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Executive Summary**

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## Inclusiveness of Early Childhood Education and Care: Experiences of Disadvantaged Families in Europe

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# **Inclusiveness of Early Childhood Education and Care: Seven Case Studies across Europe**

## Executive Summary

Özgün Ünver and Ides Nicaise (HIVA – KU Leuven)

In this report, we focus on the experiences and perceptions of disadvantaged families (in particular, low-income families with and without a migration background) in the field of early childhood education and care. We present case studies based on focus groups with parents and interviews with professionals working in the ECEC sector in seven cities in Europe. We distinguish between (un)equal opportunities, (un)equal treatment and (un)equal outcomes in analysing different sources of inequalities and possibilities to address them. We defined unequal opportunities as inequalities in exogenous conditions (e.g. family income) that affect the accessibility of ECEC services. Unequal treatment refers to endogenous barriers within the services, either at systems or at local implementation level. Strategies to combat inequalities can promote either more equal opportunities or more equal treatment. In some cases, ‘equal outcomes strategies’ reach beyond this distinction and indeed involve priority treatment of disadvantaged groups.

When it comes to the specific experiences of families with an immigrant background, the Interactive Acculturation Model (Piontkowski et al.) is used as an additional framework: concordance or discordance in mutual acculturation attitudes of immigrant and host communities can help interpret frictions between groups.

*Unequal opportunities:* cost (both the fees and additional costs such as extra-curricular activities and transportation) and (un)availability of places (waiting lists, priority given to dual-earner families) seem to be two important barriers in day care services especially for 0-3 year-olds in all countries. Despite the existence of financial support schemes for low-income families, people are under-informed about their rights and the procedures they need to follow. Access is less problematic for 3-6 year-olds because of the well-established legal entitlement for free of charge pre-schooling for this age group in all seven countries.

*Unequal treatment:* there are cultural barriers for immigrant groups in terms of both access to and treatment in the ECEC system. When cultural and religious values of ethno-cultural minorities are not accounted for in ECEC services, parents with an immigration background tend to feel excluded. Moreover, communication between parents and ECEC professionals does not run smoothly if parents do not speak the local language or professionals are not sufficiently culturally sensitive. A connected major issue is school segregation especially for large immigrant groups such as Turks in Germany or Belgium. Evidence from both the literature and parents’ opinions is mixed about the effects of segregated education, with some suggesting there is a negative effect while others say there is no effect. Nevertheless, it should be borne in mind that segregation is undesirable per se as it hinders dialogue between groups.

*Equal outcomes strategies:* various types of priority investment in disadvantaged children were reported. However these are mostly small-scale and local initiatives from schools or municipalities. Examples include family or parent-child centres such as *IN-Zetje* in Beringen,

and initiatives to train ‘neighbourhood mothers’ (Stadtteilmutter) in Berlin. We observed the most inclusive ECEC system among the seven cases in Finland where the means-testing is efficient, immigrant children receive more linguistic stimulation and all children have legal entitlement to an ECEC place from 1 year-old onwards. However, some professionals reviewed in Finland also pointed at exclusionist tendencies from the majority group.

With regard to the *reciprocal acculturation* between immigrant groups and host communities, we found potentially conflictual patterns in Berlin (Turkish immigrant group), Beringen (Turkish immigrant group) and Barreiro (African immigrant group) where the minority groups tend to have a mix of *integrationist / separatist* and the majority groups tend to have a mix of *integrationist / assimilationist* attitudes. Immigrants in these countries have some commonalities such as problematic language acquisition and a long-established and large immigrant community that decreases the need to integrate further in the host society. They are all ‘devalued’ or ‘under-valued’ immigrant groups, usually associated with lower education, employment, social status, and income. It was more difficult to identify acculturation patterns in Italy and Finland due to limited data and the mixed group composition of participants. In England, on the other hand, we found consensual patterns of interactive acculturation. Issues of cultural differences and adjustment were not raised by participants in this case study, suggesting low levels of conflict between minority and majority groups for families living in this area of England.

