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**Families at social risk and access to 0-3 Early Childhood Education and Care in Spain:
A model to understand diverse conditions in the current system**

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Abstract:

It is acknowledged that less children from families at social risk and/or socio-economic disadvantage participate in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) across Europe. The article examines who among these families have special difficulties in accessing the first cycle of ECEC for infants between 0-3 years of age (0-3 ECEC) in Spain. It presents a model that reveals diverse strategies taken by families in relation to 0-3 ECEC and a particular segment of families who are served "worst" by the current system and whose access to the first cycle of early childhood education is especially hindered. In the analysis, we also highlight gender; gender appears as a fundamental dimension to understand the forms of participation (or non-participation) in 0-3 ECEC within families at risk of social exclusion; it is manifested in how beliefs about parenting during the first years of life and structural conditions intersect. The article is based on a study in which we conducted 35 semi-structured interviews with families at social risk as well as group discussions with a total of 40 family and education professionals in five metropolitan areas of Spain.

Keywords: Early Childhood Education, Access to Education, Children and Families at Risk, Eco-Cultural Approach, Spain

1. Introduction

The development of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) has been the focus of educational policies and programmatic proposals in the context of the European Union (EU) and beyond in recent years. At a global level it has been identified as a fundamental tool for family conciliation and the effective and equal incorporation of women into the labor market (European Commission (EC), 2018a; Nollenberg & Rodríguez-Planas, 2011; OECD, 2020; Telford, 2016; Valiente, 2003). On the other hand, within the objectives of social inclusion and reduction of social inequalities within the EU, early educational intervention has been pointed out –particularly for children in a situation of risk for exclusion– as a fundamental tool to promote socio-educational equality (e.g. Burchinal et al., 2010; Dearing et al., 2018; EC, 2018b; Vandebroek & Lazzari, 2013; van Huizen & Plantenga, 2018).

However, the development and consolidation of this segment of the educational system is very heterogeneous. In many countries (including Spain) it is a non-compulsory and not universalized educational stage. It has a diversity of organizational formats, forms of financing, and political support that vary much more than for other parts of the education system (Llorent, 2013; Torres & González, 2008). Within nation states, this variability may emerge because national policies around this educational stage allow for diversification of ECEC provision models. It may also be facilitated in national systems in which educational policy making is transferred to regional or local governments. Indeed, this is the case for Spain in which

educational governance is in the hands of regional autonomous communities, and municipalities play an important role in the funding and shaping of ECEC models.

Despite the heterogeneity, the participation of children in various modes of educational care for children between 0 and 6 years of age has been growing in net terms in the European context including in Spain (e.g. EC, 2018a). However, this growth, in addition to being uneven across geographic contexts, is not occurring at the same rate across different social groups (e.g. Eurofound, 2015). Alongside reports that highlight the relevance of ECEC as a measure of social inclusion, there are studies and policy briefs that underscore the lower participation of socio-economically disadvantaged children (e.g. Kachi et al., 2020; Petitclerc et al., 2017), migrant or refugee families (e.g. Bove and Sharmahd, 2020) and/or ethnic and cultural minorities in pre-compulsory education (Jiménez-Delgado et al., 2016). Specifically, in Spain, some studies have demonstrated how the current access provisions to 0-3 ECEC are not favorable for lower-income and underserved groups (Jiménez-Delgado et al., 2016) - underserved children and families are labelled in different ways by professionals and policy documents through terms that are used almost interchangeably such as “vulnerable”, “at risk” or “disadvantaged” children and families, among others (see López-Pavón, 2020).

More broadly, this line of inquiry rests on international and comparative research that proposes a positive (and almost linear) relationship between socio-economic status and participation in ECEC (Bennet, 2012; Lazzari & Vandebroeck, 2012; Ünver & Nicaise, 2016). Aligning with the line of argument, a number of studies stress the importance of promoting equal opportunities of access to quality 0-3 ECEC for children in socially vulnerable situations (Booth, 2014; Burchinal et al., 2010; Dearing et al., 2018; Heckman, 2006; Lipscomb, 2013; van Huizen & Plantenga, 2018). However, debates remain around this goal, especially regarding for whom and how a formal type of ECEC contributes to children’s and families’ well-being (see, for instance, Kottelenberg & Lehrer, 2013). Whether and how socio-economically disadvantaged groups decide to (or not to) use the service is also influenced by multiple factors and complex processes. For instance, some suggest it is not only a matter of access barriers but that decisions interrelate profoundly with societal views and family beliefs about what is the best form of care for infants (Valiente, 2019).

In addition, there are studies that have addressed parental decision-making processes in relation to 0-3 ECEC or on parental educational preferences (e.g. Hofferth & Wissoker, 1992; Gamble et al., 2008; Gruzová & Syslová, 2020; Peyton et al., 2001; Stipek et al., 1992). Yet, most of these studies rest on two assumptions that are not well-aligned with the circumstances of lower-working class and at-risk families in Spain. First, most research is conducted with families that already have some access to and who are seen as being able to reflexively exercise their choices within the ECEC provision system (Galera, 2021). Second, developmental research tends to put the focus on individual parental educational beliefs and tends to ignore how policy assumptions -for example, assuming a two-parent “adult worker family model” (Duncan et al., 2004, p. 255)- or availability and funding restrictions limit the capacity of at-risk families to maneuver within the ECEC provisions available in their local context.

In this context, this article draws from a broader policy-oriented project focused on examining qualitatively what was hindering access to the first cycle of ECEC (that is, for the 0-3 years age cohort) in families at social risk and / or socio-economic exclusion in Spain. In the Spanish context, the 0-3 cycle is the critical ECEC period to address these questions. 3-6 ECEC is fully incorporated into the educational system in Spain and shows almost universal participation rates (Borra & Palma, 2009; Sánchez, 2008). In contrast, participation in the 0-3 cycle is much lower and there is great diversity in how 0-3 ECEC unfolds given the factors discussed above. For this reason, we collected data in five localities/metropolitan areas in different regions of the Spanish state with different ECEC policies and provisions. It was beyond the scope of the study to include rural areas, although we are aware that there are meaningful differences in the use of ECEC and family organization between rural and the urban areas (e.g. Anderson & Mikesell, 2019).

These research goals fit with an ecological and eco-cultural perspective on ECEC and human development (e.g. Bronfenbrenner, 1999, 1986; Neal & Neal, 2013; Tudge, 2008; Weisner, 2002). An ecological perspective is called for by Vandenbroek & Lazzari (2013) to better understand children's access to ECEC, particularly from disadvantaged backgrounds, allowing research to move beyond a simplistic view of parental choice and acknowledge the multiple factors involved in educational decisions and the relationships among these factors. An ecological approach considers different intertwined systems of direct and indirect influence. In short, building on this framework, children's participation (or not) in ECEC is seen as mesosystemic process (connecting family and school microsystems). In turn, this process is

mediated by various macro-systemic factors (ranging from educational and economic policy priorities to cultural ideologies about child-rearing) and exosystemic indirect dynamics, such as the conditions of parents' participation in the labor market or (particularly for at-risk families) the intervention of other social and family services.

In the broader study we have analyzed different kinds of factors or "barriers" that hinder access to 0-3 ECEC, in line with recent calls (e.g. Vandenbroek & Lazzari, 2013) - discussed in (Poveda et al., in press). This article focuses on the diverse relationships that at-risk families in Spain have with 0-3 ECEC. We present a "model" developed from the data in the study building on a grounded theory logic (see below) in which we categorize the participant families into different profiles. This model suggests that access to 0-3 ECEC in families at risk does not progress linearly as socio-economic status improves, as often assumed in the literature. We also discuss findings from a gender perspective; children's participation in 0-3 ECEC is situated within a gender order in which child-rearing ideologies, structural features of the labor market and ECEC policies intersect. We begin with a description of the methodology we employed in the study.

2. Methodology

2.1 Participants

Fieldwork for this study was carried out in five metropolitan areas: Madrid, Valencia, Barcelona, Bilbao / Basque Country and Seville (see Note 1). As shown in Table 1, a total of 35 families and 40 professionals from the different localities participated. The families were selected by the funding entity, the local research team and/or by different local professionals because they were considered as being in a situation of social exclusion –or at risk of exclusion– based on one or more of the following dimensions: relational (e.g. lack of support networks), legal-administrative (e.g. migrants or receiving support from social services), residential (e.g. living in marginalized areas of their locality), and/or economic/work-related (e.g. lack of stable jobs or in a low-wage situation). The professionals were also recruited either through the funding entity or contacts of the local research team. Each group discussion had a diverse set of participants with workers from the public sector and the administration, social services and educators, as well as researchers (see Table 2).

(INSERT TABLE 1 and 2 HERE)

2.2 Data collection protocols

All adult participants were informed of the objectives of our project and gave their written consent to participate in the study. The project emerged as a technical collaboration between the funding NGO and the university research teams involved in the project with the oversight of the two organizations leading the project (Save the Children and La Fundación de la Universidad Autónoma de Madrid). The techniques used for data collection were semi-structured interviews with families and group discussions (GDs) with key informant-professionals, and they lasted approximately 30-60 minutes and 100-180 minutes, respectively. For both interviews with families and GDs with professionals, we developed common protocols, which were shared across all the local research teams. For the interview with families, the script was built around documenting and understanding families and children's daily lives (Tudge, 2008; Weisner, 2002) bearing in mind it was not possible to conduct naturalistic observations or involve children directly in the data collection as advocated by this approach (cf. Tudge and Hogan, 2005). However, we tried to grasp the everyday routines (Weisner, 2002) and pay attention to the context and interaction among people and objects involved in these daily routines (Tudge, 2008, p.89). In short, the interview protocol explored the following elements:

- Basic and contextual information about the family: nationality(ies), the level of education and employment status of the adults in the home, the number of minors in the home and schooling information of each child as well as the housing conditions and family history.
- The perceptions of families about the barriers to enroll their children in the first cycle of early childhood education for infants between 0-3 years of age.
- Daily routines of the children aged 0-3 and daily parenting strategies and rules, including about who and what the children interact with on a regular basis.
- The views of families on this educational stage (0-3 ECEC).

