

For all, for free!

Why do parents have to pay for early childhood education but not for primary education?

Jorma Sipilä

Abstract

I aim to understand the different payment policies that exist for primary education and early childhood education and care (ECEC) by exploring their respective institutional histories.

Primary education was the first public service in history to be provided for all. This was simply based on elite interests. Primary education would produce more efficient workers and soldiers and more dutiful citizens without undermining class society.

Infant schools were established in the 19th century to support the care of small children as working class mothers were unable to meet children's needs. Well-off families, by contrast, could put their children in kindergarten and so promote their wholesome development. Later on, the 20th century saw the huge growth of daycare, which combined the interests of mothers, employers and children.

ECEC is a key tool for improving human skills and competencies and reducing the inequalities associated with birth. At a time when human qualifications are gaining increasing importance, payments for early childhood education are surely becoming outdated. Children's daycare may be charged but early education not.

Key words: kindergarten, daycare, primary school, compulsory, free of charge, institutional

CHAPTER 3

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Why do parents have to pay for early childhood education but not for primary education?

Primary education for all, and even compulsory primary education for all, has been embraced in all rich countries since the nineteenth century. Participation in early education and care (ECEC), by contrast, continues to remain voluntary and subject to a fee, even in most European countries. Why has it been taken for granted that primary school should be obligatory and free of charge, but not ECEC? In this article I am searching for explanations from the reasons why these educational institutions were originally created.

I begin by looking at the particular reasons why education has gained such a privileged position among public services that no fees are charged. I then proceed to explore the differences in the historical development and institutional forms of primary education and ECEC. Finally, I briefly present the case of Finland, where the central and local governments have implemented payment policies which actively inhibit the expansion of ECEC.

Education: A very particular public service

There are many reasons why education has become an essential element in the making of modern democracy. Education helps people achieve their aims, it promotes public good and it lends itself to collective provision. It puts the exceptional learning capacity of humans to good use and so lays the foundation for improved goal achievement. This reinforces faith in the future and helps to relieve social tensions. Education is furthermore quite well in line with the interests of power elites. Let us look at a few themes a little closer.

Collectivity and the public good. Education is an excellent example of a public good. As a public service it has long-term benefits both for the individual student and for others interacting with this student. Another peculiarity of education is that it is an institution well suited for collective provision. Teaching can often be organized in groups without any loss of efficiency. Government-funded mass education has fairly well met the expectations of both teachers and students. There is a

marked difference to health care provision, for instance, which is largely based on individual diagnosis and treatment plans, and the personal relationship between physician and patient.

Equality and inequality. Even in democracies the interests of elites play an important role in the development of public services. Education has an extraordinary ability to pursue equality and inequality at the same time. This is one of the reasons why education enjoys greater favour among the ruling and upper classes than do health care, social care or social security. As a rule, education is not allocated in such a way that the poor get more than the rich. The higher the level of education, the larger the proportion of students coming from an upper-class background. This bias, somewhat paradoxically, does not prevent education from being regarded as carrying great promise for equality. For instance, Branko Milanovic (2016) denoted education as the great social equalizer of the twentieth century as the enormous expansion of secondary and higher education opened up access for the children of workers and farmers, and of the middle class.

In comparison to education, ECEC is a much more complex social and political phenomenon.¹ As the name says, early childhood education and care is not just about education but also about care. ECEC institutions do not concentrate on a specific set of basic functions in the same way as primary schools. Although the provision of education and care for young children are parallel processes, they differ in substantial respects. They include different activities, contribute to different political objects and are differently targeted at children of different ages. Social care was traditionally regarded as a family issue that had nothing at all to do with politics. Nevertheless, social care is a phenomenon of utmost political importance because of its role in creating basic human resources.

Traditionally, social care has not ranked very high on the political agenda. The public care of children was not at first regarded as a form of education, but rather as a method to relieve social problems. Later, the growth of female employment gave other meanings to children's day care. The emphasis shifted to its educational content, and children's day care became a political issue. However, the progress of day care policy has strongly depended on women's political mobilization.²

¹ This is reflected in the diversity of the concepts used in different times and places. In this article the terms *early childhood education*, *kindergarten*, *preschool*, *nursery school* and *pre-primary school* are used synonymously. The same goes for *early childhood care*, *children's day care* and *childcare*.

