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Published online: 02 Jul 2014.

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Accessibility of early childhood education and care: a state of affairs

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ABSTRACT: We analyse both academic literature and practice reports to discover the main causes for unequal accessibility of high quality early childhood care and education (ECEC). In order to understand and to remedy this inequality we need to consider the interplay between elements of governance, of the management of services and elements on the level of parents. From this analysis as well as from reports on successful inclusive practises, we arrive at five quality criteria and make 13 recommendations for policy and practice.

RÉSUMÉ: Nous analysons la littérature scientifique ainsi que des analyses de pratiques pour mieux comprendre les causes de l'inégalité de l'accessibilité des lieux d'accueil et d'éducation des jeunes enfants. Cette analyse nous mène à discerner l'interaction entre éléments de gouvernance, de la gestion des institutions et des éléments appartenant aux parents. Ce constat nous permet de formuler cinq critères de qualité et 13 recommandations aux politiques et aux pratiques.

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG: Es besteht ein sozial ungleicher Zugang zu qualitativ hochwertiger frühkindlicher Bildung und Betreuung. Um zu einem besseren Verständnis der Gründe für dieses Ungleichgewicht zu gelangen, analysierten wir die wissenschaftliche Literatur sowie die (in Flandern) bestehenden Praktiken. Diese Analyse verschaffte uns einen Einblick in die Verflechtungen zwischen der jeweiligen staatlichen Steuerung, dem Management der Kindertageseinrichtungen und der Beteiligung der Eltern. Unserer Erkenntnisse erlauben uns, fünf Qualitätskriterien zu formulieren und darüber hinaus 13 Empfehlungen für Politik und Praxis zu geben.

RESUMEN: Analizamos tanto en la literatura científica como en informes de prácticas cuales son las causas principales del acceso desigual a una educación de calidad en la primera infancia. A fin de entender y remediar esa desigualdad tenemos que considerar la interacción de elementos de gobernanza, de la gestión de servicios y de elementos pertenecientes a los padres. De este análisis, así como de los informes sobre prácticas inclusivas con éxito, podemos extraer 5 criterios de calidad y 13 recomendaciones para la política y la práctica.

Keywords: accessibility; inequality; poverty; diversity; immigrants

Introduction

It is now well known that early childhood education and care (ECEC) can yield substantial beneficial effects, and that these effects can last up to adolescence and in

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doing so ECCE can alleviate the effects of poverty at an early age. As a result, there is growing concern about the accessibility of ECEC for children from ethnic minority and low-income families. This concern is expressed in international policy documents (e.g. European Commission 2011), as well as in international reports (e.g. Naudeau et al. 2011; OECD 2006, 2012; Unicef Innocenti Research Centre 2008). Despite this consensus, it is well documented that children from ethnic minority and low-income families are less often enrolled in non-maternal care and preschools, and that when enrolled these children are more often to be found in provision of poorer quality care than their more affluent peers. While detailed figures are not available for all countries (e.g. France does not officially record ethnicity), there is an abundance of evidence that this is a global phenomenon. This has been demonstrated in the US (Hernandez, Taka-nishi, and Marotz 2009) and in several European countries, including France (Brabant-Delannoy and Lemoine 2009), Germany (Büchel and Spiess 2002), Italy (Del Boca 2010), the Netherlands (Driessen 2004; Noailly, Visser, and Grout 2007), Belgium (Ghysels and Van Lancker 2011), England (Sylva et al. 2007) and some Nordic countries (Wall and Jose 2004). We present a concise overview of what we know from research about why this still is the case as well as 13 lessons to learn from successful practices. We draw on an extensive literature review of European research and policy documents, commissioned by the European Commission Directorate-General Education and Culture and published as Lazzari and Vandenbroeck (2012) . Additionally the issue was discussed at a meeting with 71 experts and decision makers from 14 countries in January 2013. The expert meeting was part of the Transatlantic Forum for Inclusive Early Years, an initiative of a consortium of European and US foundations, led by the King Boudouin Foundation (www.inclusive-early-years.org). Insights on successful practices from these discussions are integrated in this article.