The protocol for the GDs (Bohnsack, 2004; Smithson, 2000) with professionals was structured in two parts:

- Collect professionals' perceptions and knowledge about the barriers that vulnerable families face in accessing the first cycle of early childhood education. This allowed, on one hand, to triangulate and complement the findings from family participants, and on the other, to gain a broader picture of factors and issues that affect the participation of vulnerable families in ECEC 0-3 and other macro-systemic factors that shape enrollment in ECEC.
- Collectively generate ideas with the participants on how to address the barriers that the most vulnerable families face in accessing ECEC 0-3.

In four of the locations these sessions were organized as GDs with six or more participants. In the case of Basque Country, it was not possible to recruit a diverse group of professionals, so a group interview (GI) with two family services technicians was held. In this case, as an extension of the individual interview method, the researcher maintained an active conversational role, and knowledge was primarily produced through the researcher-participant interaction. This information was complemented with informal exchanges with various professionals in the field of children and youth at social risk during fieldwork in the Basque Country.

2.3 Data analysis strategies

The collected data have been transcribed and analysed within a qualitative-inductive analytical logic in which analytical categories, topics and a "model" was developed from the data we collected through the interviews and discussion groups. In particular, data analysis was guided by two different approaches. First, we employed thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) for the identification, categorization, and conceptualization of the barriers as well as family situations and parental beliefs. Second, more importantly for the goals of this article, we built on an abductive approach (Reichert, 2019) based on the logic developed in grounded theory (Corbin and Strauss, 1990) to understand the kinds of families that were having special difficulties in accessing 0-3 ECEC in Spain. From a grounded theory perspective, the analytical process is viewed as a cycle in which two dynamics co-occur: (1) the constant confrontation between "theory" and "data"; (2) the gradual process of construction and reconstruction of an explanatory framework, which leads to the development of organizational-explanatory models

(Kelle, 2019). According to Reichertz (2019) abduction refers to the process of looking for a fitting explanation when confronted with surprising facts. Understood in a very flexible manner, this premise was present in our analysis: as we will explain in the result section, the findings did not coincide with the implicit hypotheses that initially sustained the study. Therefore, we worked on developing and adjusting a model that captured the distinct relationship between different family profiles and access barriers to 0-3 ECEC within families and children at socio-economic risk. Drawing on the discursive data generated by participants, the model pays particular attention to how different systemic-ecological factors play a role in structuring the varied relationships with ECEC 0-3 we found across families at risk of social exclusion (Vandenbroeck & Lazzari, 2013).

At a procedural level, in line with the multi-sited and distributed nature of fieldwork and given the ethical constraints on sharing raw data across localities, the analysis was carried out at two intertwined levels. At one level, raw data based on the transcriptions was categorized and coded by the local teams, leading to local reports (required by the funding organization) that examined in detail the discourses of the families and professionals of each locality. At another level, the project co-coordinators synthesized and systematized the findings to identify patterns in the data across different localities and recursively build an organizational model for all the data. These interpretations were recursively probed by each local team against the original data.

3. Results

3.1 A model to understand the difficulties and conditions to access 0-3 Early Childhood Education experienced by families at social risk

As part of the exploration of the barriers and mediating factors regarding access to 0-3 ECEC we propose an organizational model that mainly fulfills two functions: (1) To make sense of how different factors influence access to 0-3 ECEC; (2) To make visible how, in the Spanish context, access and greater participation in publicly or privately owned 0-3 ECEC does not have a linear/progressive relationship with socio-economic status within the segment of families at social risk.

As said above, there seems to be a linear suggestion in which the greater the socioeconomic capacity of families, the greater the participation in 0-3 ECEC. In addition, in a national (or local) context with established policies to promote equity and in which early educational access is tied to social protection (to which Spanish policies are somewhat committed), then families

with less resources should have more access to public 0-3 ECEC. In turn, the more resources families have, the more they should enroll their children in private 0-3. However, our data suggests that there are particular sets of families who appear as the “worst” served by the current system and whose access to the first cycle of early childhood education is seriously hampered. This led to building an alternative model which visualizes the complex relationship between socio-economic circumstances and access to 0-3 ECEC and in which policies, particularly in relation to how public and private 0-3 ECEC options are laid out, emerge as mediating factors.

Figure 1 shows the elements of the model. On the horizontal axis we have a continuum of socio-economic and material conditions ranging from situations of great social risk and material precariousness to the living conditions of Spanish "middle class" families. The vertical axis represents the level of participation in ECEC 0-3, differentiated between public and private offerings. It should be noted that the private sector emerges as a key element, inasmuch as 0-3 ECEC is currently constituted as an educational stage that is neither universal nor compulsory and, therefore, is not free of cost to families in Spain, including the public offers depending on the circumstances of the families and local policies.

(INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE)

Based on these two elements —socio-economic / material conditions and participation in 0-3 ECEC— the data collected point to different forms of participation and barriers to access to early childhood education. These diverse forms of participation cluster around five family profiles in relation to 0-3 ECEC. Figure 2 situates the five family profiles in the model described above, indicating the number of families in our sample that fit in each profile. Only the first four of these profiles are reflected in the families interviewed for this study and will be examined in more detail below, presenting the cluster first and then illustrating it with a contextualized analysis of a case family for each profile, given space constraints. Profile 5 corresponds to middle-class families, which are projected in our model based on our experience in Spanish 0-3 ECEC research and policies but not included in our sample.

In our analytical proposal, the key classifying factor is attendance or non-attendance in 0-3 ECEC, generating two profiles in which the children attend organized childcare and two in which they do not attend 0-3 ECEC. Aspects such as family composition or the specific socio-

economic and social circumstances of each family have a more probabilistic character (i.e., they may appear more or less frequently in one profile, but the situations do not define their categorization). Similarly, families have changing histories and circumstances, and different children in the same families may have had different histories of participation in 0-3 ECEC. In these cases, the analysis and "categorization" is done based on the family circumstances at the time of the interview and the form of involvement in ECEC of the child aged 0-3 in the family.

(INSERT FIGURE 2 HERE)

Nine families fall into *Profile 1*. These families are considered in a situation of great vulnerability and without (regular) work; yet, they count on the assistance and intervention of Social Services and/or NGOs who work with children and families. Children in these families do have access to the scarce public 0-3 ECEC places through different aids and procedures promoted by social services and local educational policies. Within this profile we find a large number (six) of single mothers living in very precarious material conditions, receiving *Minimum Insertion Income* (Ma02)¹, or unemployment benefits (Pv02; Ma07), or if working, cleaning houses paid by the hour (Ma04; Ma06; Va06). For instance, the case of a family in Madrid (Ma02, Extract 1):

Extract 1: Single mother unemployed, Spanish origin, with a child of 22 months, living in a rented room (Madrid).

(...) I lived there in San Diego [in Madrid] and really I found one [nursery] closer, I don't know if it wasn't public or what happened but, anyway, they told me that there were no vacancies (...) so I talked to the [social] assistant and they told me that if I wanted I could choose that one and no, I had no problem. I fulfilled the points and so on and for me it was good, I didn't have much difficulty, really (...) they only told me that I could go with the assistance because of the RMI [Minimum Insertion Income] and that's it. (...) the truth is normal, I didn't have any difficulty (...)

In *Profile 2* (N=7) families, multiple family, personal, material and legal circumstances converge in a way that "overwhelm" the family and prevent them from successfully managing the admission processes to 0-3 ECEC. Here it seems that other urgent family needs must be met and these do not initially include participation in 0-3 ECEC. In the discourse of professionals, these families are referred to as "multi-problematic" and seem to fall through the

¹ A code has been used to identify each family who has participated in the study. It includes the acronym of the locality (Barcelona = Ba / Basque Country = Pv / Madrid = Ma / Seville = Se / Valencia = Va) + a number assigned to each family by locality.

"cracks of the system". This includes migrant families, recently arrived and/or in an irregular situation (Ba06; Ma03), with language barriers (Se01), some medical conditions of the child or the parent(s) (Ba05), and/or experiencing complicated family processes (such as separations, family breakups, domestic violence, addictions, etc.) (Se03). For example, the case of a migrant mother in Seville with 3 children (Se03, Extract 2):

Extract 2: Mother from Morocco with 3 children, unemployed, the husband lives and works in Morocco. The family does not compute as a single-parent family and was not entitled to the reduced fee to enroll her youngest daughter in subsidized 0-3 ECEC (Seville).

So when I came here I only needed the day care for my daughter and I had to pay. Why? Because my husband did not have a NIE [foreign identity card], that is to say, since my husband was out of the country, the day care was not subsidized for me, I had to pay for it. At that time I could not pay for it. I went to the social assistance a lot of times but the social worker told you that if you have a work contract she can help you with half of the childcare, "well lady, I am unemployed, I have no one to take care of my daughter and if I don't work I can't feed my daughter (...)

The professional perception is that schooling in 0-3 ECEC is not felt as a support or resource by families when there is a combination of circumstances of this type, but rather emerges as an added "stressor", where current policies or intervention work fails to facilitate access to 0-3 ECEC successfully (e.g. Coordinator of an NGO that supports vulnerable families, Madrid).