² Authoritarian masculine politics has in fact created an evident barrier against ECEC. One example of its importance was the tremendous growth that the Spanish preschool system experienced after the Franconian era (Valente 2009).

One difference between childcare and education concerns their collective character. Childcare is neither provided collectively with such ease as education, nor is the public-good outcome of childcare achieved as rapidly as it is in education. Thus, the basic political conditions for free and comprehensive childcare provision are not as favourable as the basic political conditions for free and comprehensive education.

Education for all: The roots

How did education become a particular institution in which governments invest so heavily? I begin by reviewing the standpoints of the main supporters and opponents.

The earliest reason for public education was related to religious and social order. After antiquity, the history of European education began with the Christian Church. Religion cannot exist without education. Given its emphasis on equality, the Christian Church in particular needs an education system that is both comprehensive and free. Before the Industrial Revolution era, states were mainly interested in education for purposes of social legitimation. In particular the Protestant Church cooperated well in providing legitimation for the state (Archer 2013).

Another major reason for public education stemmed from the economy. The lead in promoting education was taken by rich cities. From early on, the dominant bourgeoisie became aware of the opportunities offered by trade and industry, and realized the skills they required. The bourgeoisie's main focus was to increase the productivity of labour – it needed skilled, reliable, proactive and multilingual workers (de Swaan 1988, pp. 52–117). Later, education gained even more importance when the bourgeoisie assumed control over the state. Since then, state officials were also expected to have knowledge and skills, that is, to be educated (Mann 2012; Archer 2013).

The third explanation has to do with the growing importance of communication. Interestingly, Abram de Swaan linked the initial stages of mass education with the nation's need for linguistic integration. Even in a country such as France, the large number of spoken languages and dialects very much complicated mutual understanding. In the United States, the linguistic integration of immigrants was an enormous set of projects that were carried out in different ways in different states (de Swaan 1988, pp. 92–99).

But there were also good reasons to oppose the expansion of education. Education was a heavy drain on scarce resources that could have been used for other purposes. Employers and many parents needed children as labour, and the work they did on farms and in factories did not require any particular skills. There was little use even for literacy because there was almost nothing to read. Taxpayers did not want to pay for the education of other people's children: they considered that it would be useless to teach anything other than Bible reading or certain practical skills, especially to girls, peasants and the poor. Public support for the enlightenment of the people was certainly less than enthusiastic (Heidenheimer 1981; de Swaan 1988, pp. 53–60; Lindert 2004, pp. 100–106).

Primary school as an international success

Frederick the Great, Emperor of Prussia, declared compulsory primary education for all children in 1763.³ His announcement was the first move toward equal opportunity in education. During the 1800s, the idea of comprehensive primary school spread across Europe, and by the end of the century most Western states had obligatory primary education for all children.

Education started with children who were assumed to be able to focus, follow the lessons and to walk to school on their own. Attendance could be made compulsory for children aged six to seven. The content of teaching was surprisingly similar in different countries. Children had to learn to read, write and count. In addition, they had to know where in the world they lived, that is, they had to learn history and geography (de Swaan 1988, p. 52). In short, primary school was to instil the basic skills and obedience required by their future membership of society.

In the nineteenth century, the law on compulsory education did not necessarily mean that children actually went to an appropriate school. In Sweden, for example, the obligation was first imposed from the beginning of the century, yet in the 1870s children who lived in the countryside went to a lower primary school for no more than a couple of days a week, on average, for one year. One-third of the schools were ambulatory and teachers had almost no qualifications (Laamanen 2000). In other countries too, most children spent only a couple of years at school (Lee & Lee 2016).

The establishment of primary schools was delayed in countries where economic development was lagging behind, where the bourgeoisie was weak and where the Catholic Church was opposed to

³ Different years in different sources.

state education (Arroyo-Abad & Lindert 2016). The most progressive country was the United States, where even secondary education was comprehensive and free of charge, one generation before Europe (Heidenheimer 1981).