Understanding unequal access

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 for instance. As a result, inequalities in enrolment were predominantly understood as the result of parental *choice* (e.g. Hofferth and Wissoker, 1992; Peyton et al. 2001; Shlay et al. 2005). 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 (1994) 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 (Henly and Lyons 2000; Himmelweit and Sigala 2004; Vandenbroeck et al. 2008). These studies have shown 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 behaviour and environmental constraints, but also include the policy level are even more scarce (Sylva et al. 2007). Yet, such an ecological approach is necessary, acknowledging a multitude of factors at various levels: the micro-level of families, the meso-level of services, the macro-level of neighbourhoods and the exo-level of policies (Pungello and Kurtz-Costes 1999, 2000; Sylva et al. 2007),

as well as the interactions between these levels. We draw on studies on inequalities in access, but also on successful projects that have enabled more parents from ethnic minorities or parents in poverty to enrol in high quality provisions to analyse the complexity of these different levels. Regarding the analysis of successful practices in Europe, we have predominantly looked at projects that are related to two European networks: DECET (Diversity in Early Childhood Education and Training, mostly active in Western Europe) and ISSA (International Step by Step Association, mostly active in Central and Eastern Europe). It often concerns 'grey' literature reported on websites (www.decet.org; www.issa.nl; see also www.unaglobal.org) and in internal documents.

Policy

Policy measures, regarding the availability of services as well as general quality regulations and monitoring affect accessibility (Sylva et al. 2007). ECEC systems that operate on market principles, even when accompanied by a voucher system for poor families, are less effective in attracting poorer families (Lee 2006; Moss 2009). In the Netherlands, for instance, since marketisation in 2005, the number of provisions decreased in rural and poorer areas, while it increased in more affluent urban neighbourhoods (Noailly, Visser, and Grout 2007). This does not mean that the problem of unequal access is limited to market-oriented systems. Research shows that in more comprehensive welfare systems – typical of continental Europe – high quality ECEC is also more available in more affluent areas (e.g. Vandenbroeck et al. 2008; Del Boca 2010). Public policies that address issues of availability, entitlement and childcare costs – 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 (Skolverket 2007).

Characteristics of provision

In many countries, there is a shortage of provision for the early years and in most split systems, the shortage is greater for the youngest children (0– to three-year-olds) compared to 3three- to six-year-olds. In case of shortages, provision may be rationed according to priority criteria that – not always deliberately – discriminate against children from ethnic minority and poor families, such as, giving priority to working parents or to those who register early on waiting lists (Felfe and Lalive 2011; Ghysels and Van Lancker 2011). Parents in precarious working conditions can hardly plan their need for non-maternal care in advance (Vandenbroeck et al. 2008). Moreover, the fact that immigrant families have less access to care through informal networks (Wall and Jose 2004) and more often work irregular hours, demands more flexible opening hours of services (Del Boca 2010; Hernandez, Takanishi, and Marotz 2009; Wall and Jose 2004).

Characteristics of families

Immigrant families and families living in poverty often have smaller informal networks and less access to information about ECEC and enrolment procedures. In addition, language and cultural barriers may prevent them from fulfilling the bureaucratic

procedures necessary to enrol their children (Leseman 2002). A striking example in this regard are Roma communities, where lack of trust toward authorities and public services combined with discrimination and hostility encountered in educational environments tend to undermine children's participation in ECEC (Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe 2010).

Principles of good practice

Despite these obstacles, many practices exist to overcome these difficulties and allow significant progress to be made in the enrolment of children from ethnic minority and poor families.

For the purpose of this review research findings from studies describing successful practices implemented within EU Member States within the last 10 years were summarised and analysed. A particular effort was directed toward the maximum representation of EU countries in the studies selected, with particular reference to different social welfare regimes (Esping-Andersen 2002) and to the different situations from which disadvantage might stem (e.g. living in a poor neighbourhood, coming from a migrant background, living in contexts of ethnic division, belonging to segregated groups such as Roma). Preference has been given to studies providing a thick description of outstanding programmes, which received research validation, that were informed by relevant theoretical background and that provided a punctual account of the context in which practices took shape and developed. By acknowledging the different understandings underpinning educational policies directed toward the social inclusion of disadvantages children – which calls for a careful reflection on the wider social, cultural and political context in which successful educational practices have been generated – an in-depth analysis of the successful practices displayed across EU Member States was carried out. Through the analysis of such successful projects five crucial criteria that are contributing to increase the accessibility of ECEC services for children and families from a disadvantaged background have been identified and are discussed in the section below. These constitute the basis for the elaboration of the principles of good practices that will be illustrated in the concluding section of this article.

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 provision is to be targeted to families 'at risk'. On the contrary, structural provision addressing the general population (but with specific attention for the specific needs of families) are more successful than targeted provision (OECD 2006). 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, policymakers may decide to first invest in poorer areas, such as, the significant investment in Sure Start Children's Centres in England.