Families in *Profile 3* (N=10) are generally two-parent families in which only one adult works, usually the husband/man. The wife is left to care for the young children and is not actively seeking employment or full-time-regularized employment. Families in this profile do not see schooling in 0-3 ECEC as a priority for different reasons: (a) beliefs about stay-at-home parenting and the place of women in the family (Ma01; Se05); (b) the availability of a caregiver-support network (Va01); and (c) 0-3 ECEC access policies focused on work-life balance, when all adult caregivers in the household have regularized full-time employment, which do not meet the needs of this type of family or facilitate their access (Se06). Consequently, the children of families with this profile end up not participating in 0-3 ECEC, as in the case of the children of a migrant family in the Basque Country (Pv03, Extract 3):

Extract 3: Father of a two-parent family, of Moroccan origin, three children, their youngest two-year-old son does not attend ECEC 0-3. The father works as an educator while the mother does not work outside the home (Basque Country).

(...) No, I did not send him to school because of the experience I had with the middle child. Last year, for example, the middle child is now four years old and almost three months old. Last year, when he was three, he was enrolled and everything, I took him for a week and no (...) No, no, no, no, I didn't like it because the child still needs the support of the family, of the mother... they have to be so wrapped up, you know? It was a shame to leave them there (...) you know? He is a child, he is not yet ready to go to school alone, and on top of that my wife does not work, an advantage we have (...) an advantage in favor, let's say, that allows him to stay at home and so on, that's why I have not even enrolled the little one this year (...)

We can describe *Profile 4* (N=9) as two-parent families in which both adults work, but working conditions and the combined salaries still leave the family in a precarious situation. Although they have access to 0-3 ECEC, they compete with many other families for access to public places. In addition, as the public offer does not always meet their care needs for long or irregular hours, etc. (e.g. Va05 in which the father works as a building painter and the mother cleans houses), they make use of private 0-3 ECEC as an alternative, even though the expense represents a comparatively disproportionate part of the family income. This is the situation faced by a migrant family in Valencia (Va03, Extract 4):

Extract 4: Mother, two-parent family, Ecuadorian origin, three children, father works full time and mother is starting a business. The family used to send the youngest child to a private nursery paying a reduced fee of 130 euros a month receiving financial support from different public sources (Valencia).

(...) I looked at it there and I signed up and everything, but they told me that there is probably no place. Then a friend told me to look at another [private] nursery and we went to talk. The girl told me that there was no problem, that she would keep the place for me if they didn't receive me here, I would go and register there. There were no problems (...) the truth is that they were all very attentive. Both the directors, who were two girls, and the teacher were very attentive (...) and that's a support for us, because if we have to work or do other things, we can't do it with them [my children] (...)

The fifth profile, *Profile 5*, corresponds to middle-class families, headed by one or two adults who work outside the home. The participation of middle-class 0-3 children in early childhood education is characterized as high, with access to both public and private provisions, especially given that one of the most significant factors to facilitate access to the public 0-3 ECEC network in Spain is the active employment status of the adult caregivers of the home. Similarly, families in this profile have the resources to access the private early childhood education network, which is chosen either because it has not been possible to access the public network or because it offers services (e.g., extended schedules, curricular singularities, etc.) that are not available in the public network (cf. Galera, 2021). In any case, middle-class families have not been included

in fieldwork, as it is out of the study's focus, and so we will not discuss further this profile. Yet, it is important to have this set of families as a reference in the model, among other reasons because it structures parts of the professional discourse and some of the administrative-political barriers that we have identified.

3.2 Analysis from a gender perspective

Gender is present as a key dimension to understand the forms of participation in 0-3 ECEC and the access barriers families face. It is already apparent from the fact that 0-3 ECEC is seen as part of the social policy to promote women's (re)insertion to paid work and thus gender equality (e.g. Dinamia, 2019). Yet, our data reveals that the difficulties faced by families at risk to enroll their children in 0-3 ECEC have much to do with gender related issues but in a more complex way than as often understood in policy papers. Here, the focus is not on mothers' beliefs about ECEC 0-3 and how they affect the decision that families make (cf. Duncan et al., 2004; Stipek et al., 1992), but on how families in socially vulnerable circumstances must manage decisions in relation to 0-3 ECEC and how these decisions are shaped by how gender intertwines with ECEC and social care policies, the conditions of the labor market or gender within the family order. This approach draws on an intersectional perspective (Cho et al., 2013; Goñalons & Marx, 2014) in which gender, social class, cultural background and various structural factors interconnect in the unfolding of current policies and existing forms of social intervention. From this perspective we have identified three social and family situations in which gender stands out as a decisive factor to understand the forms of participation (or no-participation) of children in 0-3 ECEC: (1) Single motherhood as a specific risk situation; (2) The dilemmas of caregiving mothers within two-parent families, and; (3) Conciliation difficulties for couples in precarious work situations.

Single motherhood as a specific risk situation

Leaving aside the methodological considerations regarding how the sample of interviewed families was recruited –as explained earlier, we used a convenience sampling and eight (28% of the sample) of the interviewed families are headed by women who face child-raising and care without a partner–, single motherhood has particular relevance in our analysis. Despite not being the most frequent family model in the sample as a whole, 50% of the families that we have characterized as being in a more precarious situation (Profiles 1 and 2) are headed by

single mothers. Single motherhood is also a risk situation that professional discourses identify and indicate with relative clarity and consensus, for instance:

Extract 5: NGO Worker, Group discussion in Valencia.

(...) I think that another profile [that has barriers to enroll their children in 0-3 ECEC] is single-mother families, whether they are immigrants or not. They are families that have a more difficult support network, they may be unemployed or in precarious employment and to access it [0-3 ECEC] seems to me a profile that...they have it quite difficult (...)

An effect of this singularization is that single-mother families are more visible in the allocation of (scarce) protection resources, and the participation of their children in 0-3 ECEC is facilitated. Logically, it would be an exaggeration to say that all children under 3 years of age of single mothers have guaranteed access to 0-3 ECEC, given the shortage of places and current admission policies to the 0-3 tier. As noted above it was not the case in our study either, especially for single-mothers in the “multi-problematic” family category (Profile 2). For instance, a widow from Nigeria living in Valencia with three children would like to enroll her youngest child in 0-3 ECEC to find some work but she states she is not facilitated with much information and, thus, her child is not enrolled in early care (Va02). However, it is noteworthy how several of the single mothers in this study describe access to 0-3 ECEC as not very difficult, having been closely accompanied by social workers (see Extract 1).

Dilemmas of caregiving mothers within two-parent families

There is a group of families in which, apparently, the mother and father distribute the roles in such a way that the father (man) provides the economic support of the family and the mother (woman) is dedicated to the care and raising of the children (Profile 3). In this "arrangement", the schooling of the youngest children can be delayed until they are 2-3 years of age or the beginning of the second cycle of ECEC (3-6 years of age). Until then upbringing and education takes place mainly at home and under the mother's care.

This situation would seem to be “traditional” reflecting a consolidated and stable upbringing and family model in our culture. Indeed, some professionals advocate the model as below, calling for a holistic rethinking of children's care system during the first years of life (particularly the first year):

Extract 6: Social Educator, GD in Valencia.

Well, I'm going to say one thing that maybe all of you "jump on top of me" here, but I think that from 0 to 2 they have to be with the main attachment figure. I think that what we would have to do is to create more protected employment, more conciliation with maternity and paternity leave and that we are denaturing, losing our instinct as a result of industrialization (...) and they are selling us capitalism as they want. (...)

Unlike for the case of single-mother families where there is a clear consensus in the professional discourse on the type of support and provisions that they should receive, we found different views among professionals when discussions turn to the (re)incorporation into the labor market of mothers "with a partner" and with young children. While some professionals expressed views in line with Extract 6 there were others who strongly defended the importance of the development and consolidation of the current 0-3 ECEC model, pointing out its special relevance for children at risk of social exclusion. This is also an area where the data collected with the families uncovers very heterogeneous circumstances and expectations that administrative and enrollment policies reduce to the same "family arrangement".

Admission criteria in 0-3 ECEC places two-parent families with unemployed (or under-employed) mothers in a weaker place with regard to participation in organized early childhood education. To begin, for the families at social risk and a situation of poverty that we have interviewed, the scheme "father works outside the home and mother cares in the home" includes a diversity of very complex realities in which the circumstances of the family often diverge from the premises of this apparently traditional arrangement. Some were in the processes of breakup/separation of the couple (Se03), in others there were changes in the legal situation of the parents (Se01), and yet in others the arrangement included transfers and moving due to work (Ba05; Ba07; Ma06). For instance, a mother of three children from Seville (Se03) was asked to pay for the nursery of her youngest son because the father and she were in the process of separation but, since both of them were receiving unemployment benefits, they fell above the income and care criteria. She also said in the interview that when another child of her started schooling she could not get the signature from the father as he was in prison. In this case, she could have had difficulty enrolling the child in school, yet the school administration did not make an issue out of this and facilitated the process.

Likewise, this "father as breadwinner" assumption many times does not recognize that the employment situation of the "father" (with precarious, irregular, seasonal employment) or the mobility of the family does not guarantee his capacity as a "provider"; for example, Ba04, in which father only does "little jobs (*trabajillos*)" and at the moment of the study he was unemployed due to sickness, as reported by the mother of the family. In this situation there is

a need for the mother to also join in the active search for work (Ba02; Ba05; Ma03; Se04; Pv01; Pv07; Va05). Mothers who find themselves in one of these scenarios state that schooling in 0-3 ECEC is a "prerequisite" for obtaining a job (Ma03) and, yet, they are the ones indicating the most difficulties and obstacles to access 0-3 ECEC and the aids that would make schooling viable. For instance, a mother of a family in Barcelona –with three children and the father working a self-employed gardener– (Ba02) wants to find work to complement the unstable (and often insufficient) family income but they have not been able to enroll her youngest child in a nursery due to the fee they are required to pay.

