

# Between equal opportunities and work-life balance: balancing institutional design in early years education in Spain

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Received: 26-01-2022  
Accepted: 23-05-2022  
Publicación: 12-07-2022

**Recommended citation:** LEÓN, Margarita; PALOMERA, David; IBÁÑEZ, Zyab; MARTÍNEZ-VIRTO, Lucía and GABALDÓN-ESTEVAN, Daniel (2022). “Between equal opportunities and work-life balance: balancing institutional design in early years education in Spain”. *Papers*, 107 (3), e3084. <<https://doi.org/10.5565/rev/papers.3084>>

## Abstract

Since the year 2000, the provision of early years education and care for the under-threes (hereafter 0-3 ECEC) in Spain has undergone a steady increase. This growth has taken place in all of the seventeen Autonomous Communities, albeit not in a uniform way. In this article we study how different institutional designs at the regional level have an impact on equality of opportunities, both in how families access the service and in how much they pay. We try to ascertain under what conditions ECEC can go beyond a policy that helps families juggle work and family responsibilities, and becomes a redistributive and equal opportunities policy that helps the most socially disadvantaged groups access it while

defraying its cost. We analyse how state regulations regarding ECEC have evolved from the 1990 LOGSE to the 2020 LOMLOE, and we compare seven Autonomous Communities which each have different levels of coverage and management models. Our study concludes that although there are differences in both access criteria and in the price of services, all the Autonomous Communities studied have been moving towards a service that aims to be more equitable, with an explicit recognition of the particular difficulties caused by low income, disabilities, being a single parent, or gender-based violence. Even so, certain structural characteristics of ECEC—such as the fluctuating nature of its financing, its weak public regulation and monitoring, and significant outsourcing to private providers—make it difficult to universalise the service in order to make it a truly redistributive policy.

**Keywords:** Early Childhood Education and Care; Social Investment; Equity; Spain; Autonomous Communities

**Resumen.** *Entre la equidad y la conciliación: similitudes y disparidades en el diseño institucional del primer ciclo de educación infantil en España*

La provisión del primer ciclo de educación infantil (EI a partir de ahora) ha aumentado de manera sostenida en España desde el año 2000. A pesar de una considerable dispersión territorial, esta expansión ha tenido lugar en todas las comunidades autónomas (CC. AA.). En este artículo estudiamos cómo los distintos diseños institucionales a escala autonómica impactan en la equidad tanto en el acceso al servicio como en el coste para las familias. Tratamos de averiguar en qué condiciones puede el primer ciclo de EI ir más allá de una política de conciliación empleo/familia y considerarse una política redistributiva y de igualdad de oportunidades que favorezca acceder a él y sufrague su coste para los colectivos socialmente más desfavorecidos. Analizamos la evolución de la normativa estatal del primer ciclo de EI desde la LOGSE de 1990 hasta la LOMLOE de 2020, y comparamos siete comunidades autónomas que presentan distintos niveles de cobertura y modelos de gestión. Nuestro estudio concluye que, si bien existe disparidad tanto en los criterios de acceso como de precios, todas las CC. AA. estudiadas han ido avanzando hacia un servicio más garantista, con un reconocimiento explícito de las circunstancias de especial dificultad originadas por bajos ingresos, discapacidad, monoparentalidad o violencia de género. Aun así, características estructurales del primer ciclo de EI, como una financiación fluctuante, una débil regulación y control públicos y una importante externalización a proveedores privados, dificultan su universalización como una política redistributiva y de calidad.

**Palabras clave:** educación infantil; inversión social; equidad; España; CC. AA

### Summary

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## 1. Introduction

Over the last three decades, quality ECEC provision has become a priority at state, regional and municipal levels in Spain. According to data from the Ministry of Education (MEDC, 2013), on average in Spain, the percentage of children under three years of age in schooling went from 18.2% in 2007 to 34.8% in 2016. That is, in just one decade, it practically doubled. In comparative terms, ECEC provision in Spain is just above the EU average, and ahead of countries such as Italy, Finland, Germany or the United Kingdom. In addition, although the private sector at the 0-3 stage has a larger share than in any other stage of schooling, both the public places on offer and the number of children enrolled in public nurseries have increased steadily.