In Europe, education systems were born in a class society where the upper classes wanted to limit social mobility. Education belonged to the upper classes, landowners and merchants. It might have been dangerous for the rich to allow poor people to have access to newspapers and books. Another educational idea, therefore, was to exclude the poor and to start public education for better-off children at the age of nine to ten, once they had received a decent education at home. The objections were resolved through a compromise: primary schooling was provided for all, but access to continued studies was restricted by means of admission tests and fees (Heidenheimer 1981, pp. 280–2; de Swaan 1988, p. 54; Laamanen 2000).

Primary school became an international success. Literacy and education increased human well-being in many ways. Besides boosting economic productivity, schooling also had various immaterial effects: by increasing skills at the bottom of the income ladder, it strengthened political stability, lowered crime rates, improved health and reduced inequality (van Leeuwen & van Leeuwen-Li 2014; Roser & Ortiz-Ospina 2018).

By the early twentieth century resistance to education had subsided. Child labour was prohibited by law, and farmers and workers began to see the prospects of upward social mobility. The obstacles to the further education of their children had to be removed. Societies had prospered and they could now afford to invest in the future of children. Education became a social benefit that opened up opportunities for the development of human capabilities among all social groups.⁴

Early childhood care as a public service

⁴ In Finland compulsory education was not stipulated until 1921. Before that, it featured prominently in the first programmes of the mass political parties, i.e. the Social Democrats and the Agrarian Party. These programmes were published at the start of the 20th century, before independence (in 1917). The Social Democratic Party called for obligatory primary education and the removal of payments in all educational institutions. The Agrarian Party pushed for a more practical and social curriculum in primary school. The party's great ideologist Santeri Alkio wanted to see education do away with class differences and insisted that the distinction between elementary and secondary school be removed. Everyone had to accumulate the 'capital of civilization' (Alkio 1907).

Children experience phenomenal growth and development in their first years of life. The needs of a newborn baby are very different from those of a child who is starting primary school. ECEC must fulfil a variety of functions and take account of these changes in children's needs and capacities. This makes ECEC both institutionally and politically highly complex.

Baby care requires an enormous amount of time, human resources and flexible commitment. Neither the market nor the state have the capacity to provide all this; the real source of resources is the family.⁵ However, owing to the circumstances, there may also be a recurring need for help from other people. In modern societies the public support for care protects children and concretizes the public interest in their future.

However, the right of the state to intervene in family life is strictly limited to cases where child protection is indispensable. Early childcare is regarded as an integral part of private family life. As expressed by Ingo Richter (2009), caring is a personal relationship that resists regulation by law. What the state can do under these circumstances is guarantee unconditional help to carers in trouble, for instance in the form of the right to day care.

Conditions change when the baby grows up. Parents begin to see day care as an alternative and often enrol their child at the age of one to two years old. Despite the optional rights to day care, not all parents take advantage of it. The government may create public institutions for early childcare, but it cannot oblige children to attend. Parents in Western countries are free to choose the religious or pedagogical institution in which they want their child to receive care. But when the child grows up, the state's rights get stronger and the parents' rights weaker. Education, however, is controlled by the state. If the state wants to provide comprehensive education for younger children, it may lower the age at which children have to go to primary school (Richter 2009; Scheiwe 2009).

Reasons for ECEC

Anette Borchorst divides the tasks of ECEC into five categories: 'Three of them relate to the children. The first is childcare as preventive and residual welfare, targeted at poor and at-risk children; the second relates to social pedagogical objectives for child development; and the third is educational, focusing on improving reading and writing skills. Two objectives relate to women's

⁵ A well known, but not sustainable, historical exception was innovated by the kibbutzim in postwar Israel.

employment: the first is economic in nature and is motivated by the wish to satisfy the demand of labour; the second is embedded in the wish to enhance gender equality' (Borchorst 2009, p. 132).

Initially, the development of ECEC was justified by the huge social problems that were created during the years of unregulated industrialization. Mothers who worked long hours were unable to meet their children's needs for care and education. In more affluent families, there was a willingness to invest in the comprehensive development of children through new social pedagogical programmes.

In the nineteenth century, two institutions were created to address these tasks. Bettye M. Caldwell summed up the difference between these institutions using American terms: 'From the beginning, we have had day nurseries (or day care or childcare, to use the modern terms) for the poor, and early childhood education for the affluent. Such programs differed in their objectives and in their quality' (Caldwell 1989, p. 5). Referring to the tasks mentioned by Borchorst, the purpose of day care was to control the risks and respond to the needs caused by women's employment, whereas kindergartens promoted children's development and skills.

