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The Equal Access Study

Research Concept and Study Design

Impressum

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ISBN 978-3-86379-300-5

Grafik Brandungen GmbH, Leipzig

Druck Himmer GmbH Druckerei & Verlag, Augsburg

Datum der Veröffentlichung Dezember 2018

Deutsches Jugendinstitut e.V. (German Youth Institute, DJI) is one of Germany's largest social science institutes focusing on research and development around the topics of children, youth and families, as well as the political and practical areas related to them.

The German Youth Institute is based in Munich with a branch office in Halle/Saale. Founded in 1963, its supporting organisation is a non-profit association whose members stem from the political and academic spheres, as well as from other associations and institutions dedicated to the support of children, youth and families. Its institutional budget is primarily funded by the Federal Ministry of Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth (BMFSFJ), and, to a lesser degree, by the German federal states (Länder). Additional financial contributions are made by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBWF) as part of the Ministry's project funding, and by various foundations, the European Commission and institutions for the promotion of research.

The International Center Early Childhood Education and Care (ICEC) was established at the Department of Children and Childcare at the German Youth Institute in 2012. Conceived as a Joint Research Center, the ICEC bundles empirical research with scientific policy consultation and professional practice. The ICEC supports the international transfer of knowledge, political concepts and experience, thereby enabling Germany to draw on insights from other countries. In this connection, the ICEC is also actively involved in international panels and networks in the field of early childhood education and care (ECEC). The Equal Access Study is a comparative research project carried out by the ICEC from 2017 to 2020. The focus of the study is the accessibility of ECEC services in Canada, Germany and Sweden, with an emphasis on persistent access barriers at the local level of service provision.

The ICEC is funded by the Federal Ministry of Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth.

Publications within the Equal Access Study:

Volume 1 – Research Concept and Study Design

Volume 2 – Inequalities in Access to Early Childhood Education and Care in Germany

Volume 3 – Inequalities in Access to Early Childhood Education and Care in Sweden

Volume 4 – Inequalities in Access to Early Childhood Education and Care in Canada

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Preface

Equal access to early childhood education and care (ECEC) has moved to the forefront of national and international political debates. While ECEC enrolment rates keep increasing in many countries, inequalities in the enrolment of children from disadvantaged backgrounds remain. Still, knowledge about access patterns and the way institutional frameworks and steering processes might create, or perpetuate (existing) inequalities in access is still limited.

The *Equal Access Study* aims to go some way to further addressing these gaps in research. It is conducted at the International Centre Early Childhood Education and Care (ICEC) at the German Youth Institute. The study is comprised of:

- an introductory paper on the research concept and design of the study (ICEC Working Paper Series – Volume 1)
- a series of three expert reports on inequalities in access to ECEC in Germany, Sweden and Canada (ICEC Working Paper Series – Volume 2–4)
- a final report on the results of the empirical case studies which are based on six local case studies in the three countries.

The volume at hand consists of the study's research framework and design. It also contains the summaries of the three country reports written by different national experts. To make the information accessible for national and international readers, the conceptual paper as well as the three summaries are published in German¹ and English. The expert reports are available in English only.

We explicitly would like to thank the authors of the country reports, Prof. Christa Japel & Martha Friendly from Canada as well as Prof. Susanne Garvis & Dr. Johannes Lunneblad from Sweden, for their commitment, their support and the constructive cooperation. Their contributions allow us to gain a deeper understanding on governance structures and (potential) access barriers in early childhood education in Canada and Sweden.

Additionally, we would like to thank our colleagues at the German Youth Institute: Birgit Riedel for her helpful feedback on the German report and Sylvie Ganzevoort for the organisational support for the study.

Munich, November 2018

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¹ The German version of the paper can be found here: www.dji.de/ceec

1.

The *Equal Access Study*: Research Concept and Study Design

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The *Equal Access Study* is a qualitative, cross-country comparative research project that is conducted at the International Centre Early Childhood Education and Care (ICEC). Based on insights into the early childhood education and care (ECEC) systems in Canada, Germany and Sweden, the study investigates the role of institutional frameworks and steering processes when it comes to explaining persistent access barriers. This research perspective is based on the premise that social group-related differences in the use of ECEC services cannot solely be explained by parental preferences and attitudes towards childcare. They are also shaped by structural aspects such as specific regulations and modes of governance at the different levels of ECEC systems.

One focus of this study is the interplay and the tensions between and within the different ECEC governance levels. The study, therefore, has a case study-oriented design that illuminates the way wider policy regulations are understood and implemented at the local governance level, and what this means for the problem of (un)equal access. The broader aim of the project is to address existing patterns of inequalities in access to ECEC by shedding light on phenomena of selectivity in different municipalities and the potential role of local strategies and practices. In the following discussion, the research questions and aims are presented and the conceptual framework, research design and methodology of the research project are outlined.

1.1 Research focus: the problem of (un)equal access

Recent decades have seen a significant shift in the meaning and perception of early childhood education and care (Campbell-Barr/Bogatić 2016) and ECEC has experienced a marked increase in recognition. In many western societies it has become

a prioritised field of social policy (Klinkhammer/Riedel 2018). Especially because of the rise of what is known as ‘social investment discourse’ and insights from neuroscience and developmental psychology, early childhood is deemed to be crucial not only for the cognitive development of children but also for the development of the human capital potential of society as a whole (Naumann 2014). International research findings show that children who attend ECEC enjoy long-lasting educational benefits and tend to do better at school than those who do not (Ruhm/Waldfogel 2012). Children from disadvantaged backgrounds are thought to greatly benefit from ECEC. However, recent research findings show that these positive effects are very much dependent on a high quality of services (Anders 2013; Keys et al. 2013). Beyond the benefits of ECEC for the cognitive and socio-emotional development of children, it is also regarded as key to female labour market participation and has been directly linked to wider economic returns and social prosperity (Heckman et al. 2010; Heckman 2006).

Moreover, early childhood education and care is increasingly regarded as a key factor for creating equal educational and social opportunities (Bennett 2012; Lazzari/Vandenbroeck 2012). Indeed, the role of early childhood education in overcoming social inequality has been at the forefront of political and scholarly debates. The social welfare function of ECEC extends beyond its educational benefits and touches on social issues such as gender inequality, the social exclusion of immigrants and child poverty (Gambaro et al. 2014a; Prigge/Böhme 2014). Thanks to the influence of supra-national bodies (i.e. OECD, European Commission and The World Bank), the aim of providing equal opportunities and equality in access to ECEC for all children has moved up the policy agenda internationally (Campbell-Barr/Bogatić 2016). The resulting shift towards social investment policies across industrialised western countries (Häusermann 2018) and the unprecedented interest in the value of early childhood (Currie/Almond 2011) have meant that early childhood services in different national systems are increasingly being assessed and developed. A direct consequence of this are the major expansion efforts across a range of industrialised countries and the significantly increased availability of childcare across the OECD area (Bonoli/Reber 2010).

Nevertheless, increased availability in itself does not necessarily lead to greater equality in opportunities for all children regardless of their social background. Evidence from a longitudinal study that was conducted in Norway shows that even when high-quality ECEC services are both available and affordable, the link between underutilisation and low income/low parental educational level is only partially mitigated (Sibley et al. 2015). Indeed, patterns of selectivity are still observed across a wide range of countries² and children from certain social backgrounds are still less likely to be enrolled in services geared towards the general child population.