In this study we intend to ascertain if the institutional design of ECEC in Spain has contributed to it becoming a redistributive and equal opportunities policy, and if so, to what extent. There is a broad social and political consensus regarding the benefits of expanding early years schooling, but the focus of this work, like that of several recent studies, is to analyse the relationship between the growth of ECEC and the reduction of inequalities. The context in Spain is one of the public supply being lower than the demand, and in this study we distinguish between two models. One is an institutional design that prioritises the growth of ECEC to facilitate working mothers' work-life balance. Here, the access criteria favour dual-income households, there are no redistributive mechanisms that favour other types of households accessing the service, and access to private services is partially subsidised. The opposite model prioritises equal opportunities through an extensive network of public schools with a sliding-scale system that subsidises the service for low-income or otherwise disadvantaged families.

Since this is a largely decentralised policy area, in order to answer the question of which of these two models is more predominant in ECEC services in Spain, as well as examining the country-wide regulatory framework, we also need to study the institutional design in the different Autonomous Communities.

Following Gallego and Vilalta (2016), Spain can be considered a quasi-federal state, one in which different territorial preferences and needs are recognised within a framework of equal rights and a single market. Because of this framework and other structural and dynamic factors, the welfare regimes in the various regions have been configured in different ways. The diverse policies implemented in each one have an impact on equal opportunities. Although the sub-state deployment of compulsory education, health and dependency has already been studied (Gallego, 2016), here we examine the degree of divergence (or convergence) of the Autonomous Communities in the institutional design of their ECEC services. The initial hypothesis of this article is that, even though all the Autonomous Communities have seen growth in ECEC services and participation in them, we expect to find significant differences regarding the institutional design and objectives of the services in each region.

We have selected seven Autonomous Communities: Andalusia, Catalonia, the Valencian Community, Galicia, Madrid, Navarra, and the Basque Country. For our empirical analysis we have used data from publicly available access and pricing criteria; in particular we analyse the importance of factors that have a redistributive capacity, both regarding access to the service and its cost in each region. As well as the public nursery fees, we also study the existence of direct or indirect subsidies to access privately owned nurseries. We complete the analysis with secondary documentation that is available for each region.

The article is organised as follows: the next section employs the conceptual paradigm of Social Investment (SI) to explain the relationship between the growth of ECEC and equal opportunities. Then we provide the context in which early childhood education has developed in Spain, both in terms of how it is regulated and how it has grown in the different Autonomous Communities. Subsequently, we present the empirical analysis on how ECEC has changed, with reference to the parameters used to access the service and its cost in the regions studied. The last section concludes.

## 2. Policies Regarding Investment in Early Childhood and Equal Opportunities

Observed from the social investment (SI) paradigm, policies that invest in early childhood play a central role in supporting women's employment, especially that of young mothers, and are also investment in human capital. The importance that these policies have acquired in the new SI paradigm is due to the greater emphasis now placed on policies that guarantee equal opportunities, rather than traditional approaches that have pursued equal results. Thus, under the SI paradigm, in a generalised context of increasing social inequality, the emphasis is placed more on preventive strategies rather than on reactive ones, and policies are more geared towards preparing rather than repairing (Morel et al., 2011). The policies regarding the education and care of young children no longer have a welfare-based character, instead taking on an entirely novel role in the configuration of the classic welfare state. Hemerijck (2015) identifies the three principal functions of SI, which complement one another: 1) *stock*, which refers to the quality of human capital and capabilities throughout life; 2) *flow*, which has to do with current labour market flows and contingencies of contemporary life; and 3) *buffers*, which are the minimum income protection systems that guarantee adequate levels of quality of life.