Conciliation difficulties for mothers in precarious work situations

Finally, there are other families in which both parents are in an active work situation. But as we have indicated (Profile 4), the working conditions of the parents and the economic resources –even combined– that this work generates continue to leave the family in a vulnerable situation. Apparently, the admission criteria in public 0-3 ECEC prioritize these family situations (when it understands 0-3 ECEC as a conciliation measure), however several of the families interviewed do not manage to participate successfully in the public system even under these conditions (Va03). On the one hand, as we have pointed out, places are scarce and the admission procedures are complex, so they do not manage to access the public system. On the other hand, the attendance expectations and/or the schedules of the public 0-3 ECEC systems sometimes do not match the working conditions of the parents (Ma05, in which the mother works as a gardener early in the morning before the schools opens) and there is a lack of a family/support network that can supply these care needs. Thus, families end up resorting to the private network despite the cost that this may entail:

Extract 7: Mother of a family made up of mother, father and two children, of Latin American origin, both parents work in Valencia.

(...) what we miss in this nursery is that they do not take care of such young children, because here, for example, mine entered with 9 months because it entered last year in December, it is the rule that they have, that if she had been born in January she no longer enters, she would have entered next year. So, and for other mothers that I know, who want to work and say, "where do I leave the child? (...) I know that there are other nurseries that a month, [or] after two months they already receive a baby (...).

Finally, as this same extract suggests, in these work-family circumstances, "conciliation" work is really understood as a woman's responsibility. It is mothers who must seek an educational solution for their children that is adjusted to their work circumstances, and it is mothers who,

if circumstances require it, modify their expectations and working conditions (looking for part-time alternatives, working by the hour, delaying their job search, etc.) to meet the care and upbringing needs of the youngest children (Ba02; Ma05). For example, the mother in Barcelona with three children (Ba02) cited above cleans houses by the hour, sometimes taking her young son to work. One reason that makes it difficult for them to send their young child to an 0-3 ECEC is the economic cost as mentioned above. Another reason is because her husband does not want her young son to go to 0-3 ECEC, saying that “he is very small”, an arrangement that is a source of tension in the couple and clashes with the mother’s personal projects:

Extract 8: Mother with 3 children, whose husband is a self-employed gardener, of Spanish origin (Barcelona) (Ba02).

(...) It affects me because I am the one who is pulling him [the father]. What I told him is that it seems that you do not want me to advance, that you want to have me here exclusively for you and your children. I need to fly, I need to feel, since I have a percentage of me that is not one hundred percent at least let me work, let me contribute and feel a bit like myself (...)

4. Conclusions

The findings we have presented in this article and the analytical model we have proposed present a complex portrait of how families at risk of social exclusion participate in 0-3 ECEC. As mentioned at the beginning of the paper, understanding why and how disadvantaged families are not facilitated with access to 0-3 ECEC and decide not to participate in this educational tier is a complicated matter that needs to be examined beyond an issue of individual choices and beliefs. The qualitative approach of the study and our theoretical perspective allowed us to situate parental and professional discourses within multiple systemic factors that configure young children’s participation in ECEC. From our perspective, this more nuanced approach to the experiences of families at social disadvantage is relevant for professional intervention and educators who work in ECEC, as it points out different factors and interrelationships among them that shape specific experiences in relation to the first years of care. In addition, the findings might be relevant to shape ECEC targeted policies, especially in a context (such as Spain) in which municipal and local authorities are relevant policy actors and can build their proposals closer to the actual experiences and circumstances of families.

The paper primarily focused on identifying what type of families are having special difficulties in accessing 0-3 ECEC or finding an early childhood care arrangement that meets their family needs and parenting preferences. Within this analysis, not unexpectedly, gender and gender

relations played a role in the organization of barriers to 0-3 ECEC so we would like to close the paper with some comments on how gender operates in our data and analysis. In particular, it is important to situate child-rearing beliefs within the gender order that shapes the care of children during the first years of life (Kremer, 2007).

Parenting beliefs, particularly around the role of the mother in the daily care of children during the first years of life, emerged as a relevant argument in different parts of the data, and especially in particular profiles (Profile 3 and 4) it shaped participation in 0-3 ECEC. However, this ideal care arrangement materializes alongside educational policies that make (or not) other support options available or even professional discourses that re-singularize the role of mothers in early development and care (Valiente, 2019). As the families we have interviewed uncover, at the moment, 0-3 ECEC provisions in Spain do not meet well the care and educational needs of the precarious labor conditions of families at social risk (part-time, with irregular hours, under fragile administrative conditions, etc.) and rests on a construction of working parents and working mothers (cf. Duncan et al., 2004; Dinamia, 2019) that does not reflect well the circumstances documented in this article. In addition, certain professional discourses and constructions of the family (Extract 6) consider that the family (mothers and fathers) should be the primary site of early childhood care and support to early development (cf. Sevón, 2011). These discourses shape professional interventions and open the possibility of designing other types of early childhood care provisions. In turn, the rethinking of 0-3 ECEC provisions (if developed and followed through) could impact current policy understandings of the role of early childhood education in the promotion of socio-educational opportunity and equity.

Notes:

1. The study was conducted as consultancy for Save the Children Spain and was coordinated by the research group "Contemporary Childhood: Semiotic Practices and Developmental Contexts" (<http://www.infanciacontemporanea.com>) at the Universidad Autónoma de Madrid. The project developed in coordination with three "local" research teams (Barcelona, Seville, Bilbao) to collect data in each site. Field work in Madrid and Valencia was carried out by the same team in coordination with Save the Children workers. Each "local team" oversaw data collection in their locality, initial coding and the preparation of a local report.

Table 1: The number of family and professional participants in the study by locality

| | Madrid | Barcelona | Valencia | Seville | Bilbao | Total |
|-----------------------|---------------|------------------|-----------------|----------------|---------------|--------------|
| Families | | | | | | |
| Total Families | 7 | 7 | 7 | 7 | 7 | 35 |
| Professionals | | | | | | |
| Total | 15 | 7 | 10 | 6 | 2 | 40 |

Table 2: Profile of professional participants in the study

| Profile | N |
|---|-----------|
| Childhood Studies Researcher | 1 |
| Public Administration ‘Technicians’ | 3 |
| Psychologist in a Child Support Service | 1 |
| ‘Technicians’ and Managers from the 3rd Sector (NGOs) | 16 |
| ECEC Administrators / Heads | 4 |
| Health Professional in a Child Support Service | 1 |
| ECEC Teachers | 4 |
| Social Educators | 9 |
| Social Worker | 1 |
| Total | 40 |

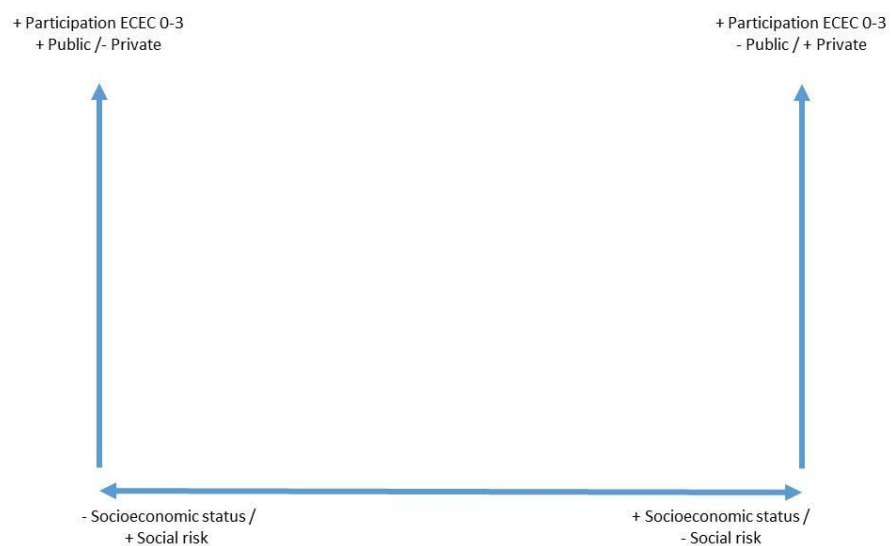


Figure 1: Factors to understand the barriers to access to Early Childhood Education 0-3

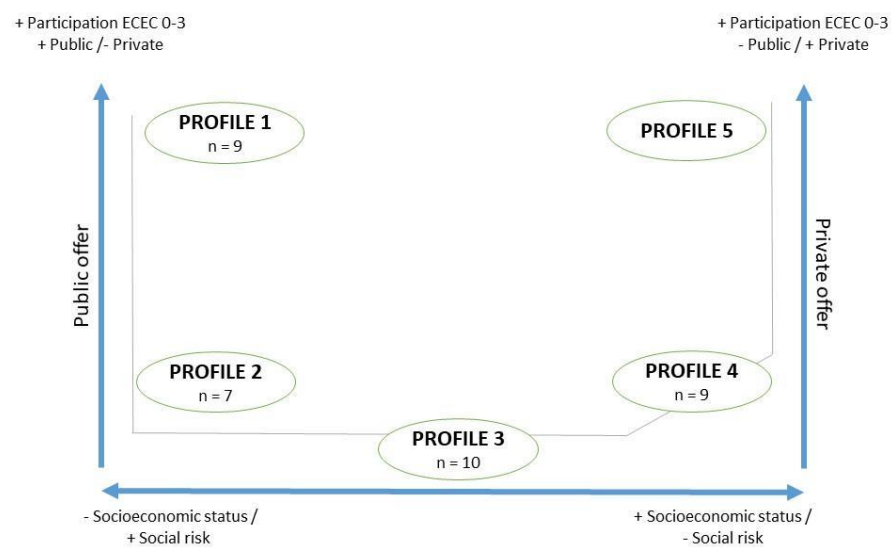


Figure 2: Family profiles and access barriers to 0-3 ECEC

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Families at social risk and access to 0-3 Early Childhood Education and Care in Spain: A model to understand diverse conditions in the current system

Word counts: 8751

Abstract:

It is acknowledged that less children from families at social risk and/or socio-economic disadvantage participate in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) across Europe. The article examines who among these families have special difficulties in accessing the first cycle of ECEC for infants between 0-3 years of age (0-3 ECEC) in Spain. It presents a model that reveals diverse strategies taken by families in relation to 0-3 ECEC and a particular segment of families who are served "worst" by the current system and whose access to the first cycle of early childhood education is especially hindered. In the analysis, we also highlight gender; gender appears as a fundamental dimension to understand the forms of participation (or non-participation) in 0-3 ECEC within families at risk of social exclusion; it is manifested in how beliefs about parenting during the first years of life and structural conditions intersect. The article is based on a study in which we conducted 35 semi-structured interviews with families at social risk as well as group discussions with a total of 40 family and education professionals in five metropolitan areas of Spain.