2 See Gambaro et al. (2014b) for a discussion of the situation in the UK and Oberhuemer (2014) for persistent access barriers within the German ECEC system.

Moreover, there are ongoing concerns about the responsiveness of ECEC services to the increasingly diverse needs of families and communities in different local contexts (Vandenbroeck/Lazzari 2014). These observations suggest that inequality in access continues to be an issue and that a closer look at perhaps subtler barriers to equal access is needed.

It is important to acknowledge that the problem of social and educational equality³ is a complex and multi-faceted issue that concerns aspects beyond the mere accessibility of services. Educational equality touches on phenomena that are outside the scope of this research project such as opportunities for equal participation, the intergenerational transmission of cultural capital and the way social inequalities are reproduced in everyday interactions and pedagogical practices. Even though equality in access in itself will not (automatically) lead to equal educational outcomes, it is still a fundamental prerequisite. This is because it is crucial for the promotion of equality in attainment (i.e. children's educational opportunities). This in no way disputes that, in the wider pursuit of social equality, equal access is only the 'starting point' that in the longer run will necessarily lead to new challenges. For example, if a more diverse group of children visits ECEC settings, this will require greater staff sensitivity towards the circumstances and the needs of children from a broad range of social, cultural and religious backgrounds (Dubovicki/Jukić 2016).

Research outcomes from across Europe show that children from disadvantaged social backgrounds are not only less likely to take up ECEC services but are also enrolled at an older age (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice/Eurostat 2014). Findings point, for example, to a strong link between maternal educational level and the usage of ECEC services, especially for the group of under-three-year olds. In her research on the situation in Europe, Wirth (2013) showed for a range of OECD countries that better qualified mothers are more likely to return to work and make use of ECEC services than mothers with a lower level of qualifications. They are, moreover, more likely to do so earlier on in their child's life. This finding is especially pronounced in countries with strongly market-based, for-profit ECEC service provision (i.e. Great Britain, the Netherlands). Despite state support there are indications that the actual costs for childcare continue to discourage less well qualified mothers who usually have a lower level of income (ibid.). Evidence from other studies across European countries shows that, especially in countries where educational participation is generally low (i.e. Poland, Bulgaria, Austria, Ireland), social inequalities in the usage of ECEC services can likewise be observed (van Lancker/Ghysels 2016). In these systems, children with a migrant background are the least likely to use ECEC (Vandenbroeck/Lazzari 2014).

3 Across the vast body of work on social inequality in education, a distinction can be made between research that has focused either on equality of educational opportunity or on equality of educational outcomes. For an in-depth discussion of concepts of educational equality see Guiton and Oakes (1995) or Hallinan (1988).

Similar patterns have been observed in regard to the quality of early childhood education: children from less privileged social backgrounds have a lower chance of being enrolled in a high-quality ECEC setting than their middle-class peers (Gambaro et al. 2014a; Kuger/Kluczniok 2008). Even though currently only a small number of international studies are available on this issue, initial findings suggest that this observation holds true for a range of different countries (European Commission et al. 2014; Bennett 2012). This is especially worrying since it is high-quality ECEC that positively influences young children's cognitive and socio-emotional development. On the one hand, research has convincingly demonstrated that the quality of services children attend is of crucial importance for the goal of equality in educational opportunity. On the other hand, if children from disadvantaged backgrounds have limited access to high-quality services, this might even deepen existing lines of social segregation between them and children from more affluent, middle-class families (Riedel 2011).

Overall, it has to be noted that enrolment rates themselves are not able to furnish conclusive information on access barriers. Rather it is the unmet demand for ECEC places that points towards (structural) access barriers for specific social groups or certain regions. As a result, the issue of unequal access and inequality in early childhood education and care has been taken up in some new studies and projects. A recent example of this is ISOTIS⁴, a Europe-wide collaborative research project and consortium that is aimed at contributing to effective policy and development in practice at different system levels in order to effectively combat persistent educational inequalities at an early stage. Another example for an ongoing research project with a focus on development in practice is the INTESYS⁵ project. It looks at the integration of sectors and services in order to improve the access of vulnerable families to high-quality services. The European CARE⁶ project, completed in 2017, was based on seven urban case studies in different European countries. This project addressed questions of the inclusiveness of ECEC systems and access to high-quality services.

4 <http://www.isotis.org>

5 <http://www.europe-kbf.eu/en/projects/early-childhood/intesys>

6 <http://ecec-care.org>

1.2 Research aims and questions

The *Equal Access Study* is especially concerned with identifying persistent access barriers in systems of early childhood education and care. Earlier research often focused on barriers within families and parental choices for (not) enrolling their child in ECEC (see critique by Vandebroek/Lazzari 2014). However, tendencies towards a change in or widening of perspective can be observed. Recent research has started to discuss childcare usage patterns as a result of structural barriers rather than parental choices alone (Pavolini/van Lancker 2018)⁷. There is still a lack of research on how educational inequalities are linked to the institutional settings in which they evolve. As part of this shift in perspective the objective of this project is to shed light on the ways in which ECEC systems are regulated and governed at the national, regional and local policy levels. It explores how different modes of governance and the interplay between different steering levels may either promote or diminish inequalities in access to high-quality ECEC services.

The main research aim of this project is to identify the way regulations and strategies for equality in access at the national level are implemented at the municipal level, where services are usually organised and provided by local authorities. Here the focus is on persistent challenges to equal access at the local level that might pose barriers for specific groups of children, as well as local strategies that aim to overcome certain stumbling blocks to access. A further focus of the project is on how local governance processes and measures are shaped by regulations and competencies at other governance levels⁸ (vertical governance) and how this influences access to ECEC at the local level. This is relevant to the project because ECEC, in the three selected countries, is provided by a variety of stakeholders, including public, private non-profit and private for-profit providers. In order to assure minimum provision, as well as quality and equity, national governments are involved to varying degrees in coordinating, regulating, incentivising and funding ECEC systems whilst local authorities and stakeholders experience differing degrees of autonomy and responsibility in different ECEC systems.

The *Equal Access Study* aims to address the following questions:

- How has the issue of equal access been addressed at the national level of ECEC governance in Canada, Germany and Sweden?
- What are the specific framework conditions of the ECEC systems in Canada, Germany and Sweden? Are there indications that certain features of the system

⁷ A more in-depth elaboration of the current state of research can be found in the German report: www.dji.de/cec-e

⁸ While existing literature frequently uses terminology such as 'superordinate' or 'subordinate' governance levels, we consciously chose to use such terminology only where necessary and appropriate. This acknowledges that the level of autonomy and political clout in steering ECEC services at the local governance level varies from country to country.

(e.g. governance structure, regulations, provider structure, financing, interaction with aligned policy areas) either facilitate or hinder equal access opportunities?

- How are the national ECEC systems embedded in the respective national welfare systems? What can we say about other relevant policies that affect ECEC, such as aligned family policies?
- What can be learned by paying attention to selectivity phenomena at the local level and respective strategies and practices on ECEC implementation in general and the issue of (un)equal access in particular?
- How do the competencies assigned to the different policy levels interact with each other? What can we say about the opportunities and challenges of these models of multilevel governance and policy regulations in addressing access inequality?

A key strength of our small-scale qualitative research design is that it is able to relate the data collected at the local level to the national context of individual ECEC systems. By looking at the way ECEC systems are embedded in wider national contexts and welfare structures, we hope to be able to gain insight into what kind of policy strategies work under certain conditions at the local level.