The stock function is directly linked to child care policies. Many empirical analyses have been carried out from different perspectives that all show the importance of the first years of an individual's life for their subsequent development. As well as a series of cognitive aspects, the first years of a person's life are crucial for the development of non-cognitive skills, such as motivation, self-esteem, leadership skills, etc. (Heckman et al., 2013). Heckman's work was pioneering in demonstrating the return obtained by ensuring public investment in early years care, especially for those most vulnerable. Since chil-

hood is the moment in which opportunities related to human capital begin to unfold, early childhood investment policies attempt to level the playing field by minimising what Heckman (2012) calls “the accident of birth”. In a context of increasing inequalities between social classes, and given the differences in the resources available to children born into families with diverse sociodemographic backgrounds, early childhood care policies can potentially be an element that compensates for them (Esping-Andersen, 2009; Flores et al., 2016). The capability theory approach developed by Nussbaum and Sen (1993) also stresses the importance of quality education and other social policies as a precondition for an individual’s capacity for agency (Hobson, 2014). This issue is especially relevant for children at risk of social exclusion, since access to education helps to break the cycle of intergenerational transmission of poverty that often takes place in the most vulnerable households.

For over two decades now, international organisations such as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the European Union (EU) have been urging governments to rethink how they can protect children and families in order to develop more preventive approaches to inequalities and nurture their human capital. For example, the OECD Starting Strong reports (OECD, 2006, 2012, 2017) were instrumental in employing the IS paradigm in mapping out the regulatory framework for this new approach to child policy.

However, although there appears to be a generalised consensus that childcare and education policies need to put more emphasis on equitable access, it is clear that these policies vary according to where they are implemented. In the case of EU countries, there has been a rapid growth in ECEC services over the last two decades, especially in countries that previously had low or very low levels of supply, such as Spain, Germany or the United Kingdom. Nevertheless, this spread has not been uniform, differing both in how quickly this transformation has taken place and in the specific characteristics of how the service has grown (Morgan, 2012; Eurydice, 2013). It is clear that as part of a broader IS strategy, the growth of ECEC depends on the institutional and sociocultural configurations that shape different welfare regimes. As a result, it is logical to expect significant variations both between countries and between regions (León, 2017).

In addition, this growth also depends on dynamic factors. In many European countries, the expansion of early childhood care services has coincided with the austerity measures implemented following of the 2008 economic crisis. Deregulation of labour markets, on the one hand, and investment in policies inspired in the IS paradigm, on the other, make up a puzzle well worth trying to decipher (Cantillon and Lancker, 2013).

Related to the above, several recent comparative studies have looked at the extent to which early years schooling has an impact on inequality. With the data we have, and observed globally, early childhood education tends to have a social bias in favour of the middle classes. Since the service is not universal in most countries, access tends to be prioritised for families where

both parents work, penalising families where the parents are unemployed or not currently active in the workforce (Lancker and Ghysels, 2014). In the same vein, children of mothers who have completed higher education make considerably more use of these services than children whose mothers who have only completed compulsory secondary education. When considering the family unit's income rather than the mother's educational level, the results are similar. In Spain, almost half (49.6%) of the children aged 0-2 who regularly use formal care have mothers with higher education studies, while only 31.3% have mothers who only completed compulsory secondary education or primary education (Save the Children, 2019). This tendency can also be seen when observing access to the service according to the parents' origins. According to a recent report published by Save the Children (2019), there are 20% fewer non-EU migrant families that access the system than families made up of Spanish nationals.

