Great expectations, but how to achieve them? Explaining patterns of inequality in childcare use across 31 developed countries [1]

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Abstract:

Childcare services are increasingly regarded as a major policy lever to mitigate social inequalities. Such services are believed to be effective in reducing poverty and increasing employment rates by allowing both parents to engage in paid employment, as well as to benefit the cognitive and non-cognitive development of young children. This holds in particular for young children from disadvantaged backgrounds, enhancing their future success in education and in the labour market. However, recent studies have shown that the use of formal childcare services is socially stratified, i.e. higher-income families or families with a high-educated mother use childcare services to a much larger extent than lower-income families or families with a low-skilled mother. Due to this social gap in childcare use, government investment in childcare could fail to live up to its inequality-reducing potential or, worse still, may actually exacerbate rather than mitigate social inequalities. Drawing on the comparative social policy literature, this article explores, for the first time, the determinants of inequalities in childcare coverage for a broad set of countries. Our results contribute to a proper understanding of the mechanisms driving inequality in childcare service use, which is crucial to the future of childcare services as an effective policy instrument to mitigate social inequalities in early life.

Excerpts from the conclusion:

In one of its first comprehensive reports on childcare, the OECD noted that “a public supply-side investment model managed by public authorities brings more uniform quality and superior coverage of childhood populations than parent subsidy models” (OECD 2006:114). We may now add that they also bring more equality.

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