As already pointed out, the study builds on research which has demonstrated that children and families from socioeconomically disadvantaged and cultural minority backgrounds are less likely to have access to ECEC than those from more privileged backgrounds. By socioeconomically disadvantaged groups we mean groups that have lower financial resources (especially income), lower occupational positions, lower education background and/or lower personal resources (e.g. single parents). When we refer to ‘cultural minority groups’ we are interested in the impact of characteristics such as ethnicity, migration history and/or first language on the accessibility of (high quality) ECEC services. Moreover, through data collection and analysis, we aim to take up the question as to which children are affected in an inductive manner to gain some insights into which groups are discussed as more likely to experience access barriers and how this is addressed in various local contexts. This has the advantage that the findings on who might be less likely to have access to services are not predefined based on existing research only, but also emerge from the qualitative research data.

Due to limited resources, we do not explicitly focus on children with disabilities since access conditions for disabled children and governance structure, strategies of inclusion and related policies partly differ from those of children from different socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds. They also involve further stakeholders, especially from the health sector.

1.3 Research concept: access dimensions

The heuristic framework of this project draws on four criteria that have been identified in a previous analysis of best practice examples across different European countries (Vandenbroeck/Lazzari 2014; Lazzari/Vandenbroeck 2012). This categorisation builds on the framework introduced by Roose and de Bie (2003). What is useful about this heuristic background is that the authors firmly anchor social services in an inter-subjective notion of the welfare state. This notion stresses the importance of differentiating service supply in order to provide all individuals with the opportunity to develop their full potential in line with diverse needs, in a diverse range of circumstances (Roose/de Bie 2003).

The four criteria are:

Availability: Are services/places available everywhere, also in disadvantaged and rural areas? What measures have been taken regarding the *availability* of childcare services? How widely available are services geared towards the under-three-year-olds?

Affordability: How affordable are ECEC services and how are they funded? Are all parents, regardless of social background, able to afford high-quality ECEC for their children? Are measures such as public subsidies in place to ensure that services are accessible to all families? Are there other financial or social costs (i.e. financial costs not included in the subsidised fees; social 'costs' such as the stigmatisation of being in 'need')?

Accessibility: Have any other implicit or explicit barriers in the form of selective enrolment procedures, procedures of place allocation or language barriers etc. been observed? Do families benefit from existing regulations such as income-related fees and subsidies in equal ways? Are there any redistributive measures or initiatives in place that are meant to safeguard equal access, and what do we know about them?

Adequacy: Are the ECEC services attuned to the demands of children and parents with diverse social and cultural backgrounds? Is the system able to take into account diversity? Does the system allow for integrating families whose needs and demands differ from those of the majority population or more privileged families? Does the current ECEC system foster a constructive dialogue between services and families?

1.4 Methodological approach: researching access barriers from the perspective of vertical and horizontal governance

In the *Equal Access Study*, a research perspective is adopted that focusses on the role of governance and institutional pathways when it comes to understanding patterns of access inequality and potential access barriers. By taking into account the context dependency of institutional processes, we acknowledge the complexity of ECEC governance. On the one hand, ECEC service provision is embedded in historically grown institutional arrangements, which matter when it comes to understanding current patterns of enrolment. On the other hand, these arrangements are not static constructs, and seemingly minor modifications can pave the way for path-altering changes. This perspective focusses on the significance of contextuality and the fact that similar policy measures may lead to different outcomes depending on the socio-cultural and institutional contexts within which services are provided. Since many ECEC systems are governed in a complex multi-level structure with responsibilities shared across different administrative levels, the study considers both vertical governance processes (i.e. across different levels of the systems) and horizontal governance processes at a local level, where ECEC services are frequently organised and implemented. Whilst the focus of the empirical research is on the local level, the interrelatedness of different governance levels is taken into account, too.

Multi-level governance: the vertical research perspective

As in other policy fields, ECEC systems tend to be complex constructs that are governed across different policy levels. There is still a lack of insight into the way in which policy frameworks at the national level are put in place and comprehended at the local level of service provision (Campbell-Barr/Bogatic 2016). In this project, a governance perspective is used to analyse the impact of institutional contexts and look at structures and modes of steering. The concept of governance is understood as structures, actions and modes of steering and coordinating public and non-public stakeholders seeking to provide a common good, in our case access to ECEC. We chose to apply this perspective to the project for the following reasons: First, the governance perspective is well suited for multi-level analysis. Thus, we can account for split responsibilities at different administrative levels. This perspective allows us to integrate both national and local processes of ECEC administration (Kuronen/Caillaud 2015). Second, since the interests of different stakeholders are

not necessarily aligned – the contrary is often the case – a multi-level system generates negotiations, tensions or even blockades. The process-oriented approach of governance analysis helps us to tackle the dynamic interaction between institutionalised structures (such as legal frameworks) and negotiation processes. Third, the governance approach has the capacity to consider the interaction between different (governmental and non-governmental) stakeholders.

Despite our strong focus on the local dimension of ECEC governance and provision, the directing of our attention to other governance levels demonstrates that social policies should not be regarded as solely local products (Andreotti et al. 2012). Despite differences in governance structures and regulatory framework conditions, in most countries ECEC provision is subject to certain central-local tensions that have an impact on issues such as access.

Local level governance: the horizontal research perspective

The focus of the project is on identifying access barriers to ECEC at the local level. What is of interest here are the ‘specific configurations’ (Andreotti et al. 2012) that emerge when national frameworks are interpreted and enacted in historically grown local contexts, with specific socio-cultural demands and varying resources. While the ideal of equal opportunities for children is firmly anchored in global discourses and has appeared on the agendas of ECEC policy making at the national level, there is still a lack of insight into the way in which these developments find expression in local contexts. Further research is needed here to gain insight into persistent local access barriers and whether equal access is best addressed at the local level of service provision. Whilst national policy institutions continue to play a significant role in ECEC governance through regulatory frameworks and the provision of financial resources, throughout the 1990s, there has been a trend towards decentralisation of social care services. The resulting developments point towards a pluralisation of political actors and stakeholders involved in the provision of early childhood education and care. This, in turn, has led to new dynamics and processes within ECEC systems that are still under-researched. An important starting point for this research project is a theoretical framework that acknowledges the plurality of actors and stakeholders involved in the provision of formal childcare services, such as the concept of welfare pluralism (see Evers/Olk 1996 and Riedel 2011).

It must be noted that aspects relevant to the issue of access, such as the availability and affordability of ECEC, have been and still are of essential interest to those concerned with the general requirements for equality in opportunity. In addition, however, institutional stumbling blocks to ECEC attendance may also entail other, less readily observed factors that we hope to gain a better understanding of through a local perspective.

1.5 Study design

The *Equal Access Study* has a case-oriented, cross-country comparative research design and is conducted in two consecutive research steps. It begins by assessing the ECEC governance frameworks and wider welfare traditions of each of the countries. The subsequent research step empirically investigates the specific access-related challenges and strategies at the local level (Gómez/Kuronen 2011; Gómez 1998; Yin 1994).

The empirical comparison is based on six municipalities – two in each country. The two-step research design is meant to facilitate the contextual understanding of each case study, which is based on an understanding of local ECEC governance as shaped by regulation at the other governance levels. It is seen as an important access route for insights into systemic/institutional access barriers and reconfigurations of national policy frameworks at the local level. Stake (1994) and later Gómez (1998) also define these research designs as ‘collective case studies’. What is characteristic for this approach is that several cases are studied to generate knowledge about the research problem.