The migrant population accesses this type of service less than a country's citizens in virtually all European countries. Abrassart and Bonoli (2015) sought to clarify this tendency. By analysing survey data on the use of childcare services for the Swiss canton of Vaud (where there are large variations between different municipalities), the authors developed a series of hypotheses about the patterns observed based on the following variables: the mother being in employment, the cost of the service for the families, the scarcity of the supply, and the families' cultural background. Using the results obtained, they concluded that, although the mother's employment situation is a determining factor, the differences in the tariff structure and the final cost of the service mean that most use of childcare services will be made by high-income families, while cultural reasons seem to have very little influence. Examining ECEC provision in Catalonia, Palomera (2022) presents further evidence that shows how the cost of the service and an atypical employment situation are important barriers for families with lower incomes and with no university studies. In contrast, neither the mother's country of origin nor the families' cultural preferences seem to influence this lower rate of access to the service. In addition, comparing public nursery applications and places assigned, Palomera (2022) shows how the mechanisms that determine the allocation of places lead to unequal access, highlighting the importance of institutional design in shaping these policies. In short, it appears to be the design of children's services that are aimed primarily at solving the problems of work-life balance for families that generates these inequalities between social groups.

As we will describe in the next section, the attempt to universalise ECEC in Spain has had to tackle the problems of too few public places on offer and unequal access, with too few compensatory mechanisms to help the most under-represented groups. Education and care at this stage are still mostly paid for by families, with the private sector being a key player (González, 2004; León and Salido, 2016; Navarro-Varas and León, forthcoming); this is an issue that is reflected in the differences in access depending on income levels. In this way, the diversity of what is on offer in terms of management structure, governance,

cost and resources makes it difficult to compare ECEC (0-3) and pre-school (3-6) provision. Universal access to a free pre-school service guarantees equal opportunities at the beginning of a child's schooling.

### 3. The changing laws regarding ECEC in Spain

A succession of education laws in line with changes in the Spanish central government has caused the framework for early childhood education to undergo constant shifts within the education system as a whole. However, despite changing emphases and nuances, over the last three decades, the right to early childhood education in Spain has become consolidated through the universalisation of free pre-school education. What is on offer at the pre-school education stage (3-6 years) is comparable, both in terms of quality, infrastructure and human resources, to compulsory primary education. ECEC for the under-threes, on the other hand, has followed a very different path. As the following pages show, lack of funding, together with rather shaky regulations, has given rise to uneven growth in services with large disparities between different areas of the country (González, 2004; Ibáñez and León, 2014). The following table contains a summary of how early childhood education has been envisaged by the various education laws passed from 1990 to the present day.

The General Education System Act (LOGSE) of 1990 was the first step towards recognising the educational and pedagogical component of ECEC, and was the first time that 0-3 ECEC was included within the national education system. Despite being a non-compulsory schooling stage, the law meant that for the first time the public administrations took on the obligation of guaranteeing sufficient places to those who requested them. It also recognised

**Table 1.** ECEC in Spanish education system legislation

Axes analyses	LOGSE 1/1990	LOCE 10/2002	LOE 2/2006	LOMCE 8/2013	LOMLOE 11/2020
Classification of types of early years education	Early years (0-6 years) * First stage (0-3) * Second stage (3-6)	Nursery (0-3 years) Pre-school (3-6)	Pre-school (0-6 years) * First stage (0-3) * Second stage (3-6)	Pre-school (0-6 years) * First stage (0-3) * Second stage (3-6)	Pre-school (0-6 years) * First stage (0-3) * Second stage (3-6)
Function of early years education	Social protection and care	Social protection: educational and social function	Intended to be educational, not necessarily school-based	Not defined	Intended to be educational, not necessarily school-based
Obligatory	No	No	No	No	No
Guaranteed service	Yes (stages not explicit)	Yes (stages not explicit)	First stage: no Second stage: yes	First stage: no Second stage: yes	First stage: no Second stage: yes
Guaranteed to be free	No	Nursery: no Pre-school: yes	First stage: no Second stage: yes	First stage: no Second stage: yes	First stage: no Second stage: yes
Management model	Mixed (public-private)	Mixed (public-private)	Mixed (public-private)	Mixed (public-private)	Mixed (public-private)
Party in government	PSOE	PP	PSOE	PP	PSOE-UP

Source: authors' own elaboration using data from León and Muñoz, 2016.

