deal with child poverty through a “cascade model of services” (OECD, 2011: 60): low-income families receive, in the first instance, general services and then, if needed, they get more focused services.

4. Qualitative analysis

Practitioners' arguments on the social inclusion dimension of public childcare and education can be broken into three blocks: barriers to access, benefits from attending and difficulties faced by already attending families.

4.1. Methodology

Qualitative data is generated through several encounters with the Head Manager of Municipal ECEC services in the city and with the managers of three municipal crèches located in the most disadvantaged areas of the city. In some cases these encounters were recorded and data was transcribed (2); in others, ethnographic notes were taken right after the interview (5). Finally, ethnographic notes have also been generated from the views expressed in two workshops carried out in the context of a local project that tried to liaise services from different policy fields.

4.2. Results

4.2.1. Access to public crèches

The current admission criterion in public crèches in the city acts indeed as an insurmountable barrier for children from low-income families in the relatively more affluent neighbourhoods: the admission criterion prioritises families where adults are working in the formal market, blocking the access of low-income families in areas where legal employment has not become a rare resource. The coordinator and service managers of the service in the city established this rule, four years ago. Current admission criterion privileges working parents (they get 25 points) over low-income parents (they get 5 points). Yet, low-income families can also only get this minimum advantage to access the crèche if they are beneficiaries from only a specific and very restricted type of social assistance: the minimum income (RMI). Neither explicit requests from social services nor any other type of social assistance is taking into account. Indeed, the most practical consequences of this criteria are inexistent: in relatively more privileged areas, working parents get access priority and fill the services; in most deprived areas, public crèches have vacancies so there is no need for the criteria. However, keeping this reductive and highly standardised indicator of economic vulnerability might denote that reducing social inequalities is not a political concern regarding public early childhood services and the extent to which public nurseries remain impervious to other social services.

Even if low-income families can get more reduced fees (down to €15 a month), they lose this reduction if they are in debt to the Council. As impoverishment and indebted processes are entwined (Dearden et al., 2010), this general Council norm may have the unintended consequence of penalising some families because of their poverty. In this case, poor families suffered from dealing with Municipal policies that have disparate goals and principles (an inclusive one in the case of the public childcare policy, and a punitive one in the case of the general Council policy). These incongruences are exacerbated by the lack of coordination between Departments within the Council.

When the Head Manager is asked about the role that ECEC services could play in the fight against child poverty in the current moment of socioeconomic crisis, she claims for the need to make changes to facilitate the access for vulnerable families.

«At the current time, the situation is not the same as it was five or six years ago, when the staff from the Municipality established the criteria for admission to public childcare, which favoured families where all adults worked. In those moments of high employment rates this demand was the one that it seemed that public childcare could better satisfy. Now the situation has changed and this scale may not be appropriate. However, many families may not understand that they are left out of the home despite needing it (both parents work) and yet others families who do not need it (unemployed families with low incomes) are favoured». (Note from ethnographic interview to Maria on January 2014)

However, she quickly brings up her concerns about opposition that the Municipality could face if low-income families are granted preference to access public childcare. In addition, when the interviewer suggests her the idea of attracting more low-income people from the area, maybe through networking with social services, she resolutely stated that the Municipality could not afford to have a large number of user's families nearly fully subsidised.

The Head Manager actually considers that childcare benefits all children and especially those children coming from the most disadvantaged families. However, when the researcher expose to the Head Manager that some very poor families were not taking their child to childcare because they couldn't afford even the lowest fee of 15 euros a month, she answered as something taken from granted that families should always have to pay something for the service, that public childcare couldn't be free. This data is in line with ethnographic observations from social services (taken by this researcher) that shows that practitioners claim that users should always have to "give something back" for accessing a service in order for them to really value what they are getting. Making parents responsible for children not attending childcare because they are not willing to make effort to pay a fee does not seem to be either an efficient or a fair social intervention. First, the institution fails to acknowledge that part of the disadvantage of these parents is actually not recognising the value of childcare. Second, the institution should not let children be the victims of the poor decisions of their parents.

According to the Head Manager, changes in the profile of the families using public childcare can have an impact on what she perceives a service of high quality should offer.

«Regarding the drop off time service, she told me that some people have been leaving it along the year and currently there are crèches where it is being used by only two families, that this is unsustainable but they have maintained it throughout the year for these few families anyway [...] However, they will reconsider the service for the following year. Maria says that the problem is that if you take out these services, public crèches will no longer be attractive for a lot of families who would go to other childcare services. Cancelling the drop off time means lowering the quality of public childcare services... but at the same time, the person initially supervising the drop off time could be more useful in another task at a different time [...]». (Note from ethnographic interview to Maria on June 2014)

The Head Manager, who uses a very restrictive definition of "quality", is nevertheless acute in warning about the risks of social segmentation of the services in some parts of the city: a public one aimed at the low-income families and the private one for families where both parents are working.