The main advantages of this approach in terms of this research project are the opportunities to consider the particularities related to the social policy and institutional context of the topic under investigation. This can be hard to achieve by means of large-scale multi-national comparisons (Gómez 1998). Another argument in favour of this approach is the goal of a more holistic and in-depth understanding of local circumstances, dynamics, mechanisms and processes. An additional advantage of a qualitative approach to our research questions is its ability to generate rich, detailed and in-depth data, which are useful when it comes to shedding further light on not well-understood issues that require the generation of theory. This is especially important since, as we have pointed out, certain mechanisms that might be linked to subtler dimensions of access are not yet fully understood and are still a ‘black box’.

The study is conducted in three consecutive research steps:

- 1) As a first step of the research project, expert reports on each of the countries were commissioned. The aim of these expert country reports is to provide an overview of the regulations, competencies and responsibilities across the different governance levels in the ECEC systems of Canada, Germany and Sweden. This first stage is, moreover, seen as a preliminary research step for the municipal case study selection and the contextualisation of the research findings at the local level.
- 2) As a second research step, two local case studies are conducted in each country. Local ECEC governance and service provision patterns in individual municipalities are examined in order to identify access barriers as well as strategies to

ensure equal access for all children. The main methods used for data collection are semi-structured, qualitative interviews with a range of representatives from local authorities and providers. A focus of interest are local practices related to the issue of (un)equal access to services: How are national policies meant to further equal opportunities regarding access translated at the local level? Which different local actors are involved and how?

- 3) As a third step, the findings of both previous research stages will feed into a comparative analysis of equal access strategies and outcomes in the three countries.

Country selection

The next section contains a short rationale for the country selection in this research project.

Due to the federal structure of the country, the ECEC system in Canada is characterised through geographical disparities. The legal framework and pedagogical guidelines for ECEC services are laid down at the level of its ten provinces and three territories. Of interest in the case of Canada is the way in which regulations, or the absence of regulations at the national level (e.g. maternity and parental leave policies or fiscal transfers to provinces/territories) and ECEC regulation and provision at the provincial and local levels are interrelated in either promoting or impeding equal access to ECEC. Beyond the general national trend on the persistent gap in ECEC across Canada and which groups are most strongly affected by it, we are especially interested in ECEC governance and provision in the two largest Canadian provinces, Ontario and Quebec.

The German ECEC system is of interest as it is a mixed welfare system which is regulated and governed at the federal and regional levels, whereas the realisation and operationalisation of ECEC service provision is organised at the local level. Additionally, Germany has been through several legislative reforms on ECEC expansion over the past two decades, leading to new developments and challenges in the ECEC system.

Sweden was selected as a case for the following reasons: Whereas in Swedish ECEC the legal framework and pedagogical guidelines are laid down at the national level, provision is organised at the local level. Access to ECEC is based on a universal approach. Therefore, it is of interest to what extent the Swedish ECEC system faces challenges related to unequal access to (high-quality) ECEC.

Expert country reports

To explore the situation in Sweden, Canada (particularly in the provinces Ontario and Quebec) and Germany, the expert reports are meant to illuminate the interplay between ECEC regulations, wider care regimes, and welfare regulations⁹. The reports especially shed light on regulations, competencies and responsibilities at the national and federal levels of the ECEC system in these countries/provinces. It also illuminates the interplay between different governance levels and the degree of autonomy and political leeway enjoyed by each governance level. In the reports, moreover, existing data on ECEC enrolment patterns of different groups and on the current availability and demand for childcare services are discussed. Also, data on the use of high-quality services by different groups of children are gathered. A third objective of the reports is the collection of information on the way in which the ECEC systems have developed historically in each of these countries, their social welfare function and the way in which ECEC usage may intersect with regulations in other aligned policy areas such as family policy or education. Wider welfare arrangements, in which ECEC systems are embedded, are considered since we believe that policies that are directly or indirectly linked to ECEC also play a role when it comes to issues of social and educational inequalities in access to childcare. Thanks to the reports' insights into important parameters such as ECEC enrolment rates, patterns of access inequality and their development over time become clear, and an initial understanding of the particularities of the problem of (un)equal access in each country is gained. Therefore, the reports are used as an important preliminary step for the municipal case studies that are meant to facilitate the selection of cases and the process of narrowing down the research questions to be addressed at the municipal level. This, in turn, crucially informs the development of an interview guide that will be used for the interviews with local authorities and stakeholders.

The objective of the expert reports is to provide deeper insights into the development and implementation of political strategies that address inequality in access to ECEC in the selected countries, focusing mainly on two characteristics: (1) socio-economic status and (2) migrant (respectively aboriginal) background. The reports contain information on the following aspects:

- State of research and latest data on inequalities in access to (high-quality) ECEC.
- The organisation of the ECEC governance system (regulating framework(s), funding and service provision) including the allocation of competencies and relevant regulations and programmes on the national/federal, provincial/regional and local levels.

⁹ A summary of each of the three reports is attached to this paper.

- Interdependence of wider welfare and care policies and ECEC policy, and the consequential effect.
- Reflection on current major challenges and barriers to equal access.

Based on the expert reports, particularities of the three ECEC systems have been identified which will then be used to sample the municipalities and interview partners for the local case studies.

On the empirical part: the local case studies

In the next stage of this research project, the focus of our investigation and the methodological approach of our project will be on access-related processes at the local level of ECEC governance. We will be on the look-out for selectivity phenomena. With a view to gaining a deeper understanding of what is happening in different local contexts, a multi-perspective interviewing approach with different stakeholders will be used in each municipality. Gomez and Kuronen (2011) refer to this as “listening to different versions of the same story” (p. 691). Interview partners will include local ECEC policymakers, staff in local administrations, ECEC providers and other actors in the local community. The aspects of interest here will be, for instance, the local ECEC administration’s approach to matching the service offer and families’ demands, how the access issue is addressed, as well as local strategies for combating unequal access. The interviews are guided by a semi-structured interview guide. This interview guide will reflect the four dimensions of access (availability, affordability, accessibility and adequacy), and will address research questions that arise from the findings in the expert reports. The interview guide is currently being tested in pilot interviews.

The rationale for the local case study selection

The local case studies build on persisting knowledge gaps and important questions regarding the implementation of ECEC at the local level of the system, which have been raised in the expert reports. From the reports we can gain first insights into what might be relevant characteristics of the particular institutional context that can guide our further exploratory research on potential access barriers. The municipalities in Germany, Canada and Sweden have been selected in terms of the distinctive features of the respective ECEC system for the purposes of applying the local data to the wider national welfare context and, therefore, substantiating the cross-country comparison. Consequently, the six municipalities are thought to represent one or more particularities of the country-specific ECEC system.

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2.

Inequalities in Access to Early Childhood Education and Care in Germany – Summary –

Antonia Scholz, Katharina Erhard, Sophie Hahn and Dana Haring

This report discusses the problem of equal access to services of early childhood education and care (ECEC) in Germany. Germany is a particularly interesting country when it comes to investigating (un)equal access as the German ECEC landscape has undergone fundamental changes over the past two decades. Among other things, this shift has led to a universal legal entitlement to ECEC. Nonetheless, there are still some stumbling blocks to equal access. The problem of equal access is complex and needs to be addressed in a multi-dimensional manner in order to identify possible stumbling blocks at all levels of the system and highlight even less immediately visible processes of institutional discrimination. The report, therefore, draws on four key dimensions that have been identified in earlier research as the crucial prerequisites that need to be met for service provision to be equally accessible to all children. These dimensions are the availability, affordability, accessibility, and adequacy of ECEC service provision.