the obligation of state policies to facilitate universal access to ECEC, especially to the most vulnerable social groups. This is interesting because it is a precursor of the obligation that would be enshrined six years later in law 1/1996 on the legal protection of minors that would affect all public administrations. The LOGSE also contemplated the child development perspectives used by the most avant-garde pedagogical movements that were already highlighting the importance of offering quality early years education. The next education law was passed by the Popular Party government in 2002. This, the Organic Law on the Quality of Education (LOCE), continued to strengthen the role of early childhood education, especially the 3-6 stage. The LOCE again underlined the importance of nursery school for the under-threes, recognising both its educational and welfare components. It considered the 3 to 6 year stage as pre-school, making it part of non-compulsory education that went up to secondary and higher level vocational training (León and Muñoz, 2016). The Organic Law on Education (LOE) approved by the Zapatero socialist government in 2006 recovered part of the spirit of the 1990 LOGSE. The law once again changed the structure of schooling levels but did not change the regulatory framework in place regarding the conditions to access the system. However, in its article 84, the LOE established that if there were insufficient places available in public and publicly-subsidised private nurseries, the admission process would be governed by the following priority criteria: the existence of siblings enrolled in the nursery, proximity to the home or a parent's place of employment, and the per capita income of the family unit. It established that any of the criteria, except proximity to the home, could represent more than 30% of the total score. The non-compulsory nature of early years education, and the guarantee of free pre-school but no free 0-3 ECEC were maintained. The regulations promoted a gradual increase in number of places offered, but without going into further detail.

The education law that was passed by the new Popular Party government in 2013, the LOMCE (Organic Law for the Improvement of the Education Law), did not make any substantial changes to how the early years stages were organised. It maintained the previous structures, educational levels, model of public-private management, classification of types of services, and the possibility that public education services be provided by private schools through subsidies. The law defined early childhood education as a voluntary stage that has an "educational intention", obliging nurseries and schools to offer a specific pedagogical project (León and Muñoz, 2016). While access to the second stage (3-6 pre-school) was free and universal, taking place within the primary school facilities, what was on offer at the first stage varies depending on the municipality, the private sector and family income.

Finally, the LOMLOE, approved in November 2020, continues to define early childhood education under one umbrella, but divided into two stages. Under this new regulatory framework, an attempt is being made to promote the equalising aspect of 0-3 ECEC, giving priority to students at risk of poverty and social exclusion. In its general principles, the LOMLOE re-establishes a



commitment for ECEC to compensate for the effects on children's learning and development caused by cultural, social and economic inequalities, as well as highlighting the early detection of specific educational support needs and support for them (art. 12.5).

#### 4. The growth of 0-3 ECEC in the Autonomous Communities in Spain

As we will see below, the successive regulatory frameworks put in place since 1990 have allowed the education system to expand the coverage of early childhood education and the public supply of it. This growth has been in parallel with a corresponding increase in spending levels as a percentage of GDP. However, compared to 3-6 pre-school, the growth of 0-3 ECEC services has been uneven and highly fragmented on many levels. This has partly been caused by this succession of education laws and their respective interpretations, along with loose regulations and mixed public-private management models. In order to contextualise the empirical analysis regarding access and cost of 0-3 ECEC in the regions studied, we review each of these aspects below.

As seen in Table 2, the percentage of children between 0 and 2 years in nursery school in Spain has gone from 10.7% in 2000 to 16.6% in 2008, rising to 32.8% and 43.1% in 2016 and 2020 respectively. Public spending as a percentage of GDP increased by just over a tenth between 2005 and 2010 (from 0.43 to 0.54), but as a result of the economic crisis, it declined in subsequent years to levels similar to those of the pre-crisis period (0.45 in 2017). The comprehensive result has been widespread growth in the schooling levels of children from 0 to 3 years old between 2000 and 2020, with an upward trend. However, this was not universal, with disparities of more than 10 points between regions.