Day care (infant school) for child protection. The nineteenth century saw the growth of a huge number of movements to help poor families. Emily D. Cahan presents a long list: 'Sunday school classes, missions, orphan homes, children's aid societies, settlement houses, kindergarten education, tenement house and child labor reform; campaigns to conserve the health of infants and young children; campaigns to remove young paupers from the almshouses; the establishment of reformatories and probationary measures for young offenders; programs to send orphaned children out West to live with farm families; and mothers' pensions as an economic aid to single-parent families' (Cahan 1989, p. 13).

Safe day care was a response to the need for child protection, provided for small children so that their poor mothers could go to work. The quality of the first day nurseries left much to be desired: they were overcrowded, marginally funded, staffed by untrained personnel and barely able to meet the minimum standards of sanitation. They were never really 'for the children' but were primarily intended to help the mothers (Caldwell 1989, p. 5).⁶

⁶ Germans spoke frankly of a '*Kleinkinderbewahranstalt*' ('institution for preserving small children').

The early nineteenth century saw the emergence of what may be described as an infant school movement in Britain. Infant schools functioned partly as ‘minding schools’ for young children in industrial areas. These schools were usually targeted at children between two and seven (Gillard 2011). The idea was to protect children from evil and corrupt influences and to discipline them in proper habits. At the same time, they greatly facilitated children’s progress in more advanced schools (Board of Education 1931, p. 3, p. 11).

Later, the failure to integrate infant schools with the new educational philosophy developed by kindergartens and the inclusion of five-year-olds in primary schools both contributed to the decline of infant schools (Kammerman 2007, p. 11). In Britain, infant schools were partly merged with primary schools when the primary school age limit was lowered. This again was largely motivated by health and social arguments (Penn 2009).

There were also many who disapproved of early childhood care. They felt it was morally wrong for society to assume duties and responsibilities that belonged to the family, and they certainly did not want to pay taxes to bankroll this. In religious circles, there was much resistance to out-of-home childcare, especially in Catholic countries and in the United States: ‘The child’s home was considered the most appropriate environment for early development, and the informed mother was considered the best teacher’ (Cahan 1989, pp. 12–13).

Kindergarten (nursery school) for child development. Emily D. Cahan described the substance of nursery school: ‘for middle-income groups, there arose a nursery school and kindergarten system whose primary focus was to supplement the enrichment available at home. Diverse in their origins and purposes, nursery schools and kindergartens were held together as a system by their explicit aim of educating and socializing the growing child.’ (Cahan 1989, p. 7).

The pedagogical kindergarten was developed in Central Europe (Froebel, Pestalozzi, Montessori). Its main purpose was to reach the ‘whole child’ by creating an environment that promoted wholesome social and emotional development, enhanced physical growth and safeguarded mental and physical health. Early education was a nice addition to children’s life and chargeable, of course, confirming that kindergartens remained a bourgeois phenomenon. To mitigate this class division, charities started to establish ‘*Volkskindergartens*’, which introduced social pedagogics to families with low incomes (Cahan 1989, p. 22; Kamerman 2007).

Comprehensiveness as an exception. Was there no need for comprehensive early education that would benefit the church, the city and the state? Christian churches certainly recognized such a need and, in response, established Sunday schools. The government, for its part, showed little interest in early childhood education. The city bourgeoisie, again, was interested in childcare as a means of controlling the social problems of working families. However, social problems tend to raise marginal policies – not care services for all.

It was not thought that early childhood education could achieve something that decent homes could not achieve by themselves. Society was not oriented to education in the same way as it is today. There was no sense that all people should be educated according to their abilities. And scientists had not yet proved that early education laid the foundation for all later learning.

As long as people lived in a strict class society, it was implausible to try to establish comprehensive services. Infant schools were for working-class children but not good enough for the bourgeoisie, while kindergartens were too expensive for working families.