A large body of existing studies focuses on the demographic variables of young children, and emphasises educational beliefs and parental preferences. Against this backdrop the role of institutions in perpetuating access barriers for certain social groups has not been a matter of extensive empirical research. As there are indications that access inequalities may also result from the social, political and institutional contexts in which ECEC systems have emerged historically, the research perspective in this report has been extended to shed light on the interplay between structural conditions of the ECEC system in Germany, the individual needs of families within the increasingly heterogeneous German society, and how this can result in access barriers for certain groups of children.

Current ECEC situation: Enrolment rates and demand

The provision of structural data on the German ECEC system is well developed as a full census is conducted every year by the German Federal Statistical Office. Therefore, these data furnish large numbers of cases that allow for differentiation by year, small age groups and other characteristics.

In 2018, 33.6 percent of children aged zero to two were enrolled in ECEC, either in centre-based provision (28.3 percent) or family day care (5.3 percent). Respectively, 93.0 percent of three- to six-year-olds attended ECEC, the vast majority enrolled in centre-based care (92.3 percent). Enrolment patterns differ systematically between different social groups and between regions. Children whose parents have a low educational level or a migration background are the most underrepresented groups. These children are less likely to attend ECEC than their peers with higher socioeconomic status and without a migration background. Social disparities are especially pronounced in the case of zero- to two-year-old children. However, differences in enrolment patterns by migration background can mainly be traced back to socioeconomic differences. This suggests that migration only plays a minor role in explaining differences in ECEC enrolment and that a migration background and a low socioeconomic background strongly correlate. Enrolment patterns that at first glance appear to be mechanisms related to migration background, therefore, require further scrutiny.

Apart from social disparities, huge regional disparities in enrolment rates to ECEC can be observed in Germany. First, there is the historically grown divide between eastern and western Germany with far higher enrolment rates in eastern Germany (for children under the age of three: 51.5 percent in the east, 29.4 percent in the west). Second, enrolment rates in urban, well developed areas exceed those in less populated rural regions.

While there are notable regional differences in structural aspects of ECEC services (e.g. provider structure, parental fees, opening hours), there is still a lack of data on the interplay between regional and social disparities. A similar data shortage is observed with regard to enrolment to high-quality services.

As a result of the massive expansion of the ECEC sector, enrolment rates have been on the rise over the last decade. Still, some groups seem to have benefited more from the legal entitlement and expansion. This is especially true for children with highly educated mothers. On the downside, this means that some groups are still more likely to be left out. Demand still exceeds the ECEC places available. In 2016, 28 percent of zero- to two-year-old children in western Germany were actually enrolled, while 43 percent of parents expressed a wish for a place for their child, resulting in a gap of 15 percentage points. In contrast, in eastern Germany demand from parents (59 percent) exceeded enrolment (52 percent) by only seven percentage points. Additionally, it can be observed that parents' demand for institutionalised care has been on the rise

for this age group since the introduction of the legal entitlement. The gap between demand and provision for three- to six-year-olds is only marginal but still exists. Data on differences in demand at the local level are scarce and require further research.

Welfare context and current policy reforms

Historically, early childhood education and care in Germany has developed in two relatively distinct political systems and social contexts. Despite the conservative, corporatist tradition of the German welfare system and a historical policy focus on social insurance rather than equality, fundamental reforms and changes in the policy focus of the early childhood education and care system have increasingly been guided by principles such as equal opportunities and social inclusion. A crucial driving factor of this development was increasing female labour market participation and a growing need to reconcile family and work obligations through the provision of childcare. Over the last two decades, this has led to significant changes in the ECEC system and aligned family policy areas that have started to depart childcare in Germany from its longstanding familialist and conservative welfare tradition.

At the turn of the millennium, with the rise of the social investment discourse and the outcomes of the first round of the Pisa study in 2001, a shift in paradigm and policy focus was encouraged that started to challenge longstanding childcare ideals. Because of a new emphasis on the human capital potential of ECEC and insights from the neurosciences and developmental psychology, children started to be seen for the first time as the main beneficiaries of ECEC. Early childhood education began to enjoy wider recognition in social policy circles and was no longer solely a subject of family policy, but increasingly also a matter of educational policy.

Moreover, the poor ranking of Germany in the PISA league tables fostered a nationwide discourse on ‘school readiness’ and underpinned the role of ECEC in overcoming social and educational inequalities. The greater emphasis on social inclusion and equal opportunities led to a range of initiatives and programmes. One such initiative was the development of non-stringent curricular guidelines between 2002 and 2006. Then followed the Day Care Expansion Act (*Tagesbetreuungsbausbaugesetz* – TAG) in 2005 and the Childcare Funding Act (*Kinderförderungsgesetz* – KiföG) in 2008. The Childcare Funding Act includes a legal entitlement to ECEC for all children, starting on their first birthday, which came into effect in August 2013. The main aim of this reform was to significantly expand childcare services across Germany, especially for the under three-year-olds. Moreover, as it was the case in other European countries, there has been a trend towards the introduction of integrated services in Germany. Since the early 2000s, we have observed the rise of centres combining childcare and other counselling services for families.

The reforms to the German ECEC system were accompanied by some important changes to family policies, in particular fundamental changes to the parental leave scheme in Germany that now strongly resembles the Nordic parental leave model. These changes encourage dual-earner families and support an early return to work. As a result, the familialist tradition of the German welfare and care system is now said to be in decline and recent family policy reforms are thought to herald a new area. Nevertheless, the interplay between institutional frameworks and individual work-family arrangements continues to be defined by some ‘old legacies’, too. The changes described above have been counteracted by other reforms or by unchanged policy structures such as the joint taxation of married couples (*Ebegattensplitting*). This shows that family and childcare policy in Germany continues to be defined by different and even competing ideals of care that co-exist simultaneously. Despite a rapprochement of available childcare places in the eastern and western regions of Germany, there are some important indications that the co-existence of traditional and progressive work-care models continues to lead to differences in ECEC usage, since the later are more likely to benefit better-situated families.

ECEC governance in Germany and its implications for (un)equal access

Early childhood education and care in Germany is characterised by a multi-level governance structure, public funding and a strictly regulated childcare market with a predominance of private non-profit providers. It has developed as part of the public welfare sector (and not the educational sector) and is part of the system of child and youth welfare (*Kinder- und Jugendhilfe*).

Based on the principles of federalism and subsidiarity, steering in ECEC has traditionally been organised in a highly decentralised structure. Whereas the national government only sets a broad legal framework, detailed regulation, funding and implementation of ECEC services are the responsibility of the regional and local level. At national level, the Federal Ministry of Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth (BMFSFJ) is in charge. At regional level, the *Länder* (federal states) translate general guidelines into concrete regulations. The local level bears the main responsibility for implementing ECEC: municipalities and districts are in charge of planning and providing an adequate service offer. To this end, they either act as providers themselves or cooperate with non-public providers.