The analysis resulted in the following set of recommendations:

1. Strategies for more equal opportunities

- *Availability*: in many countries there is a severe lack of child care provision. This is not just a matter of aggregate supply, but also of geographical distribution. When parents have to travel too far for access to ECEC, their time and financial investment may become unaffordable. As market forces do not automatically fill such gaps in supply, government intervention is needed to regulate – and if necessary, to supplement – service provision.
- In addition, there appears to be a glaring lack of *awareness* about existing services and about their benefits, as well as financial support schemes, due to the low literacy, language or cultural barriers and poor parenting skills. Hence, active outreaching is recommended. This may include home-based services as well as parenting support to enhance the pedagogical skills of parents.
- *Affordability*: income inequality – and poverty – make ECEC unaffordable for many households. Even means-tested fees and tax credits appear to be insufficient to overcome financial barriers. Greater efforts should be made to reduce the private cost of ECEC. Given the large positive externalities of ECEC (the benefits for society), free of charge provision to low-income parents is indeed a fully justified option. Special attention should be devoted also to the additional costs of meals, extra-curricular activities etc., especially when they are charged unexpectedly.

## 2. Strategies for more equal treatment

- In several regions or countries, the focus groups revealed that ECEC services still tend to prioritise two-earner families, and sometimes indeed to exclude *unemployed* applicants explicitly, based on the stereotype that the latter can cater for their children themselves. Access to ECEC should be granted to all parents irrespective of their employment status, in the first place because ECEC is a right of the child, but also because access to ECEC allows unemployed parents to invest time in training and job search.
- Even employed parents may experience difficulties when the opening hours of ECEC services are designed to mirror standard nine-to-five, year-round employment contracts. As socially disadvantaged parents often hold atypical jobs that involve *irregular employment* or non-standard working hours, it is important for them to get access to flexible child care services.
- Meeting the needs of *ethnic minority* families is particularly demanding for several reasons. In the first place, *language* barriers must be overcome in the communication with parents as well as for the children themselves. Most ECEC services are still mono-lingual, even in cosmopolitan cities where immigrants make up a large proportion of the population. It should not come as a surprise then that minority families do not use the services that could be so beneficial for them. Responses to these language issues include intercultural mediation services, language training for ECEC staff, and bilingual language stimulation programmes for children.
- In addition to language, *cultural and religious diversity* needs to be duly taken on board. If maternal care at home is highly valued in some cultures, why not extend services to home-based ECEC and parenting support as alternatives for centre-based care? If religious norms involve special dietary requirements, why not guarantee such provision? In order to fully integrate diversity policy into ECEC systems, the active involvement of ethnic minority parents in the daily operation of services is probably the best guarantee.
- Special attention is also needed to avoid *segregation* from the very start of children's socialization process. Lessons from the compulsory education sector have shown that (quasi-)market mechanisms tend to reinforce, rather than attenuate, segregation. Government regulation can limit segregation by imposing norms relating to enrolment, equal treatment of minorities, and ethnic composition of the staff.

## 3. Strategies for more equal outcomes

Building on the experience in (compulsory) education systems, two types of 'educational priority policies' can be implemented: priority enrolment and priority funding.

- *Priority enrolment* rules are useful in particular in a context of shortage, but also to combat segregation. Such rules generally imply that specific quota are reserved for the enrolment of children from disadvantaged backgrounds. They can be adjusted to the local composition of the population of young children. Examples were encountered in Poland (for large families, single-parent families, children in foster

care, disabled children) and Flanders (low-income families, single-parent families, children at risk). It is worth extending these criteria to educational categories, such as children from low-educated parents or children whose mother tongue differs from the instruction language at school.

- *Priority funding* means that subsidies (a) compensate for the lower fees (if means-tested) paid by low-income parents, and (b) allow for more generous staffing and operation expenses in services to disadvantaged families. Educational priority funding is a widespread practice in compulsory education, but far less common in ECEC. Given the consensus among evaluators about the high return on investment in ECEC for disadvantaged children (see Akgündüz et al. 2015 for a review of evidence), priority funding schemes should be seen as an excellent public investment opportunity rather than an additional burden.

Nevertheless, the experience with priority funding in mainstream education has also shown that optimal allocation of the extra resources cannot always be taken for granted (Bernardo and Nicaise 2000). We would therefore recommend to make the additional funding conditional, e.g. by imposing smaller group size, outreaching activities, parenting support, additional specialized staff and/or in-service training of the regular staff so as to boost their social and intercultural skills.