France and Belgium made famous exceptions with regard to early childhood education. In these two countries the tough political struggle between the state and the Catholic Church extended to this field as well. Competition for the ownership of preschools became such a big issue that politicians had to intervene. In Belgium, this resulted in a sharp rise in the number of preschools. Parents began to view preschool attendance as a necessary process between infancy and the start of schooling. As a consequence, in 1910, registrations in kindergartens went up to 60 per cent of children aged three to five (Willekens 2009, pp. 48–9). In France the supply of early education was high in the 1800s, but it collapsed in the early twentieth century when private and religious preschools were banned.

The era of democracy: The expansion of day care and preschool

With the rise of democracy, education policies were increasingly shaped and influenced by individual citizens' interests. This greatly contributed to the politicization of ECEC.

Day care for all social classes. Between the World Wars, the falling birth rate opened a space for a new kinds of family policy. Alva Myrdal was one of the young Swedish Social Democrats who modernized family policy thinking in the 1930s. Rather than focussing on poor mothers' need to

work, their focus was concentrated on women's participation in society, especially in working life. Myrdal insisted that women should have enough training and skills to be able to establish their own independent role in the two-employee family. Children should be allowed to play with other children and benefit from professional kindergarten education. Professional day care would combine the interests of children, women and employers and create happiness among children and families (Myrdal 1938).

In their famous debating book *Kris i befolkningsfrågan*, Alva and Gunnar Myrdal (1935) emphasized that the core task of social policy is to work towards the long-term improvement of the population and the workforce. All members of society must be assisted out of poverty, illness and ignorance. ECEC plays a key role in this process. The Myrdals' book has later been named the first explicit social investment programme in history (Andersson 2009).

Children's day care became a major issue in Nordic politics in the 1960s, boosted by the rise of feminist politics. The main focus was still on work and care but now for all. Another novelty was that services were now referred to as *social pedagogical measures* (Borchorst 2009, pp. 133–5). This led to the development of a new kind of day care system. Day care was provided for children six and under every working day, all year round. In fact, day care centres had two sections: a nursing section for small children and a kindergarten. For decades, Nordic day care was still part of social welfare organization.

Day care policies were also reformulated in East European socialist countries. They followed the Soviet Union's model in which women's labour was harnessed to maximize the workforce and minimize wage costs. Social services functioned as tools for increasing and targeting labour supply, lowering wages, maintaining the workforce and raising the quality of labour (Rimlinger 1971, pp. 322–8). Children's day care was organized as part of health care.

International incoherence. Central and South European countries primarily emphasized the development of early childhood education instead of day care. Germany, Italy and Spain found a new coexistence between Catholicism and kindergartens. As early as the mid 1970s, 90 per cent of this age group were in preschool in Belgium, Italy and France and 80 per cent were in preschool in Germany (Kamerma 2007, p. 15).

Worldwide, the progress of early childhood education is still slow. Some poor countries do not provide early childhood education programmes at all. Between poor and rich countries, differences in ECEC spending are even wider than in the field of higher education (UNESCO 2013).

One reason for the uneven development has been the absence of an international model that could be promoted. Sheila Kamerman has described the wide range of programmes that differ in many respects. The daily schedule may follow school hours or working hours or just take a few hours, and different institutions may complement each other. They can be produced and financed both by the public and private sectors. They may be free or they may charge income-related fees. Some countries guarantee a place for all children of a particular age, but the age varies (Kamerman 2007).

However, there is also a trend toward a more unified understanding. Kamerman stated that in the 1990s international organizations began to accept that ECEC is a single, coherent whole. This view was justified by regarding ECEC as a service for children under compulsory school age, with elements of both physical care and education. Apart from its critical contribution to cognitive stimulation, socialization, child development and early education, ECEC is an essential service for working parents (Kamerman 2007, p. 1–2). A more coherent view of ECEC has helped to integrate the objectives of day care and preschool programmes, and to consolidate them administratively into the education system. Social class differences in the use of services have decreased.

ECEC coverage and payments

What should we think about the organization of ECEC today? What are the services that should be provided for all, free of charge?

To answer these questions it is necessary to structure the essential tasks of ECEC. The shortest possible summary of the tasks of ECEC has three categories:

- 1) Social pedagogical and educational objectives, which increase human capabilities and prevent exposure to social problems (EDUCATION)
- 2) Parental participation in the labour market and social activities (DAY CARE)
- 3) Social work intervention to provide decent childcare (PROTECTION).