ECEC service types include creches for children under the age of three, kindergarten for children three years and older, mixed age settings, and family day care (mostly for the under-threes). The pluralism of providers is an inherent characteristic of the German service landscape. Providers are either public (approximately one-third), private non-profit or private for-profit. A key feature of the strongly regulated childcare market in Germany is the dominant role of private, non-profit providers (mostly welfare organisations and church-affiliated services, parent-run

settings), operating on the basis of far-reaching autonomy. The for-profit segment is very small in Germany (3.2 percent).

Funding is mainly public, with the municipalities bearing around 50 percent of the costs. Investments by the federal government are limited to targeted investment programmes or indirect redistributive measures. Parental fees vary widely between the *Länder*, municipalities and providers. They are often staggered taking into account social indicators such as income or number of siblings already enrolled in ECEC. Currently, a trend towards free childcare can be observed. Free provision is in place in several *Länder* and municipalities, and there are also discussions at federal level about abolishing all fees.

ECEC access has been made universal. The increasing will to steer demonstrated by the federal government has led to the reforms described above and paved the way for the considerable progressive developments. However, in the institutional context there are some critical aspects that merit a closer look with a view to implementing equal access. These aspects touch on the consistency, transparency and scope of inclusiveness and can be observed at all administrative levels of the ECEC governance system. Overall, we see considerable variation in the regulations at *Länder* level, in local governance and provision patterns, and also in financial terms (both public resources and parental fees). These disparities lead de facto to unequal access conditions across the regions. Moreover, at the ECEC setting level, there are indications that a lack of transparency and patterns of (unintended) selectivity affect the actual degree of accessibility in practice. It is still unclear how these observed regional and social disparities in ECEC are intertwined. Further research at the local level of service provision would provide insight into how patterns of inequality can best be addressed within an institutional context that is shaped by local circumstances.

Conclusions and main findings

Germany has taken important steps towards greater equality in access and there have been considerable achievements in the policy field of early childhood education and care. Nevertheless, the report shows that the country continues to face a range of challenges. Despite the major political efforts to make services more available and affordable, there are important indications that the legal universal entitlement at the macro level does not necessarily and not everywhere in Germany translate into equal access opportunities at the individual level. This is especially down to considerable regional disparities in the availability and affordability of services. Geographical disparities in the German ECEC system affect all four pillars of equal access (availability, affordability, accessibility, and adequacy). In fact, the degree to which services are accessible especially to disadvantaged groups of children very much depends on where they live. Other potential stumbling blocks are the local(ly varying) structure of provision and the responsiveness of ECEC

services to the diverse needs of families. More subtle barriers to equal access, especially in regions where places are scarce, are observed in relation to the local allocation of places, the selection criteria of different ECEC providers and centres, and their information policies. These aspects, which imply more subliminal risks of institutional discrimination, are mainly related to the dimensions of accessibility and adequacy. They would require further research at a local level, since this would lead to a better understanding of both the way in which the wider policy goal of equal access is interpreted and implemented at the level of provision, and also of possibly resulting patterns of inequality.

3.

Inequalities in Access to Early Childhood Education and Care in Sweden – Summary –

Susanne Garvis and Johannes Lunneblad

In Sweden, preschool is part of the educational system. Municipalities are required to provide preschool for children aged between one and five. In 2016, almost 94 percent of children aged four to five attended preschool and 98 percent of six-year-olds attended preschool class. Since the 1970s, Swedish preschool has played a significant role in social policy and the political agenda for an equal society. It has been embedded in various social policies (such as parental leave and health care) in order to create a supportive welfare state.

Today, the preschool system faces new challenges of working with children from diverse backgrounds, finding suitably qualified staff, staff-child ratios and working within a public management agenda.

Inequality in access to early childhood education and care (ECEC)

Since the 1970s, the number of children enrolled in preschools in Sweden has increased, with universal access policy allowing all children to attend. This suggests that current policies enable many families to access preschool, regardless of their socioeconomic background. Thus, only a small proportion of families still choose to keep children at home before primary school.

There are relatively small differences between different social groups or income groups in terms of the age at which children start preschool. However, children in families with the lowest income and parents with low levels of education start later than children from middle-income families. This means that many children

with a foreign background start preschool later than children with parents born in Sweden.

In Sweden, 73 percent of preschools are run by the municipality whereas 27 percent are run as private preschools. Private preschools can include independent schools and parents' cooperatives. Most independent preschools are to be found in suburban and metropolitan municipalities, with few independent preschools located in rural areas. Parents can choose the type of preschool (free choice) and do not pay more than the listed fee regulation amount. The users of independent preschools are more likely to have attended higher education and be high earners, compared with the parents who choose the municipal preschools. In a research study by Vamstad (2016), some parents perceive private preschools as being of better quality. However, this is not backed by the official statistics. There is a need for more evidence on parental access to preschools in Sweden. The available data on parental attitudes to preschool access are limited.

In Swedish preschools, approximately 39 percent of staff working with children have completed approved teacher training (mainly preschool teacher qualifications). Municipal preschools have a higher number of staff with the required training than independent preschools. But there are also regional differences. The highest proportion of qualified workers is to be found in rural municipalities whereas metropolitan areas and specifically socially disadvantaged areas have the lowest proportion of trained personnel. This is worrying since the children living in socially disadvantaged areas have the greatest need for support. There are also regional differences in staff-child ratios in preschools. In 2016, the average for rural areas was ten children per preschool teacher. In metropolitan areas, the ratio was 17 children to one preschool teacher. Group size ratios are important for child interaction, safety and supervision.

Multi-level governance of ECEC

The Swedish state lays down the overall objectives and guidelines for the education system whereas the municipalities are responsible for implementing objectives and strategies. Since 1999, all children have had a legal right to attend preschool. For children one to three, enrolment in preschool is subject to a fee. The fees for preschool are calculated on the basis of family income. The municipalities can determine the amount of parental fees up to a nationally set limit (maxtaxa), and the fees therefore vary across the municipalities. Preschool is free for children aged four and five.

The national preschool is subject to the compulsory school curriculum. Different subject areas are incorporated into the curriculum, with the aims oriented towards basic values, development of social skills and play. These objectives are designed to encourage every preschool to strive to ensure that children learn and develop. Since 2010, there have been revisions to the preschool curriculum that have contributed to a stronger focus on learning.

One of the sections on preschool in the Swedish Education Act contains special language provisions for children with a mother tongue other than Swedish. It states that children who are native speakers of a language other than Swedish should be given the opportunity to develop their ability to master their mother tongue as well as the majority language. In order to support the children's mother tongue, parents can apply for mother tongue training during their time at preschool and/or school and the municipality has to provide training in the child's mother tongue if there is a group of at least five students who wish to register for this training.

ECEC in the context of welfare policy and public debate on welfare

Historically, the policy goals for preschool and the Swedish welfare system have been part of labour market policy, gender equality, with an emphasis on education. Preschool is part of a well-developed welfare system. Parents are entitled to paid parental leave for thirteen months. Examples of how the Swedish welfare system supports children and their families are: pregnancy benefits for women who can't work during pregnancy; child support up to age 16; additional allowances for families with several children; rent allowances for low-income families, and free health care for all children up to age 18.

Over the last few decades, however, the idea of a beneficial strong welfare system has been challenged by neoliberal ideology, where priority is given to freedom of choice and the conviction that quality is best achieved through competition. The municipalities have been decentralised to meet the requirements of this new public management ideology. This has changed the management of preschools on several levels. While quality is monitored within the municipalities, there is no national quality measurement system for preschool quality.