Keywords: Early Childhood Education, Access to Education, Children and Families at Risk, Eco-Cultural Approach, Spain

1. Introduction

The development of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) has been the focus of educational policies and programmatic proposals in the context of the European Union (EU) and beyond in recent years. At a global level it has been identified as a fundamental tool for family conciliation and the effective and equal incorporation of women into the labor market (European Commission (EC), 2018a; Nollenberg & Rodríguez-Planas, 2011; OECD, 2020; Telford, 2016; Valiente, 2003). On the other hand, within the objectives of social inclusion and reduction of social inequalities within the EU, early educational intervention has been pointed out –particularly for children in a situation of risk for exclusion– as a fundamental tool to promote socio-educational equality (e.g. Burchinal et al., 2010; Dearing et al., 2018; EC, 2018b; Vandebroek & Lazzari, 2013; van Huizen & Plantenga, 2018).

However, the development and consolidation of this segment of the educational system is very heterogeneous. In many countries (including Spain) it is a non-compulsory and not universalized educational stage. It has a diversity of organizational formats, forms of financing,

and political support that vary much more than for other parts of the education system (Llorent, 2013; Torres & González, 2008). Within nation states, this variability may emerge because national policies around this educational stage allow for diversification of ECEC provision models. It may also be facilitated in national systems in which educational policy making is transferred to regional or local governments. Indeed, this is the case for Spain in which educational governance is in the hands of regional autonomous communities, and municipalities play an important role in the funding and shaping of ECEC models.

Despite the heterogeneity, the participation of children in various modes of educational care for children between 0 and 6 years of age has been growing in net terms in the European context including in Spain (e.g. EC, 2018a). However, this growth, in addition to being uneven across geographic contexts, is not occurring at the same rate across different social groups (e.g. Eurofound, 2015). Alongside reports that highlight the relevance of ECEC as a measure of social inclusion, there are studies and policy briefs that underscore the lower participation of socio-economically disadvantaged children (e.g. Kachi et al., 2020; Petitclerc et al., 2017), migrant or refugee families (e.g. Bove and Sharmahd, 2020) and/or ethnic and cultural minorities in pre-compulsory education (Jiménez-Delgado et al., 2016). Specifically, in Spain, some studies have demonstrated how the current access provisions to 0-3 ECEC are not favorable for lower-income and underserved groups (Jiménez-Delgado et al., 2016) - underserved children and families are labelled in different ways by professionals and policy documents through terms that are used almost interchangeably such as “vulnerable”, “at risk” or “disadvantaged” children and families, among others (see López-Pavón, 2020).

More broadly, this line of inquiry rests on international and comparative research that proposes a positive (and almost linear) relationship between socio-economic status and participation in ECEC (Bennet, 2012; Lazzari & Vandebroek, 2012; Ünver & Nicaise, 2016). Aligning with the line of argument, a number of studies stress the importance of promoting equal opportunities of access to quality 0-3 ECEC for children in socially vulnerable situations (Booth, 2014; Burchinal et al., 2010; Dearing et al., 2018; Heckman, 2006; Lipscomb, 2013; van Huizen & Plantenga, 2018). However, debates remain around this goal, especially regarding for whom and how a formal type of ECEC contributes to children’s and families’ well-being (see, for instance, Kottelenberg & Lehrer, 2013). Whether and how socio-economically disadvantaged groups decide to (or not to) use the service is also influenced by

multiple factors and complex processes. For instance, some suggest it is not only a matter of access barriers but that decisions interrelate profoundly with societal views and family beliefs about what is the best form of care for infants (Valiente, 2019).

In addition, there are studies that have addressed parental decision-making processes in relation to 0-3 ECEC or on parental educational preferences (e.g. Hofferth & Wissoker, 1992; Gamble et al., 2008; Gruzová & Syslová, 2020; Peyton et al., 2001; Stipek et al., 1992). Yet, most of these studies rest on two assumptions that are not well-aligned with the circumstances of lower-working class and at-risk families in Spain. First, most research is conducted with families that already have some access to and who are seen as being able to reflexively exercise their choices within the ECEC provision system (Galera, 2021). Second, developmental research tends to put the focus on individual parental educational beliefs and tends to ignore how policy assumptions -for example, assuming a two-parent “adult worker family model” (Duncan et al., 2004, p. 255)- or availability and funding restrictions limit the capacity of at-risk families to maneuver within the ECEC provisions available in their local context.

In this context, this article draws from a broader policy-oriented project focused on examining qualitatively what was hindering access to the first cycle of ECEC (that is, for the 0-3 years age cohort) in families at social risk and / or socio-economic exclusion in Spain. In the Spanish context, the 0-3 cycle is the critical ECEC period to address these questions. 3-6 ECEC is fully incorporated into the educational system in Spain and shows almost universal participation rates (Borra & Palma, 2009; Sánchez, 2008). In contrast, participation in the 0-3 cycle is much lower and there is great diversity in how 0-3 ECEC unfolds given the factors discussed above. For this reason, we collected data in five localities/metropolitan areas in different regions of the Spanish state with different ECEC policies and provisions. It was beyond the scope of the study to include rural areas, although we are aware that there are meaningful differences in the use of ECEC and family organization between rural and the urban areas (e.g. Anderson & Mikesell, 2019).

These research goals fit with an ecological and eco-cultural perspective on ECEC and human development (e.g. Bronfenbrenner, 1999, 1986; Neal & Neal, 2013; Tudge, 2008; Weisner, 2002). An ecological perspective is called for by Vandebroek & Lazzari (2013) to better understand children's access to ECEC, particularly from disadvantaged backgrounds, allowing research to move beyond a simplistic view of parental choice and acknowledge the multiple

factors involved in educational decisions and the relationships among these factors. An ecological approach considers different intertwined systems of direct and indirect influence. In short, building on this framework, children's participation (or not) in ECEC is seen as mesosystemic process (connecting family and school microsystems). In turn, this process is mediated by various macro-systemic factors (ranging from educational and economic policy priorities to cultural ideologies about child-rearing) and exosystemic indirect dynamics, such the conditions of parents' participation in the labor market or (particularly for at-risk families) the intervention of other social and family services.

In the broader study we have analyzed different kinds of factors or "barriers" that hinder access to 0-3 ECEC, in line with recent calls (e.g. Vandenbroek & Lazzari, 2013) - discussed in (Author, in press). This article focuses on the diverse relationships that at-risk families in Spain have with 0-3 ECEC. We present a "model" developed from the data in the study building on a grounded theory logic (see below) in which we categorize the participant families into different profiles. This model suggests that access to 0-3 ECEC in families at risk does not progress linearly as socio-economic status improves, as often assumed in the literature. We also discuss findings from a gender perspective; children's participation in 0-3 ECEC is situated within a gender order in which child-rearing ideologies, structural features of the labor market and ECEC policies intersect. We begin with a description of the methodology we employed in the study.

2. Methodology

2.1 Participants

Fieldwork for this study was carried out in five metropolitan areas: Madrid, Valencia, Barcelona, Bilbao / Basque Country and Seville (see Note 1). As shown in Table 1, a total of 35 families and 40 professionals from the different localities participated. The families were selected by the funding entity, the local research team and/or by different local professionals because they were considered as being in a situation of social exclusion –or at risk of exclusion– based on one or more of the following dimensions: relational (e.g. lack of support networks), legal-administrative (e.g. migrants or receiving support from social services), residential (e.g. living in marginalized areas of their locality), and/or economic/work-related (e.g. lack of stable jobs or in a low-wage situation). The professionals were also recruited either through the funding entity or contacts of the local research team. Each group discussion had a diverse set

of participants with workers from the public sector and the administration, social services and educators, as well as researchers (see Table 2).