The differences between schooling rates in the different regions tells us about the growth strategy followed by each of them. For the 1-2 years age range, the average number of children in nursery school in Spanish doubled in just one decade (from 19.8% in 2008 to 40.2% in 2018); in some regions the rates reached almost 50% (Andalusia, 48.7%; Galicia, 47.3%; Madrid, 52.9%; Basque Country, 45.5%). However, the biggest change was mainly in the 2-3 year old age group, thanks to the strategy in several regions of extending the universal nature of the 3-6 stage to 2-year-olds. The high coverage rates in some regions (see table 2) are mainly due to this change to earlier schooling.

One element that marks a difference between the 0-3 ECEC provision in the various regions is the balance they have between public, subsidised and private nurseries. Unlike the later educational stages, growth in 0-3 ECEC has taken place in parallel with a strong growth in the private sector. In 2019, half of 0-3 ECEC places corresponded to private nurseries. However, table 2 shows that this jump in growth was also due to an increase in public provision. For example, in Andalusia, public places went from 2.1% in 2008 to 41.5% in 2019. Galicia is one of the few cases where there was a drastic drop in public supply between 2008 and 2016, going from 74 % to 54%. In general terms, we can see that in 2019 there were large differences between the regions in proportions of public

**Table 2.** Net rates of children 1-2 years of age in nursery school and percentage of these children in public nurseries

	Children 0-2 years of age in nursery school				Percentage of these in public nurseries			
	2000	2008	2016	2020*	2000	2008	2016	2019
Spain	10.7	16.6	32.8	36.0	42.4	43.2	51.6	51.5
Andalusia	1.3	2.8	36.7	43.1	4.2	2.1	39.5	41.5
Aragón	4.4	28.8	32.7	31.3	8.0	36.8	55.5	54.8
Asturias	1.8	7.3	18.5	23.8	0.0	70.1	85.2	86.8
Balearic Islands	6.9	9.0	22.6	24.3	28.4	44.9	69.8	77.4
Canary Islands	1.2	0.0	7.2	23.7	0.0	0.0	56.1	31.3
Cantabria	3.4	11.7	25.2	29.6	10.7	56.2	79.0	79.3
Castilla-La Mancha	1.9	2.7	31.0	26.1	33.1	24.9	64.9	64.2
Castilla y León	1.9	11.9	20.0	18.5	58.8	44.9	63.1	67.3
Catalonia	28.4	31.3	35.6	34.1	34.8	44.4	62.9	62.8
Ceuta	3.2	3.3	12.8	19.1	0.0	0.0	67.6	69.3
Valencia	7.2	10.2	27.4	35.3	38.4	36.8	40.0	39.9
Extremadura	1.3	2.2	16.8	27.2	22.1	20.8	80.7	90.1
Galicia	12.6	16.2	39.4	42.9	55.6	73.9	54.4	56.3
La Rioja	2.6	4.3	32.7	41.3	0.0	0.0	49.7	51.9
Madrid	17.8	28.6	42.8	45.9	51.3	33.9	45.1	43.6
Melilla	8.1	8.5	17.8	24.8	0.0	0.0	43.6	55.9
Murcia	9.0	13.7	16.8	17.8	61.0	60.1	51.8	49.9
Navarre	0.0	22.3	24.3	26.2	-	100.0	84.1	79.4
Basque Country	23.7	46.2	52.0	50.3	61.4	52.5	53.2	50.3

\* Provisional data.

Source: authors' own elaboration from the statistics of the Ministry of Education and Vocational Training.

and private places, and our cases range from the lowest proportion of public provision in Valencia (31.3%), to the highest in Navarre (79.4%). In addition, the public-private debate regarding early schooling is different from the rest of the educational model. The fact that many nurseries that offer 0-3 ECEC services are publicly owned does not mean that they are free. Their costs vary, since the fees are based on family income, with different grants and scholarships available in each autonomous community or municipality.

## 5. Equal opportunities policies in 0-3 ECEC access? Empirical analysis of cases

Below we compare our set of regions based on a series of analytical categories that allow us to discern how the design of 0-3 ECEC in each one aims to reduce inequalities. How do the regions tackle the dilemma of equal opportunities in the growth of a non-universal policy?