Media reports about Swedish preschools are not very common. However, in recent years, news reporting and debates have centred on preschool funding and issues related to access and quality. Public media debates on access inequality for preschools have generally focused on the size of the children's groups and waiting times for access to preschool. In some municipalities, this would seem to suggest that, given the large numbers of children attending preschool, legal accessibility to preschool is being challenged. While municipalities are able to meet access requirements by increasing children's group sizes, concerns are raised about groups becoming too large. There has also been public debate about the hours of attendance to which children are entitled. Again, however, access and hours of attendance are dependent on the municipality and vary across Sweden. Organisation on the municipal level in Sweden has, therefore, emerged as an important factor regarding access inequalities within Swedish ECEC.

The latest reception of refugees has also triggered a debate about Sweden as a multicultural society. About 20 percent of the children in Swedish preschools have a foreign

background. The number of children who speak a mother tongue other than Swedish has also increased over the past 20 years (22 percent of the children speak a language other than Swedish). The last 10 years in Sweden have seen a growing debate on the relationship between immigration and internal national problems in connection with segregation and xenophobia. In this debate, reference is often made to the Swedish identity in its relation to the Swedish language and concepts of standards such as gender equality and social equality. However, as previously discussed, cultural diversity does not have the same positive connotation today as it did from the 1970s up to the beginning of the 2000s. Today, preschool is viewed as an important way for children with an immigrant background to become Swedish and to prepare for school.

Conclusion

The concept of equivalence has been central to Swedish education. The term describes how education works to support all children and promote social equality. The Education Act stipulates that preschool fulfils this aim when all children are offered a place in high quality preschool. Preschool is, therefore, an important topic for society, especially for parents and politicians who more and more often discuss preschool issues in the media. Swedish preschools are generally considered to be of high quality. There is a preschool education programme for children who have the right to participate from age one. In addition to having access to a preschool place, there are also a number of other welfare policies (for example parental leave, child allowance, allowance to care for a sick child) that operate as a support system aimed at compensating unequal conditions for children and their families.

By world standards, Sweden is able to provide high quality ECEC that is available to all children. However, national reports have highlighted a number of challenges for the municipalities that have consequences for preschool quality, especially around access inequality. In one-fifth of the preschools evaluated, the staff didn't have the opportunity or the ability to pay enough attention to all children. The reasons for this are both the overly large children's groups (to meet access requirements) but also the staff's lack of required training (it is cheaper for preschools to employ an unqualified teacher to work with larger groups of children). Two-thirds of the country's municipalities have no socioeconomic model for resource allocation. Even if children require extra support and resources, it is the responsibility of the preschool to organise them and to do so within the usual funding allocation. In several municipalities that used a resource allocation according to economic principles, implementation and outcomes were not evaluated. It is also apparent that what the municipalities seek to achieve with targeted resources and quality work is frequently not linked to the distribution of these targeted resources. Some municipalities also struggle with providing places for all children within the designated time limit, with parents forced to wait until a preschool place becomes available. This then impacts parent participation in the workforce. Clearly, the decentralisation of preschool imposes high demands in

terms of well-educated staff. Given the difficulties in hiring trained teachers in the most socially vulnerable areas, this is problematic. This leads to a situation of random control and difficulties in determining what needs to be improved and followed-up. For the individual, this creates difficulties in determining the level of quality and thus deciding which follow-up methods are needed to improve his/her work.

The role of the municipality in providing access equality and availability for all children is important across Sweden. Different municipalities are governed in different ways to fulfil the requirements of the Education Act, meaning children and parents have different experiences depending on where they live in Sweden. As decisions about preschool are taken and governed on the municipal level (budgets for preschool, queue system, children's group size, hours of access), there are variations across Sweden. This also means that variations occur across individual preschools, based on decisions by the preschool directors. It should be noted that all children are treated the same in the Swedish preschool system on the grounds of equality. Furthermore, the individual targeting of diverse groups in society that happens in other countries does not happen in the Swedish context.

The marketisation of education (including the free choice system where parents can choose any preschool) appears to favour the middle class whereas residents from the most socially disadvantaged areas – often with immigrant backgrounds – have encountered the downside to the transformation of the welfare state. Despite universal access to preschool as a vehicle to achieve equality, we see that the free choice market, coupled with segregated housing, has created differences in children's living conditions. Consequently, universal access (as part of the education system) cannot compensate for the increasing differences in children's life conditions. However, in international comparison, the Swedish educational system is still considered to be of high quality with strong equality.

Many of the problems mentioned are discussed on the local and national levels, with lobbying groups sometimes being successful in persuading key policy makers to provide more funding and support to preschool. On the local level, however, this is again dependent on municipality governance and how much money the municipality has to support preschools. As there is no national accreditation system for quality in Swedish preschools that could establish an overall standard, responsibility is borne on the municipal level. Sweden might benefit from a national quality monitoring system for preschool with a view to developing a national benchmark for preschool access and quality. While there is equivalence monitoring for schools nationally, a similar design is needed for preschools. School equivalence uses standardised tests, amongst other things, to assess children's learning outcomes. This kind of approach is not suitable for the early childhood context. However, group size, staff qualifications and access could all be part of the quality monitoring process in preschools. It is acknowledged, however, that this kind of monitoring is difficult as municipalities are supposed to provide individual, need-based support with scope for variations.

Inequalities in Access to Early Childhood Education and Care in Canada – Summary –

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This paper on early childhood education and care (ECEC) in Canada is intended to address questions about inequality in access to ECEC through the prism of Canada, which has often been called a family policy “laggard”. Canada stands out as a wealthy country in which only a minority of young children have access to ECEC until the year prior to formal schooling which begins at age six. An OECD report of 2011 examining family policy provision in 28 countries identified Canada as an outlier even in its cluster of Anglo-Saxon countries – a group of countries whose market model approach to support for families with preschool children encompasses a low level of child care and early childhood education coverage and limited public spending on child care.

Overall, the Canadian situation is one of restricted access to ECEC for all families whatever their income, circumstances or residential area. This can be attributed to a combination of: inadequate supply of child care places (covering only 24 percent of zero to five year olds and uneven distribution); parent fees for child care that are unaffordable for many or most families; kindergarten provision that generally doesn’t begin until age five¹⁰; and child care quality shown to be mediocre at best. In addition to the general scarcity, however, there are many reported forms of inequalities: by region/province, community type (urban-rural), for Indigenous children, for children whose parents work non-standard hours, for newcomers to

10 In Canada, a split system is in place, distinguishing between child care and early education. Early education is provided in form of kindergarten, a public, universal and free service for children age five under education legislation. Child care on the other hand is provided by private providers, there is no universal entitlement and attendance is costly. Child care is also regulated by a different legislation (child care legislation)

Canada (immigrants and refugees), for children with disabilities, and for children living in low-income families.

One aspect of Canada's generally indifferent approach to ECEC is the absence of the reliable data needed to answer even the most basic questions. Although some research and data are available, much of this is developed through private initiatives by academic researchers or civil society organisations with no national data strategy or research agenda. Some provincial/territorial administrative data are available from these sources but there is very little up-to-date cross-Canada data (or even provincial/territorial data) to address some of the key questions that are of interest in this comparative study such as "who are the families using regulated child care?", "which families are in which type of programmes?" or even "what is the quality of regulated child care programmes?". With no significant role for the federal government as a data collector and transferor of knowledge, Quebec is the only province with more than the barest data provision, research and analysis.