(INSERT TABLE 1 and 2 HERE)

2.2 Data collection protocols

All adult participants were informed of the objectives of our project and gave their written consent to participate in the study. The project emerged as a technical collaboration between the funding NGO and the university research teams involved in the project with the oversight of the two organizations leading the project (XXX and XXX - blinded for the review). The techniques used for data collection were semi-structured interviews with families and group discussions (GDs) with key informant-professionals, and they lasted approximately 30-60 minutes and 100-180 minutes, respectively. For both interviews with families and GDs with professionals, we developed common protocols, which were shared across all the local research teams. For the interview with families, the script was built around documenting and understanding families and children's daily lives (Tudge, 2008; Weisner, 2002) bearing in mind it was not possible to conduct naturalistic observations or involve children directly in the data collection as advocated by this approach (cf. Tudge and Hogan, 2005). However, we tried to grasp the everyday routines (Weisner, 2002) and pay attention to the context and interaction among people and objects involved in these daily routines (Tudge, 2008, p.89). In short, the interview protocol explored the following elements:

- Basic and contextual information about the family: nationality(ies), the level of education and employment status of the adults in the home, the number of minors in the home and schooling information of each child as well as the housing conditions and family history.
- The perceptions of families about the barriers to enroll their children in the first cycle of early childhood education for infants between 0-3 years of age.
- Daily routines of the children aged 0-3 and daily parenting strategies and rules, including about who and what the children interact with on a regular basis.
- The views of families on this educational stage (0-3 ECEC).

The protocol for the GDs (Bohnsack, 2004; Smithson, 2000) with professionals was structured in two parts:

- Collect professionals' perceptions and knowledge about the barriers that vulnerable families face in accessing the first cycle of early childhood education. This allowed, on one hand, to triangulate and complement the findings from family participants, and on the other, to gain a broader picture of factors and issues that affect the participation of vulnerable families in ECEC 0-3 and other macro-systemic factors that shape enrollment in ECEC.
- Collectively generate ideas with the participants on how to address the barriers that the most vulnerable families face in accessing ECEC 0-3.

In four of the locations these sessions were organized as GDs with six or more participants. In the case of Basque Country, it was not possible to recruit a diverse group of professionals, so a group interview (GI) with two family services technicians was held. In this case, as an extension of the individual interview method, the researcher maintained an active conversational role, and knowledge was primarily produced through the researcher-participant interaction. This information was complemented with informal exchanges with various professionals in the field of children and youth at social risk during fieldwork in the Basque Country.

2.3 Data analysis strategies

The collected data have been transcribed and analysed within a qualitative-inductive analytical logic in which analytical categories, topics and a “model” was developed from the data we collected through the interviews and discussion groups. In particular, data analysis was guided by two different approaches. First, we employed thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) for the identification, categorization, and conceptualization of the barriers as well as family situations and parental beliefs. Second, more importantly for the goals of this article, we built on an abductive approach (Reichertz, 2019) based on the logic developed in grounded theory (Corbin and Strauss, 1990) to understand the kinds of families that were having special difficulties in accessing 0-3 ECEC in Spain. From a grounded theory perspective, the analytical process is viewed as a cycle in which two dynamics co-occur: (1) the constant confrontation

between "theory" and "data"; (2) the gradual process of construction and reconstruction of an explanatory framework, which leads to the development of organizational-explanatory models (Kelle, 2019). According to Reichertz (2019) abduction refers to the process of looking for a fitting explanation when confronted with surprising facts. Understood in a very flexible manner, this premise was present in our analysis: as we will explain in the result section, the findings did not coincide with the implicit hypotheses that initially sustained the study. Therefore, we worked on developing and adjusting a model that captured the distinct relationship between different family profiles and access barriers to 0-3 ECEC within families and children at socio-economic risk. Drawing on the discursive data generated by participants, the model pays particular attention to how different systemic-ecological factors play a role in structuring the varied relationships with ECEC 0-3 we found across families at risk of social exclusion (Vandenbroeck & Lazzari, 2013).

At a procedural level, in line with the multi-sited and distributed nature of fieldwork and given the ethical constraints on sharing raw data across localities, the analysis was carried out at two intertwined levels. At one level, raw data based on the transcriptions was categorized and coded by the local teams, leading to local reports (required by the funding organization) that examined in detail the discourses of the families and professionals of each locality. At another level, the project co-coordinators synthesized and systematized the findings to identify patterns in the data across different localities and recursively build an organizational model for all the data. These interpretations were recursively probed by each local team against the original data.

3. Results

3.1 A model to understand the difficulties and conditions to access 0-3 Early Childhood Education experienced by families at social risk

As part of the exploration of the barriers and mediating factors regarding access to 0-3 ECEC we propose an organizational model that mainly fulfills two functions: (1) To make sense of how different factors influence access to 0-3 ECEC; (2) To make visible how, in the Spanish context, access and greater participation in publicly or privately owned 0-3 ECEC does not have a linear/progressive relationship with socio-economic status within the segment of families at social risk.

As said above, there seems to be a linear suggestion in which the greater the socioeconomic capacity of families, the greater the participation in 0-3 ECEC. In addition, in a national (or

local) context with established policies to promote equity and in which early educational access is tied to social protection (to which Spanish policies are somewhat committed), then families with less resources should have more access to public 0-3 ECEC. In turn, the more resources families have, the more they should enroll their children in private 0-3. However, our data suggests that there are particular sets of families who appear as the “worst” served by the current system and whose access to the first cycle of early childhood education is seriously hampered. This led to building an alternative model which visualizes the complex relationship between socio-economic circumstances and access to 0-3 ECEC and in which policies, particularly in relation to how public and private 0-3 ECEC options are laid out, emerge as mediating factors.

Figure 1 shows the elements of the model. On the horizontal axis we have a continuum of socio-economic and material conditions ranging from situations of great social risk and material precariousness to the living conditions of Spanish "middle class" families. The vertical axis represents the level of participation in ECEC 0-3, differentiated between public and private offerings. It should be noted that the private sector emerges as a key element, inasmuch as 0-3 ECEC is currently constituted as an educational stage that is neither universal nor compulsory and, therefore, is not free of cost to families in Spain, including the public offers depending on the circumstances of the families and local policies.

(INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE)

Based on these two elements —socio-economic / material conditions and participation in 0-3 ECEC— the data collected point to different forms of participation and barriers to access to early childhood education. These diverse forms of participation cluster around five family profiles in relation to 0-3 ECEC. Figure 2 situates the five family profiles in the model described above, indicating the number of families in our sample that fit in each profile. Only the first four of these profiles are reflected in the families interviewed for this study and will be examined in more detail below, presenting the cluster first and then illustrating it with a contextualized analysis of a case family for each profile, given space constraints. Profile 5 corresponds to middle-class families, which are projected in our model based on our experience in Spanish 0-3 ECEC research and policies but not included in our sample.

In our analytical proposal, the key classifying factor is attendance or non-attendance in 0-3 ECEC, generating two profiles in which the children attend organized childcare and two in which they do not attend 0-3 ECEC. Aspects such as family composition or the specific socio-economic and social circumstances of each family have a more probabilistic character (i.e., they may appear more or less frequently in one profile, but the situations do not define their categorization). Similarly, families have changing histories and circumstances, and different children in the same families may have had different histories of participation in 0-3 ECEC. In these cases, the analysis and "categorization" is done based on the family circumstances at the time of the interview and the form of involvement in ECEC of the child aged 0-3 in the family.

(INSERT FIGURE 2 HERE)

Nine families fall into *Profile 1*. These families are considered in a situation of great vulnerability and without (regular) work; yet, they count on the assistance and intervention of Social Services and/or NGOs who work with children and families. Children in these families do have access to the scarce public 0-3 ECEC places through different aids and procedures promoted by social services and local educational policies. Within this profile we find a large number (six) of single mothers living in very precarious material conditions, receiving *Minimum Insertion Income* (Ma02)¹, or unemployment benefits (Pv02; Ma07), or if working, cleaning houses paid by the hour (Ma04; Ma06; Va06). For instance, the case of a family in Madrid (Ma02, Extract 1):

Extract 1: Single mother unemployed, Spanish origin, with a child of 22 months, living in a rented room (Madrid).

(...) I lived there in San Diego [in Madrid] and really I found one [nursery] closer, I don't know if it wasn't public or what happened but, anyway, they told me that there were no vacancies (...) so I talked to the [social] assistant and they told me that if I wanted I could choose that one and no, I had no problem. I fulfilled the points and so on and for me it was good, I didn't have much difficulty, really (...) they only told me that I could go with the assistance because of the RMI [Minimum Insertion Income] and that's it. (...) the truth is normal, I didn't have any difficulty (...)

In *Profile 2* (N=7) families, multiple family, personal, material and legal circumstances converge in a way that "overwhelm" the family and prevent them from successfully managing

¹ A code has been used to identify each family who has participated in the study. It includes the acronym of the locality (Barcelona = Ba / Basque Country = Pv / Madrid = Ma / Seville = Se / Valencia = Va) + a number assigned to each family by locality.

the admission processes to 0-3 ECEC. Here it seems that other urgent family needs must be met and these do not initially include participation in 0-3 ECEC. In the discourse of professionals, these families are referred to as "multi-problematic" and seem to fall through the "cracks of the system". This includes migrant families, recently arrived and/or in an irregular situation (Ba06; Ma03), with language barriers (Se01), some medical conditions of the child or the parent(s) (Ba05), and/or experiencing complicated family processes (such as separations, family breakups, domestic violence, addictions, etc.) (Se03). For example, the case of a migrant mother in Seville with 3 children (Se03, Extract 2):

Extract 2: Mother from Morocco with 3 children, unemployed, the husband lives and works in Morocco. The family does not compute as a single-parent family and was not entitled to the reduced fee to enroll her youngest daughter in subsidized 0-3 ECEC (Seville).

So when I came here I only needed the day care for my daughter and I had to pay. Why? Because my husband did not have a NIE [foreign identity card], that is to say, since my husband was out of the country, the day care was not subsidized for me, I had to pay for it. At that time I could not pay for it. I went to the social assistance a lot of times but the social worker told you that if you have a work contract she can help you with half of the childcare, "well lady, I am unemployed, I have no one to take care of my daughter and if I don't work I can't feed my daughter (...)