Parents attending childcare get the chance of accessing other material or symbolic resources through new acquaintances. However, social capital cannot only be a consequence of attending childcare, it can also be a necessary condition. For families that are still to attend public

crèches, social capital may be basic not only to get information about the service but also to trust it:

«Among them (mothers), everyone knows each other, a lot of them say I took my child to the crèche two years ago, or five. They often come to make some questions with friends who had previously brought their children here. Word of mouth is very usual around the neighbourhood [...] They usually come in groups, they know each other from outside the crèche, from neighbourhood, or from the building, they all come together, you see them talking outside as a friends, sometimes when they are waiting to pick up the children, or when they are already with the children». (Transcript from a semi-structured Marta interview on October 2013)

In families lacking this social capital, support from social workers can help them to overcome practical (e.g. Fill in the form) issues and gain the necessary confidence in the service. The other side of the coin is that families that do not get the constant support and motivation from social services could give up the service:

«Many families coming from social services ended up by not enrolling to childcare, either because they left the area, or because they were not pushed enough by social services, and they do not see the need to use childcare. Sometimes they fill in all the applications and then they do not show up again». (Note from ethnographic interview to Susanna on January 2013).

4.2.2. *Current benefits of public childcare*

According to practitioners, childcare generally allows children to make the most of their capacities according to their age. But it seems especially so in the case of families apparently unaware of the current western understanding of children's potentialities.

«(Public childcare) increases everyone's autonomy but especially those of families from other cultures: sometimes they give crushed food to their children, or they take them over their shoulders... From the crèche we work on these aspects and the families react positively, they adapt to it». (Transcript from a semi-structured interview to Marta on October 2013)

Practitioners are also aware of the socio-educational value of ECEC services for the parents themselves. Educational practices at school and contact with other parents offer them the chance of accessing new ways of educating and caring for their children:

«Some parents are very young and have repeated the patterns of behaviour that they have experienced in their own families: lack of parental models, low education, low social skills: all these characteristics are passed down to the following generation. By accessing the school, these harmful behaviours are corrected; new models of behaviour are offered to them». (Note from ethnographic interview to Maria and Susanna on May 2013)

ECEC services can also give the chance to vulnerable parents to attend a course, even if the support from the social worker along the whole process is essential. Practitioners perceive that public ECEC services allows parents to acquire some basic skills, even though it seemed insufficient to get into the labour market.

«Over time, Nigerian families talk in Catalan to the teacher: they have learned the language in courses but also through their own children, and they are pretty motivated. But actual jobs, we do not see they can find them right now». (Transcript from a semi-structured interview to Marta on October 2013)

On the other side, it is interesting to remark some changes that public crèches has done in order to adapt to the increase of low-income families:

«At the beginning course we inform the families about all the school trips for the year and we require that families to pay a small monthly quantity, this worked very well last year. [...] At present, we have more families with economic needs and we have thought that we could not go out of the crèche so much this year. So we have to make things up, if anybody has an auntie, or a mother or someone who can make something for free so people do not have to pay anything. We want to do thing so we have to adapt to the families that we have this year». (Transcript from a semi-structured interview Marta, October 2013)

4.2.3. Obstacles for attending families to fully benefit from ECEC

Practitioners' main object of intervention is the child. Other interventions more directed to the social inclusion of the parents are not the stated focus of ECEC services.

«When asked about the benefits of public crèches, the manager clearly states that it helps the children's development. In contrast, she does not mention other benefits such as those related to lifting families out of poverty or keeping a good work and family balance». (Note from Ethnographic interview to Susanna on January 2013)

Low-income parents with casual jobs or in full-time training that cannot afford to pay the canteen and they have to make arrangements to care for the child from 12.30h to 15h. "Free school meals" ("*beques menjador*") exists but they are not reliable because might not be granted until January (the course starts in September) and there is a lot of uncertainty about who would finally obtain these grants. Therefore, applying families are not able to make a labour insertion plan or training plan until January because they do not have the guarantee that they would be able to pursue it.