Affordability

In countries where public funding for ECEC is structurally available, provision is usually free, or parental fees are scaled according to income and are therefore more affordable (Del Boca 2010). However, the criterion of affordability refers not only to material

resources but also to more 'symbolic' forms of payment. For instance, when provision is targeted at specific populations 'at risk', parents from the group have to pay a symbolic price, such as being labelled or giving up part of their privacy, in order to show that they are entitled to the targeted provision (e.g. by proving they are 'in need'). In addition, such forms of ECEC are often accompanied by home visits, meaning that parents in poverty need to open up their private homes to social workers, while middle class users do not need to do so. These measures can be seen as a symbolic price to pay, which may represent a significant threshold (Roose and De Bie 2003).

Accessibility

Availability and affordability do not necessarily make provision accessible, as multiple obstacles may exclude children from poor and immigrant families, for example, language barriers, knowledge of bureaucratic procedures, waiting lists, or priorities set by management. ECEC access policies should be planned at the local level, starting from the analysis of barriers that prevent disadvantaged children and families from availing of ECEC provision. This may entail greater outreach to families whose presence tends to be less visible in the local community (Bennett 2012; Broadhead, Meleady and Delgato 2008).

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 (Del Boca 2010; Leseman 2002; Wall and Josè 2002). In short, ECEC services and how they are run need to make sense to excluded parents and local communities. ECEC centres that develop a democratic and participative policymaking capacity are found to be the most effective in engaging with disadvantaged communities (Open Society Institute 2006; Zylicz 2010).

Comprehensibility

Finally, this criterion refers to the extent to which the meaning of ECEC provision is matched with the meanings that parents attribute to this provision. This implies that values, beliefs and educational practices of the services are negotiated with families and local communities (Vandenbroeck 2011). 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 diversity backgrounds to ECEC (DECET 2007; De Graaf and Van Keulen 2008; Peeters 2010). 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 – may be more effective in answering the demands of local communities in contexts of diversity (Open Society Institute 2006; Whalley & Pen Green Centre Team 2007).

A framework for successful inclusive practices

The analysis of findings from the studies identified in the literature review (Lazzari & Vandenbroeck 2012) lead to the elaboration of the following framework for the

implementation of structural conditions promoting successful inclusive practices. Within a systemic perspective, the principle of good practices for increasing the accessibility of ECEC services are displayed across three levels that are in constant interplay: the policy level, the level of provision and the level of family outreach.

Policy level	Provision level	Parental level
1. Public funding	6. Democratic decision-making	12. Involvement
2. Integration of education and care	7. Analysis of priority enrolment criteria and access obstacles	13. Accessible and meaningful information
3. Non-discriminatory, population-based entitlements within a universal system	8. Outreach	
4. Regulations of costs and fees	9. Flexible opening hours matching diverse local needs	
5. Quality monitoring and research	10. Diverse workforce	
	11. Inter-agency cooperation providing effective family and community support	

(1) *Public funding*: direct public funding of provision (supply side financing) seems to be more efficient than funding parents (demand financing). The provision of public services for all and the streaming of additional funding toward disadvantaged families seems to be the most effective strategy.

(2) *Integrating education and care systems*: Where education and care services are integrated under one administrative department, they tend to have higher access, especially for the youngest children.

(3) *Entitlement*: Policies that accept that ECEC is an entitlement for *all* children yield better results than targeted policies (note that this does not exclude geographic priorities).

(4) *Policies that regulate parental fees according to income* may more easily avoid financial barriers, than voucher systems for the poorest.

(5) *Quality monitoring*: Centralised systems regulation and monitoring of the structural quality of ECEC settings can prevent children from disadvantaged backgrounds being more often found in poor quality services. It would be helpful also if policymakers would underwrite more research on this issue.

(6) *Democratic decision-making*: pedagogical policies should reflect diverse standpoints about care, education and the upbringing of young children by engaging with families and local communities.

(7) *Enrolment priority criteria* need to be scrutinised carefully for their effects on different populations.

(8) *Outreach*: ECEC providers should actively engage with those marginalised groups that tend to be less visible within the local community.

(9) *Flexible opening hours* for those parents who work in difficult conditions.

(10) *A diverse workforce*: a workforce reflecting ethnic and cultural minorities gives a welcome message to minority communities. It also helps to broaden the understanding of the team in respecting diversity.

(11) *Inter-agency cooperation*: integrated centres that cooperate across sectoral and institutional borders (e.g. education, health, housing, adult education) yield

better results both in the short-term – by addressing the complex needs of children and families living in difficult conditions – and in the long-term, by contributing to the regeneration of local communities.

(12) *Parental involvement*: Parents should be listened to, meaning that staff has paid time and is supported to do so.

(13) *Accessible and meaningful information*, including multilingual information that deals with the concrete questions of diverse parents.

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