The professional perception is that schooling in 0-3 ECEC is not felt as a support or resource by families when there is a combination of circumstances of this type, but rather emerges as an added "stressor", where current policies or intervention work fails to facilitate access to 0-3 ECEC successfully (e.g. Coordinator of an NGO that supports vulnerable families, Madrid).

Families in *Profile 3* (N=10) are generally two-parent families in which only one adult works, usually the husband/man. The wife is left to care for the young children and is not actively seeking employment or full-time-regularized employment. Families in this profile do not see schooling in 0-3 ECEC as a priority for different reasons: (a) beliefs about stay-at-home parenting and the place of women in the family (Ma01; Se05); (b) the availability of a caregiver-support network (Va01); and (c) 0-3 ECEC access policies focused on work-life balance, when all adult caregivers in the household have regularized full-time employment, which do not meet the needs of this type of family or facilitate their access (Se06). Consequently, the children of families with this profile end up not participating in 0-3 ECEC, as in the case of the children of a migrant family in the Basque Country (Pv03, Extract 3):

Extract 3: Father of a two-parent family, of Moroccan origin, three children, their youngest two-year-old son does not attend ECEC 0-3. The father works as an educator while the mother does not work outside the home (Basque Country).

(...) No, I did not send him to school because of the experience I had with the middle child. Last year, for example, the middle child is now four years old and almost three months old. Last year, when he was three, he was enrolled and everything, I took him for a week and no (...) No, no, no, no, I didn't like it because the child still needs the support of the family, of the mother... they have to be so wrapped up, you know? It was a shame to leave them there (...) you know? He is a child, he is not yet ready to go to school alone, and on top of that my wife does not work, an advantage we have (...) an advantage in favor, let's say, that allows him to stay at home and so on, that's why I have not even enrolled the little one this year (...)

We can describe *Profile 4* (N=9) as two-parent families in which both adults work, but working conditions and the combined salaries still leave the family in a precarious situation. Although they have access to 0-3 ECEC, they compete with many other families for access to public places. In addition, as the public offer does not always meet their care needs for long or irregular hours, etc. (e.g. Va05 in which the father works as a building painter and the mother cleans houses), they make use of private 0-3 ECEC as an alternative, even though the expense represents a comparatively disproportionate part of the family income. This is the situation faced by a migrant family in Valencia (Va03, Extract 4):

Extract 4: Mother, two-parent family, Ecuadorian origin, three children, father works full time and mother is starting a business. The family used to send the youngest child to a private nursery paying a reduced fee of 130 euros a month receiving financial support from different public sources (Valencia).

(...) I looked at it there and I signed up and everything, but they told me that there is probably no place. Then a friend told me to look at another [private] nursery and we went to talk. The girl told me that there was no problem, that she would keep the place for me if they didn't receive me here, I would go and register there. There were no problems (...) the truth is that they were all very attentive. Both the directors, who were two girls, and the teacher were very attentive (...) and that's a support for us, because if we have to work or do other things, we can't do it with them [my children] (...)

The fifth profile, *Profile 5*, corresponds to middle-class families, headed by one or two adults who work outside the home. The participation of middle-class 0-3 children in early childhood education is characterized as high, with access to both public and private provisions, especially given that one of the most significant factors to facilitate access to the public 0-3 ECEC network in Spain is the active employment status of the adult caregivers of the home. Similarly, families in this profile have the resources to access the private early childhood education network, which

is chosen either because it has not been possible to access the public network or because it offers services (e.g., extended schedules, curricular singularities, etc.) that are not available in the public network (cf. Galera, 2021). In any case, middle-class families have not been included in fieldwork, as it is out of the study's focus, and so we will not discuss further this profile. Yet, it is important to have this set of families as a reference in the model, among other reasons because it structures parts of the professional discourse and some of the administrative-political barriers that we have identified.

3.2 Analysis from a gender perspective

Gender is present as a key dimension to understand the forms of participation in 0-3 ECEC and the access barriers families face. It is already apparent from the fact that 0-3 ECEC is seen as part of the social policy to promote women's (re)insertion to paid work and thus gender equality (e.g. Dinamia, 2019). Yet, our data reveals that the difficulties faced by families at risk to enroll their children in 0-3 ECEC have much to do with gender related issues but in a more complex way than as often understood in policy papers. Here, the focus is not on mothers' beliefs about ECEC 0-3 and how they affect the decision that families make (cf. Duncan et al., 2004; Stipek et al., 1992), but on how families in socially vulnerable circumstances must manage decisions in relation to 0-3 ECEC and how these decisions are shaped by how gender intertwines with ECEC and social care policies, the conditions of the labor market or gender within the family order. This approach draws on an intersectional perspective (Cho et al., 2013; Goñalons & Marx, 2014) in which gender, social class, cultural background and various structural factors interconnect in the unfolding of current policies and existing forms of social intervention. From this perspective we have identified three social and family situations in which gender stands out as a decisive factor to understand the forms of participation (or no-participation) of children in 0-3 ECEC: (1) Single motherhood as a specific risk situation; (2) The dilemmas of caregiving mothers within two-parent families, and; (3) Conciliation difficulties for couples in precarious work situations.

Single motherhood as a specific risk situation

Leaving aside the methodological considerations regarding how the sample of interviewed families was recruited –as explained earlier, we used a convenience sampling and eight (28% of the sample) of the interviewed families are headed by women who face child-raising and

care without a partner—, single motherhood has particular relevance in our analysis. Despite not being the most frequent family model in the sample as a whole, 50% of the families that we have characterized as being in a more precarious situation (Profiles 1 and 2) are headed by single mothers. Single motherhood is also a risk situation that professional discourses identify and indicate with relative clarity and consensus, for instance:

Extract 5: NGO Worker, Group discussion in Valencia.

(...) I think that another profile [that has barriers to enroll their children in 0-3 ECEC] is single-mother families, whether they are immigrants or not. They are families that have a more difficult support network, they may be unemployed or in precarious employment and to access it [0-3 ECEC] seems to me a profile that...they have it quite difficult (...)

An effect of this singularization is that single-mother families are more visible in the allocation of (scarce) protection resources, and the participation of their children in 0-3 ECEC is facilitated. Logically, it would be an exaggeration to say that all children under 3 years of age of single mothers have guaranteed access to 0-3 ECEC, given the shortage of places and current admission policies to the 0-3 tier. As noted above it was not the case in our study either, especially for single-mothers in the “multi-problematic” family category (Profile 2). For instance, a widow from Nigeria living in Valencia with three children would like to enroll her youngest child in 0-3 ECEC to find some work but she states she is not facilitated with much information and, thus, her child is not enrolled in early care (Va02). However, it is noteworthy how several of the single mothers in this study describe access to 0-3 ECEC as not very difficult, having been closely accompanied by social workers (see Extract 1).

Dilemmas of caregiving mothers within two-parent families

There is a group of families in which, apparently, the mother and father distribute the roles in such a way that the father (man) provides the economic support of the family and the mother (woman) is dedicated to the care and raising of the children (Profile 3). In this "arrangement", the schooling of the youngest children can be delayed until they are 2-3 years of age or the beginning of the second cycle of ECEC (3-6 years of age). Until then upbringing and education takes place mainly at home and under the mother's care.

This situation would seem to be “traditional” reflecting a consolidated and stable upbringing and family model in our culture. Indeed, some professionals advocate the model as below, calling for a holistic rethinking of children's care system during the first years of life (particularly the first year):

Extract 6: Social Educator, GD in Valencia.

Well, I'm going to say one thing that maybe all of you "jump on top of me" here, but I think that from 0 to 2 they have to be with the main attachment figure. I think that what we would have to do is to create more protected employment, more conciliation with maternity and paternity leave and that we are denaturing, losing our instinct as a result of industrialization (...) and they are selling us capitalism as they want. (...)

Unlike for the case of single-mother families where there is a clear consensus in the professional discourse on the type of support and provisions that they should receive, we found different views among professionals when discussions turn to the (re)incorporation into the labor market of mothers "with a partner" and with young children. While some professionals expressed views in line with Extract 6 there were others who strongly defended the importance of the development and consolidation of the current 0-3 ECEC model, pointing out its special relevance for children at risk of social exclusion. This is also an area where the data collected with the families uncovers very heterogeneous circumstances and expectations that administrative and enrollment policies reduce to the same "family arrangement".

Admission criteria in 0-3 ECEC places two-parent families with unemployed (or under-employed) mothers in a weaker place with regard to participation in organized early childhood education. To begin, for the families at social risk and a situation of poverty that we have interviewed, the scheme "father works outside the home and mother cares in the home" includes a diversity of very complex realities in which the circumstances of the family often diverge from the premises of this apparently traditional arrangement. Some were in the processes of breakup/separation of the couple (Se03), in others there were changes in the legal situation of the parents (Se01), and yet in others the arrangement included transfers and moving due to work (Ba05; Ba07; Ma06). For instance, a mother of three children from Seville (Se03) was asked to pay for the nursery of her youngest son because the father and she were in the process of separation but, since both of them were receiving unemployment benefits, they fell above the income and care criteria. She also said in the interview that when another child of her started schooling she could not get the signature from the father as he was in prison. In this case, she could have had difficulty enrolling the child in school, yet the school administration did not make an issue out of this and facilitated the process.