### 5.1. Access

Table 3 shows the weighting given to certain family circumstances in the criteria that are applied when accessing 0-3 ECEC. Specifically, we have selected the proportion of the following elements on the total score: family income, both parents in employment, single parent, single working mother, obtaining income support, and disability. We have only included categories that have a redistributive capacity. Other criteria, such as having siblings at the nursery or residing in the area of influence may well be important to the final score, but we have not included them since they affect everyone equally. However, it is true that the weighting given to these two criteria on the total also determines the importance other points allocated that have a more redistributive nature. We establish three categories according to the weighting: high, medium and low. High is when the weight of the category in question is above 25% of the total score; medium is between 10% and 25%, and low is when the category does not exceed 10% of the total.

In all the cases studied, with the exception of the Valencian Community and Catalonia, both parents being in employment, or just the mother in the case of a single-parent family, usually places the families towards the middle of the scale or higher up. In this way, although the latest state laws have not specified it as a criterion for access to public and subsidised schools, and have emphasised the value of 0-3 ECEC in terms of equal opportunities and reducing inequalities, we see that it has been partially adopted by a majority of regions as a policy that fosters work-life balance and supports women's presence in the labour market.

As we can see in Table 3, Galicia, Navarra and Madrid give quite high weighting in their scales to double-income households. In Galicia, for example, 7 points are obtained for each parent employed, while only 2 points are obtained for each unemployed parent. The priority given to employment in general is also shown in the case of employed single mothers. However, the recent classification of different types of families has helped facilitate greater

**Table 3.** Points awarded to access 0-3 ECEC in public nurseries, by Autonomous Community

	Both parents in employment	Single working mother	Single parent household	Weight given to household income	Recipient of regional income support	Disability or at risk of social exclusion
Navarre	High	High	High	Medium	Low	Medium
Basque Country	Medium	Medium	Bajo	Medium	Low	Low
Valencian Community	Low	Low	Medium	Low	High	Medium
Andalusia	Medium	Medium	Medium	Low	Medium	Medium
Galicia	High	High	Low	Medium	Low	Low
Madrid Community	High	High	Low	High	Low	Medium
Catalonia	Low	Low	Low	Low	Medium	Medium

Note: high: above 25% of the total score; medium: between 10% and 25%; low: less than 10%.

Source: authors' own elaboration.

diversity in terms of access. For example, since 2017 Navarre has favoured more inclusive access for single-parent families.

However, all regions have also been incorporating diverse social and family circumstances and situations of particular vulnerability in their scales; this has increased the equal opportunities component of access to the service, although in some cases only slightly. In all cases, the criteria compensate for inequalities arising from low incomes, single parenthood, disability and gender-based violence.

The use of differentiated income brackets in the scales also gives makes access more equitable. In Madrid, Galicia, the Basque Country and Navarre, applications from families with the lowest per capita incomes obtain the highest scores. However, it is important to see how income is combined with employment in the various scales. In most cases, the highest scores are obtained by combining low income with being employed. In the case of Galicia, relatively high income points are deducted and, when there is a tie, priority is given to the application with the lower per capita income, and then priority is given to full-time over part-time employment. In the case of Madrid, the high weight given to the employed status of the parents (25.6% of the total score) can be matched by unemployed mothers who have a high score regarding low family income (25.6% if they obtain maximum points, given in the case of being in the lowest income bracket). However, according to this weighting, an unemployed mother in the second lowest income bracket would lose her child's nursery place to a working mother in the highest income bracket. Another example is Catalonia, where neither family income nor employment are taken into account, and both mothers would be on equal terms. Of the autonomous communities studied, only the Valencian Community gives more weight to low family income (up to almost 10%) than to a family's employment situation.