Canada is a federation with two official levels of government: central federal government and a sub-national level made up of 10 provinces and three territories. It is a northern country in which more than two-thirds of the population live in a corridor within 100 kilometres of the U.S. border and the population density is low in much of the rest of the vast territory. Canada is a very diverse country in ethnical and racial terms that continues to encourage and welcome high numbers of immigrants and refugees. According to 2016 census data, Canada's total population has reached 36 million. Ontario and Quebec are Canada's most populous provinces, with populations of 13.5 million in Ontario and just over 8 million in Quebec accounting for over 60 percent of Canada's total population. Canada's original Indigenous people – who are perhaps the most systematically disadvantaged in Canada – make up about 4 percent of the total population.

Two main political or governance features are instrumental in determining how Canada approaches social policy. A first defining characteristic has a significant impact on child care: Canada is a liberal democratic welfare regime (as defined by Danish sociologist Gösta Esping-Anderson) which has tended to adopt a narrow notion of state intervention coupled with a high reliance on the market and the family. Federalism is the second key feature that shapes Canada's approach to ECEC. Canada was formed as – and remains – a federation. These two characteristics have considerable explanatory power when it comes to the state of ECEC provision.

Organised as a federation in the 1800s, Canada is considered to be quite decentralised. This is a central factor in how roles and responsibilities for early childhood education and care are defined. While a number of social programmes such as Employment Insurance, pensions and the Canada Child Benefit are national social programmes that are established and funded by the federal government, Canadian provinces and territories bear the main responsibility for child care.

Despite a number of attempts to advance a national child care programme over the last 40 years, a comprehensive national plan or policy has not become a reality, with the federal government playing at best a limited funding role. In its absence, each province/territory has developed its own approach to ECEC in ways that are – for the most part – fundamentally similar. However, although all provincial governments in Canada now recognise that more needs to be done to support children’s development and families’ needs for care, none has developed a comprehensive plan for universally accessible, affordable, high quality ECEC. Although the federal government has recently re-engaged with the provinces/territories on child care and has earmarked funds for the first time in more than a decade, it is too soon to know what impact this will have.

Although each jurisdiction has its own child care legislation and regulations and there are some variations in ECEC across provinces/territories in terms of structural elements such as ratios, staff qualifications and salaries, there are significant commonalities across the country. Perhaps the key overarching feature of Canadian child care is that it relies heavily on a market model in all jurisdictions, with little planning or public initiation of services and heavy reliance on parent fees in most jurisdictions. Indeed, child care is not treated as an entitlement anywhere in Canada. Services are delivered almost entirely by for-profit and non-profit services, not publicly-delivered services.

In addition to child care, all jurisdictions also provide universal no-fee kindergarten primarily for five-year-olds (Ontario is the sole province to provide kindergarten for all four-year-olds), and the majority have now moved responsibility for child care to the education ministry. Kindergarten and child care are not well integrated everywhere in Canada.

Access to child care remains problematic across Canada as the supply of regulated places is limited and unevenly distributed. There is sufficient centre-based child care to cover only a quarter of children aged zero to five, and there is significantly less centre-based child care for infants (approximately zero to two year-olds) than for older preschoolers everywhere in Canada.

Outside Quebec and to some extent, Manitoba and Prince Edward Island (two smaller provinces), child care services are not funded per se. All jurisdictions provide some operational funds that support services to varying degrees, depending on the jurisdiction. These may be in the form of wage grants to increase staff wages or general operational funding. However, in most instances, the funds are too limited to reduce the cost for parents sufficiently to make them ‘affordable’. This means that child care is primarily a fee-paying programme, with parent fees (or the fee subsidies that may replace them) forming the bulk of a centre’s budget with most parents expected to bear all – or most – of the actual costs.

In all provinces except Quebec, eligible lower income parents may be assisted to pay for child care through provincial/territorial fee subsidy schemes, which make up a very significant proportion of Canada's public child care funding. As parent fees are inordinately high and the fee subsidy programmes intended to make child care affordable for low-income families are ineffective, limited affordability is a key contributory factor to inequality of access for vulnerable low-income, newcomer and Indigenous families.

Although Ontario is the only province where local/municipal governments have a mandated or substantial role in ECEC provision, its basic ECEC structures resemble those in place in the other Canadian provinces and territories. Quebec stands out as the province most dissimilar to the others in terms of ECEC and other social provision for families.

Over the past 20 years, Quebec has invested a significant amount of public funds (far more than any other province/territory) in developing a child care system whose main objectives were to support parents in their work-family balance and to provide all children, independent of their parents' socioeconomic or employment status, with a high quality educational environment to prepare them well for the challenges they will face when entering the school system. Twenty years later, results show that the availability of child care at the lowest child care fees in Canada, accompanied by a significantly more generous and accessible parental leave policy, have had a substantial impact on the labour force participation of mothers. Furthermore, compared to the rest of Canada, Quebec has the highest proportion of children in regulated child care settings.

However, despite Quebec's positive achievements, there remain a number of challenges and critical developments. Child care has undergone rapid privatisation, with poorer quality for-profit services growing very substantially since the government introduced a refundable child care tax credit for these in 2009. This constitutes a major departure from the initial initiative to fund services, as substantial amounts now take the form of demand-side funds to reimburse families. Thus, Quebec's child care network cannot be considered a public or universal system in which all children have access (or the right) to a place. Like the others, it remains a market model where parental demand largely drives the further development of the system and poor quality is a concern.

Outside Quebec, little is known about the quality of ECEC settings in Canada and the characteristics of the children attending them. The few quality studies outside Quebec have shown that the quality is generally 'mediocre', as it has been termed. The various studies that have examined the educational quality of Quebec's child care system showed that overall quality is mediocre too, with non-profit centres generally providing better quality services than the growing for-profit sector.

Data collected in Quebec also reveal that inequality in access to ECEC is a reality, as it appears to be in the rest of Canada. Vulnerable populations such as children from low-income or immigrant families, children of recent refugees or Indigenous origin are under-represented in child care services. If they do attend a child care service, they are more likely to be in low quality settings, such as home (family) child care or for-profit centres. Furthermore, Quebec's full-day school-based kindergarten for four-year-olds – a targeted measure to improve school readiness among at-risk children – has also been shown to lack the level of quality that fosters children's cognitive and social development. There has been no research on the quality of full-day kindergarten programmes elsewhere in Canada or on Ontario's full-day kindergartens for four-year-olds.

As the scarcity of reasonably up-to-date data in most of Canada prevents solid analysis of the issues associated with inequality in access to ECEC, there are at best hints or speculation about child care use by income, Indigenous or immigrant status. Consequently, there is an ongoing challenge to reliably address questions about whether Canadians considered to be vulnerable are more or less likely to use quality child care than more advantaged Canadians. Furthermore, too little is known about the quality of the Canadian ECEC system which, when considering the parameters of provincial and territorial regulations, may generally not be on a level that fosters the global development of all children.

Equality in ECEC access can only be ensured through a high quality child care system that is substantially funded and accessible to all parents and children. This kind of system must rely on the best available evidence in forming policy and allocating resources sufficient to respond to the needs of the most vulnerable in society, while also striving to achieve and maintain the highest quality standards. A system of this kind requires leadership on both the federal and provincial/territorial level and a shared vision of the importance of ensuring ECEC programmes that promote equality of opportunity. This will allow Canadian society to move closer to eliminating poverty and inequality, rather than merely handing them down from one generation to the next.

Gefördert vom:



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und Jugend

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