Sometimes, time is not the problem: in a context of lack of opportunities and multiple disadvantages, the time can also be "devoid of purpose" for them. The teacher perceived apathy in some of the vulnerable parents that got the grant and therefore they are able to leave the child from 9am to 5pm:

«Services given to some families have resulted in problematic situations. The fact that they have been granted free meals caused them to get used to leave their children from 9 to 5 and not bother during that time». (Note from ethnographic interview to Susanna on January 2013)

Practitioners detect another obstacle for ECEC services to help parents to get a job: new parents are very involved and quite often disorientated with their new parental responsibilities, which makes it difficult for them to focus on getting training or looking for a job.

Disadvantaged parents face serious difficulties in following the service norms to the point of having to give up the service:

«The most vulnerable households are those that tend to leave the crèche. Sometimes the complexity of the situation makes it simple operating rules were making a mountain and leave home». (Note from ethnographic the working group to Maria e Susanna on May 2013)

Vulnerable families also have difficulties to keep up with some of the material demands that ECEC services made to families, such as disposable diapers. Besides, sometimes

practitioners may not fully understand the difficulties that these families could face in order to comply with some requirements that would be easy to carry out for more affluent families.

«Yes we ask for them, and it is hard that they bring them, especially the diapers. It is always the same, they usually are families from abroad, maybe because of culture, that put the exact diapers that are needed for that day and, of course, I make them understand you have to bring a whole pack and eventually they bring them, but soon after, we have to tell them again to bring more than two». (Transcript from a semi-structured interview to Vanessa on October 2013)

Special social activities and celebrations focus on the needs of the child and the smooth development of the activity, instead of on the involvement of parents:

«When we do parties or Christmas chestnut, kids do not behave the same, and you see children just want their parents do not enjoy activity, so we have hung pictures and you the parents see them». (Transcript from a semi-structured interview to Vanessa on October 2013)

Only one of the ECEC services located in the most disadvantaged areas has a parents association. Still, this association has not been able to engage the more vulnerable parents. This reveals that establishing formalised bodies for participation is in itself not enough to involve vulnerable parents in the life of the centre and to help them to establish new social relationships with other parents. Barriers to access to these associations are related to entry cost (there is an annual fee of 20 euros) and to the belief that this participatory body is not attuned to their needs or preferences. Nevertheless, the major factor preventing these parents from participating is the strain caused by the accumulation of difficulties in their everyday lives.

«See, I think their thinking is: I already have enough problems out there, I bring the child here to, well, not to forget him, but if I could disconnect for a while I have all these tough problems" and when you have a young child all of this worsens because she will ask a lot of attention, and you think that there is still the crèche that you have to care about, that, here in the crèche, they will still ask you for help». (Transcript from a semi-structured interview to Susanna on October 2013)

Besides, in the context of an entrenched local welfare system, the concentration of vulnerable families in some public crèches has already made these services to become the locus of a competition for scarce public resources between different fractions of the vulnerable families according to ethnicity. While these economic conflicts are tinged with assumptions about cultural behaviours, practitioners do not have the knowledge or the mediation competences to untangle them.

«Now there are more immigrant families and this creates more relational difficulties. Some families of Catalan-Spanish origin complained that immigrant families benefit from most of the grants. Facing this challenge, practitioners admit they have no available answers». (Ethnographic note from the working group to Maria and Susanna on June 2013)

5. Concluding remarks

Vulnerable families cannot fully benefit from public childcare because the coverage is clearly insufficient in the city. In general terms, low-income families are underrepresented within the public childcare sector in the city. This relative disadvantage is compounded by the fact that

they cannot get to some public crèches in some areas where these services are aimed at the relatively more affluent working parents. Besides, they are also practically excluded from the private childcare sector, which it is not subsidised by the Council anymore. Circumstances at the neighbourhood and the service level may eventually frame the chances that the different types of families have to access public crèches. It is remarkable, for instance, that two areas with similar high levels of economic deprivation have public crèches with very different shares of children from a low-income family.

Public childcare and education crèches in the city are currently fragmented: in the relatively affluent areas, they have no vacancies and attend working parents that pay the full fee and use the complementary services; in the most disadvantaged areas, unfilled places (low-rates of enrolment and increasing part-time use) and the growing number of subsidised families generate economical, organisational and relational challenges. The needs of the families currently attending public crèches in the poorer areas have also reframed the social functions of the public crèches. Those services more oriented towards attending low-income families face difficulties related to attracting families to service (both low-income and relatively affluent), to keeping them on a full-time basis and, eventually, to maintaining the current types of supplementary services. This situation has ended up in an economic, organisational and identity crisis in the public childcare services that are located in the most disadvantaged areas. Nevertheless, it seems that public crèches facing similar difficult social contexts have got different responses and points to different strategies of adaptation.