PROTECTION. I begin with the most crucial need: protection. There should be neither any age limits nor any charges that might limit access to child welfare. In practice, day care, including

possible interventions, is a major way to arrange decent care, even for children on the margin. Other interventions are often necessary as well.

EDUCATION. Reaching social pedagogical and educational objectives supports successful socialization and also helps to prevent social problems. ECEC is a stigma-free solution, and its positive impact seems to be strongest in conjunction with pre-primary education for children over three years of age. The problem is that children from disadvantaged families would benefit most from early childhood education, but they participate less than others (Karila, Kosonen & Järvenkallas 2017, pp. 22–9). Therefore early childhood education should be obligatory and free of charge, just like primary school.

DAY CARE. It is important to make a distinction between the functions of early childhood education and day care. Day care is provided to make it easier for parents to participate in the labour force, and thus it is important for both parents and society. However, this motive is not always in the interests of the child: sometimes overlong working hours mean that children have to spend much more time in day care than would be necessary from an educational viewpoint.

The differences between the aims, schedules and contents of education and day care are useful in shedding light on the question of charging parents for day care. To the extent that ECEC is arranged in the interests of the child, it should be free of charge. Services designed to answer the needs of parents and employers may be chargeable, although they are often subsidized by the government.

Another important difference between early childhood education and day care is the age of the children. Children usually start pre-primary school at the age of two to four. There are no preschools for babies or toddlers. In the Nordic countries day care mostly begins with toddlers (after care leave), but Americans even bring babies to day care.

European progress towards preschool for all

Two-hundred years ago Robert Owen set out historical goals for early education: all children will become successful at school and in employment and enjoy well-being (Gillard 2011). This utopia is closer to realization than ever. In particular, James Heckman's (2018) research has made a powerful impact on politicians. Based on a number of studies on different themes and using different data

sets, he has come to the conclusion that the earlier children, and poor children in particular, are enrolled in professionally organized early education and care, the better. No amount of further education can offset the losses that occur during the first years of life. There is also research evidence that ECEC contributes to economic productivity, and many scholars have recommended it as a very fruitful social investment.

Although there is strong and mounting evidence that ECEC has a positive impact on children's development, we still need much more detailed research. For instance, we also know that the positive impact depends on the quality of the service provided, and that it may vanish altogether in better-off families (Kosonen & Huttunen 2018). In Finland, for example, the children who participated in ECEC did not have better reading skills than those who did not (Cebola-Boado, Radl & Salazar 2017, pp. 50–52). More generally, the empirical results from institutional research cannot be directly transferred from one society to another; they are not universal because professionals, service users, ways of governance and environments are all different. It is rarely simple and straightforward to make evidence-based political decisions (Sipilä & Österbacka 2013).

European politicians in general tend to favour the development of ECEC. They refer to a number of arguments for high ECEC coverage: it supports children's development, prevents social problems, promotes gender equality and increases the labour supply (Eurydice 2014). However, the functional difference between pre-primary education and day care is reflected in political goal setting. The European Council and European Union (EU) recommend that states provide childcare to 90–95 per cent of children between three or four years old and mandatory school age whereas the goal for children under three years of age is only one-third of that proportion (33 per cent).⁷

Change is now underway, but ECEC is still organized in a variety of different ways. There are a few countries that do not have the right to pre-primary schooling at all. At the other end of the spectrum, eight countries guarantee the right to ECEC as soon as childcare leave ends. The most common policy is to provide the right to pre-primary education from the age of three. Compulsory pre-primary education for one or two years before primary school seems to be becoming the norm. Strangely, however, some countries have stipulated the right to ECEC but then failed to uphold that right on account of a shortage of places. Another peculiarity is that the right to ECEC does not

⁷ Denmark seems to be nearing a situation where it will be necessary to have a comprehensive system of early childhood care. Danish labour administration and social security are based on the principle that all adults must be prepared for the labour market, according to their individual capabilities. As a consequence, over 60 per cent of children aged 0–2 years old are in formal childcare (Bradshaw, Skinner & van Lancker 2015).

mean that the service is provided free of charge. ECEC may be free or subsidized, but there are also countries where parents pay up to 1000 euros a month for a day care place (Eurydice 2014).