Likewise, this "father as breadwinner" assumption many times does not recognize that the employment situation of the "father" (with precarious, irregular, seasonal employment) or the mobility of the family does not guarantee his capacity as a "provider"; for example, Ba04, in which father only does "little jobs (*trabajillos*)" and at the moment of the study he was

unemployed due to sickness, as reported by the mother of the family. In this situation there is a need for the mother to also join in the active search for work (Ba02; Ba05; Ma03; Se04; Pv01; Pv07; Va05). Mothers who find themselves in one of these scenarios state that schooling in 0-3 ECEC is a "prerequisite" for obtaining a job (Ma03) and, yet, they are the ones indicating the most difficulties and obstacles to access 0-3 ECEC and the aids that would make schooling viable. For instance, a mother of a family in Barcelona –with three children and the father working a self-employed gardener– (Ba02) wants to find work to complement the unstable (and often insufficient) family income but they have not been able to enroll her youngest child in a nursery due to the fee they are required to pay.

Conciliation difficulties for mothers in precarious work situations

Finally, there are other families in which both parents are in an active work situation. But as we have indicated (Profile 4), the working conditions of the parents and the economic resources -even combined- that this work generates continue to leave the family in a vulnerable situation. Apparently, the admission criteria in public 0-3 ECEC prioritize these family situations (when it understands 0-3 ECEC as a conciliation measure), however several of the families interviewed do not manage to participate successfully in the public system even under these conditions (Va03). On the one hand, as we have pointed out, places are scarce and the admission procedures are complex, so they do not manage to access the public system. On the other hand, the attendance expectations and/or the schedules of the public 0-3 ECEC systems sometimes do not match the working conditions of the parents (Ma05, in which the mother works as a gardener early in the morning before the schools opens) and there is a lack of a family/support network that can supply these care needs. Thus, families end up resorting to the private network despite the cost that this may entail:

Extract 7: Mother of a family made up of mother, father and two children, of Latin American origin, both parents work in Valencia.

(...) what we miss in this nursery is that they do not take care of such young children, because here, for example, mine entered with 9 months because it entered last year in December, it is the rule that they have, that if she had been born in January she no longer enters, she would have entered next year. So, and for other mothers that I know, who want to work and say, "where do I leave the child? (...) I know that there are other nurseries that a month, [or] after two months they already receive a baby (...).

Finally, as this same extract suggests, in these work-family circumstances, "conciliation" work is really understood as a woman's responsibility. It is mothers who must seek an educational

solution for their children that is adjusted to their work circumstances, and it is mothers who, if circumstances require it, modify their expectations and working conditions (looking for part-time alternatives, working by the hour, delaying their job search, etc.) to meet the care and upbringing needs of the youngest children (Ba02; Ma05). For example, the mother in Barcelona with three children (Ba02) cited above cleans houses by the hour, sometimes taking her young son to work. One reason that makes it difficult for them to send their young child to an 0-3 ECEC is the economic cost as mentioned above. Another reason is because her husband does not want her young son to go to 0-3 ECEC, saying that “he is very small”, an arrangement that is a source of tension in the couple and clashes with the mother’s personal projects:

Extract 8: Mother with 3 children, whose husband is a self-employed gardener, of Spanish origin (Barcelona) (Ba02).

(...) It affects me because I am the one who is pulling him [the father]. What I told him is that it seems that you do not want me to advance, that you want to have me here exclusively for you and your children. I need to fly, I need to feel, since I have a percentage of me that is not one hundred percent at least let me work, let me contribute and feel a bit like myself (...)

4. Conclusions

The findings we have presented in this article and the analytical model we have proposed present a complex portrait of how families at risk of social exclusion participate in 0-3 ECEC. As mentioned at the beginning of the paper, understanding why and how disadvantaged families are not facilitated with access to 0-3 ECEC and decide not to participate in this educational tier is a complicated matter that needs to be examined beyond an issue of individual choices and beliefs. The qualitative approach of the study and our theoretical perspective allowed us to situate parental and professional discourses within multiple systemic factors that configure young children’s participation in ECEC. From our perspective, this more nuanced approach to the experiences of families at social disadvantage is relevant for professional intervention and educators who work in ECEC, as it points out different factors and interrelationships among them that shape specific experiences in relation to the first years of care. In addition, the findings might be relevant to shape ECEC targeted policies, especially in a context (such as Spain) in which municipal and local authorities are relevant policy actors and can build their proposals closer to the actual experiences and circumstances of families.

The paper primarily focused on identifying what type of families are having special difficulties in accessing 0-3 ECEC or finding an early childhood care arrangement that meets their family

needs and parenting preferences. Within this analysis, not unexpectedly, gender and gender relations played a role in the organization of barriers to 0-3 ECEC so we would like to close the paper with some comments on how gender operates in our data and analysis. In particular, it is important to situate child-rearing beliefs within the gender order that shapes the care of children during the first years of life (Kremer, 2007).

Parenting beliefs, particularly around the role of the mother in the daily care of children during the first years of life, emerged as a relevant argument in different parts of the data, and especially in particular profiles (Profile 3 and 4) it shaped participation in 0-3 ECEC. However, this ideal care arrangement materializes alongside educational policies that make (or not) other support options available or even professional discourses that re-singularize the role of mothers in early development and care (Valiente, 2019). As the families we have interviewed uncover, at the moment, 0-3 ECEC provisions in Spain do not meet well the care and educational needs of the precarious labor conditions of families at social risk (part-time, with irregular hours, under fragile administrative conditions, etc.) and rests on a construction of working parents and working mothers (cf. Duncan et al., 2004; Dinamia, 2019) that does not reflect well the circumstances documented in this article. In addition, certain professional discourses and constructions of the family (Extract 6) consider that the family (mothers and fathers) should be the primary site of early childhood care and support to early development (cf. Sevón, 2011). These discourses shape professional interventions and open the possibility of designing other types of early childhood care provisions. In turn, the rethinking of 0-3 ECEC provisions (if developed and followed through) could impact current policy understandings of the role of early childhood education in the promotion of socio-educational opportunity and equity.

Notes:

Table 1: The number of family and professional participants in the study by locality

| | Madrid | Barcelona | Valencia | Seville | Bilbao | Total |
|-----------------------|---------------|------------------|-----------------|----------------|---------------|--------------|
| Families | | | | | | |
| Total Families | 7 | 7 | 7 | 7 | 7 | 35 |
| Professionals | | | | | | |
| Total | 15 | 7 | 10 | 6 | 2 | 40 |

Table 2: Profile of professional participants in the study

| Profile | N |
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| Childhood Studies Researcher | 1 |
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| ECEC Teachers | 4 |
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| Social Worker | 1 |
| Total | 40 |

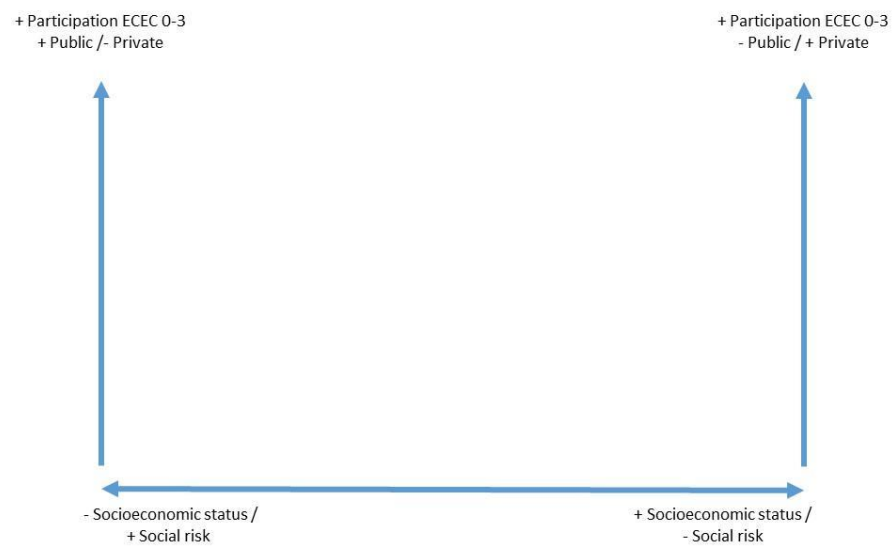


Figure 1: Factors to understand the barriers to access to Early Childhood Education 0-3

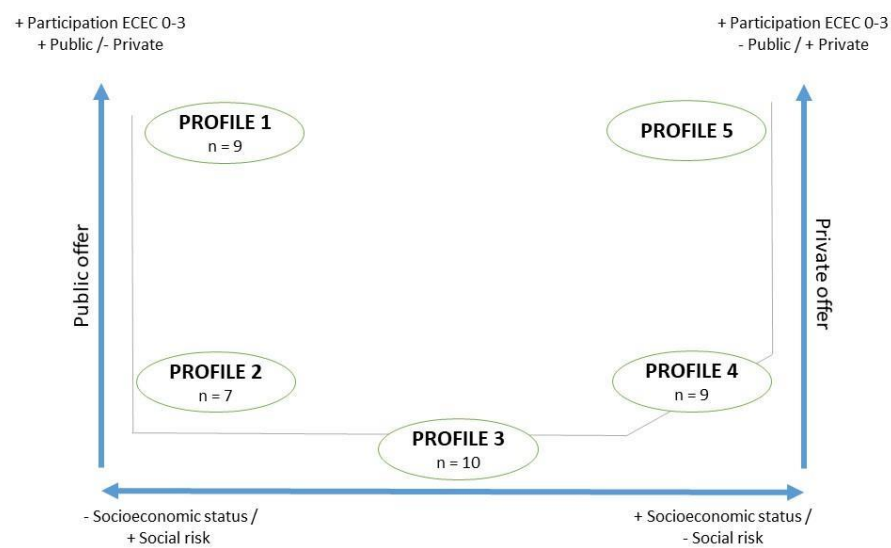


Figure 2: Family profiles and access barriers to 0-3 ECEC

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