Listening to professionals in relation to the new social difficulties that public nurseries face enriches our understanding of their dilemmas and reveals both limits and ways out. Access for low-income families is actually restricted because of a wider array of factors. At the moment, current public ECEC services are not ready to fully subsidise an increasing number of low-income families, since public budgets are tightening and the universalization of these educational services is not considered as essential as it is at further stages. Apart from economic and ideological reasons, political considerations may be obstacles for further reforms: these public crèches were originally motivated to help families to balance work and family. Reframing now this goal to include other social issues may face opposition by middle class families that are relatively influential on a political level. Regarding practitioners, they may lack professional skills (social mediation) or the working culture (networking with other services) to deal with the complex needs of socially disadvantaged families. Moreover, in contrast to the view of European commissioners, ECEC local actors do not consider these services as an unconditional right for all families: parents should be motivated with the service and, for instance, they must make a certain economic effort in order to use. This ECEC practitioners' view must be a product of a widespread individualistic ideology, but it could be also a way of protecting themselves from the conflicts and blockages generated in what has become an ambiguous social field with contrasting demands.

On the other side, vulnerable families may fail to engage with these services because either they do not know their existence or they are not given information, advice or support to go through such a standardised application process. Moreover, these families may simply not trust this public institution. Suspicions are overcome either when the vulnerable family keeps social connections with other families already acquainted with the services (another women from the same country of origin) or when another already trusted services intercede with the family for the crèche (social assistance).

Apart from the care and the high quality nurturing and education provided directly to the child, vulnerable families that are users of public nurseries in the city get other types of support.

First, the child can potentially access a wide array of services in case that she has any special need (psych-pedagogic team, referrals to other services or organisations). These crèches also put families in contact with external organisations and activities that could promote their social inclusion. Second, vulnerable parents can learn from both other parents and the practitioners about more positive models of parenting. Third, low-education or immigrant parents may benefit from short courses to enhance their social competences and, to a much lesser degree, their employability.

Public crèches in the city may not be ready to successfully intervene in key facets of social inclusion, such as helping families to overcome unemployment, poverty or to significantly improve their social competences or parental abilities. First, current services structures are not ready to adapt to the evolving and specific needs of disadvantaged families (deficient system of economic support, lack of participation in the service, timing and process of enrolment, routinely demands of the service to the families, lack of coordination with other services). At the same time, the practitioners' "object of work" is the child (from an educationalist point of view) and not so much the parents or the "child within the family" (especially from a socioeconomic point of view). Therefore, public ECEC services eventually have a relatively low impact on the social and work competences of parents themselves. In fact, practitioners detect that new parents are overwhelmed by their new responsibilities, which makes it hard for them to get training or to look for a job.

This research identifies some of the challenges that public ECEC services face promoting the necessary reflection for them to become a tool against child poverty. Indeed, the introduction of new types of social intervention in and the universalization of high quality ECEC services would clearly benefit children and families during a key moment of their lives. Yet, these benefits may remain quite restricted if political actors do not tackle socioeconomic structural inequalities related to the lack and precariousness of jobs, discrimination, material deprivation or inadequate housing.

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Access to quality early childhood education and care has become a prime policy recommendation to address child poverty and social exclusion. However, vulnerable families tend to use less ECEC services. Besides, we do not know how these services actually improve the life chances of the poor families that are already attending them. This case study shows an overview of the role of public ECEC services policies regarding child poverty in the city of Tarragona (Spain) in the context of a financial and economic crisis. First, descriptive analysis of quantitative data at the local level generated by this research answers to what extent and which types of low-income families benefit from public childcare, and how do those services adapt to the social and economic circumstances of those families. Second, semi-structured interviews to ECEC managers are carried out to understand the experiences and the barriers that low-income parents face to access the services, and to point out the potentialities and the current limitations of these services when trying to be more socially inclusive for the low-income families that are already attending them.

Sergi SÁNCHEZ CASTIÑEIRA is PhD candidate in Sociology at the University of Barcelona, Spain. He has worked as a senior policy officer in the Municipality of Tarragona and as a social worker in the Municipalities of Barcelona and London. He has also been a lecturer in Social Work at the University of Barcelona. His research interests cover poverty and social exclusion, with particular attention to the institutional processes that are currently framing child poverty in Southern-European countries. Among his technical reports, Sánchez, S. and Gimeno, N. (coord.) (2011). *Diagnosi social participativa de la ciutat de Tarragona 2011*. Ajuntament de Tarragona, and Sánchez, S. and Gimeno, N. (coord.) (2011) *La Renda Mínima d'Inserció en el municipi de Tarragona: Anàlisi i Proposta de Treball*. Ajuntament de Tarragona.



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