The importance of charging: The Finnish case

In the 1980s, Finland saw a major battle over the direction of early childcare. The focus of parliamentary debate was not on children's development, but rather on mothers' employment. The familist struggle for childcare provided by housewives was spearheaded by the influential Centre Party,⁸ and in the end home care was presented as a parallel alternative to day care. As the battle turned out, Finland established parental rights for the day care of children under three – the first country in the world to do so. At the same time, the right to a children's home care allowance was accepted as an alternative to day care (Anttonen 1999).⁹

The Finnish childcare system is exemplary in terms of freedom of choice: parents can choose between municipal day care, private day care and child home care. Whatever their choice, parents get financial support from the state. This creates a comprehensive support system. The aim of this system is not, however, to provide ECEC for all. The care allowance actually doubles the cost that middle-income parents pay for ECEC: parents who pay for day care lose their eligibility for home care allowance. By compensating parents for the non-use of a public service, the Finnish state and some municipalities are effectively supporting childcare at home (Kröger, Anttonen & Sipilä 2003; Sipilä, Rantalaiho, Repo & Rissanen 2010).

Parents' right to choose between day care and cash benefits has led to a very special equalization of care and education. This is most apparent in situations where the state pays a home care allowance for children aged three to seven who do not take part in early childhood education. Receipt of the benefit further requires that the child has a sibling under three who also does not participate in ECEC. It is thus the government's thinking that it makes as much sense to have children aged three to six in domestic care as in early childhood education.

The sibling supplement is a strong statement against the value of professional education. At the end of October 2017 it was paid out for 17 000 children, about 7 per cent of the corresponding age

⁸ Formerly the Agrarian Party.

⁹ At the moment the benefit is €338 per month for one child under 3 years of age. In addition, a low-income parent receives a care supplement of max. €181 per month.

group. In addition, one-quarter of all local governments grant a municipal home care allowance, mostly on the condition that all children in the family are cared for at home. On top of that, some municipalities have a particular benefit for the over threes (Lahtinen & Selkee 2016). The problem with municipal allowances, however, is that their existence correlates with lower earnings for parents and weaker cognitive development among children (Kosonen & Huttunen 2018).

As we know that poor and less educated parents receive home care allowance more often than others, access to professional care and education is hindered among those very children who would benefit the most. These children face the barrier that their parents need money (Karila, Kosonen & Järvenkallas 2017). Ultimately, then, the state is financing the exclusion of children from professional support, especially among families at risk. Finland's rate of ECEC participation between the age of four and the starting age of compulsory education is, next to Croatia and Slovakia, the lowest in the EU (Eurostat 2017). Another important finding is that at the age of 36 years, mothers had spent 13 times more days on care leave than fathers. It is no surprise that this was also reflected in the wage gap (Kuitto, Salonen & Helmdag 2019).

Conclusion

Social policies are at their best in social groups whose future is most uncertain. Income transfers and social services may affect the development of children's functional capabilities, their later choices and ultimately affect their total life spans. ECEC is a key tool for smoothing out the inequalities associated with birth. It offers particular potential for equality because it is both the first systematic producer of learning abilities and a guarantor of decent care. Many social problems will be prevented if ECEC covers all children free of charge. The state can ensure that the children of parents from vulnerable social backgrounds do not fall too far behind when primary school begins.

The same kinds of argument that have been used to promote the worldwide diffusion of primary school have also become relevant in relation to ECEC. The focus in the development of ECEC has shifted from addressing social problems to promoting learning. We live in an increasingly complex world where the need for individual capabilities is constantly growing, and we are beginning to understand just how much even small children can benefit from learning. In an economic sense, early education seems to be a fine investment. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development report 'Doing better for children' suggests that governments should concentrate spending on the early stages of the child's life cycle (OECD 2009). Why not make such a service

comprehensive and universal?

For good reason, ECEC can be declared the institution of the early twenty-first century. ECEC has always been an example of welfare mix provision and this fits well with the contemporary expectations of diversity. The EU has worked successfully to promote ECEC, and it has received strong political support both from women's and employers' organizations. European economic crises have not seriously slowed down the development of ECEC nor its public financial support. Currently, comprehensive early childhood education is reaching new countries and younger age groups in Europe. How young children will be included, we do not know yet. Undoubtedly, resistance will increase as comprehensive early education and care moves towards younger age groups.

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