As for recipients of welfare benefits, some regions guarantee direct access to all families who are recipients of income support (Andalusia), while others award recipients more points. The Valencian Community, for example, awards 4 points out of a total of 41 to people receiving the regional income support. The scale in Catalonia gives 10 out of 90 points to families who receive the guaranteed citizen income. Navarre, despite including situations of particular vulnerability in its new 2017 scale, does not give any extra points to families that receive the regional income support. To further explain the information in table 3, in table 4 the autonomous communities examined are listed on the one hand according to the weight they give to work-life balance, and on the other the weight they give the applicant's income or if the applicant receives income support (the highest score is reported in one of the two sections of table 3). The upper right quadrant refers to a situation where institutional design is entirely based on work-life balance, while the lower left quadrant reflects a very strong emphasis on equal opportunities. The upper left and lower right quadrants show more complex situations, where the institutional design favours both work-life balance and equal opportunities. This is the case of Madrid, where points are given for having a low

income, but a family with both parents in work can obtain a higher score than a family with an unemployed parent but with an intermediate income. Only the Valencian case opts for a model that is totally focused on equality of opportunities, although the other regions are at an intermediate point regarding the weight they give to income, and vary regarding their work-life balance weightings. In short, although all regions studied are moving towards institutional designs that focus more on equal opportunities, there is considerable variability between them in the weight given to work-life balance.

When looking at access criteria, direct subsidies given to families to cover the cost of early childhood education in private schools should also be taken into account. The Madrid region follows a mixed model that gives weight to both work-life balance and equal opportunities, and offers grants that are based on the family situation of the parents (7 points for double-income families either in full-time or part-time work), and also based on low family income (up to a maximum of 5 points); in addition, up to 2 points are awarded in cases of vulnerable social and family situations certified by social services.

Finally, all regions take disabilities into account, but to different degrees. In Catalonia, if a family member has a disability, 10 points are awarded (out of a total of 90). In the event of a tie, an additional 15 points may be awarded if the household is a single-parent family or one with three or more children. In Navarre, having a member of the household with disabilities or other social vulnerabilities accredited by the social services adds 14 points. This is 17.5% of the total score, a percentage similar to what is granted in the Valencian Community in these cases. As for Andalusia, children of women housed in shelters for victims of gender-based violence or who are victims of terrorism are counted as serious risk cases. In Galicia, all minors in guardianships or in foster care have guaranteed places. In the Valencian Community, households that are beneficiaries of regional income support have direct guaranteed access, as well as the children of victims of gender violence.

**Table 4.** Relationship between work-life balance /equal opportunities in the seven Autonomous Communities studied.

		Weight of low income or receiving income support in the points system of access to public nurseries		
		High	Medium	Low
Weight of work-life balance in the points system used to access public nurseries	High	Madrid Community	Galicia Navarre	
	Medium		Andalusia Basque Country	
	Low	Valencian Community	Catalonia	

Source: authors' own elaboration

## 5.2. Cost of the service

As well as access criteria that depend on different socio-economic circumstances, an additional way of introducing a more equalising outlook to 0-3 ECEC access is to regulate its cost. According to the module of the *Living Conditions Survey* (2016) that asks about access to ECEC services, on average 15% of households said that it was difficult or very difficult to pay for childcare. Separated into income levels, the percentages were 19.7% for the first quintile and 28.5% for the second. In single-adult households with at least one child, 32.6% reported having difficulties or great difficulties paying for the service (INE, 2016).

Ascertaining the final cost of the service to the families is complex because there are several factors involved, and the regions apply different mechanisms in their price structures. In addition to differentiated price structures based on a number of criteria that vary from one region to another, the final cost of the service also varies significantly between regions, and very often also by municipality within each region. As this is a service where the private sector has a lot of weight, in addition to examining prices in public nurseries, it is also necessary to find out if there are direct or indirect financing available for families to use privately owned nurseries. In the following table, we focus on sliding-scale pricing, on the minimum price based on household income, on tax deductions or vouchers for paying private fees, and on tax deductions.

All regions except for Catalonia have introduced sliding-scale pricing mechanisms (or free services), although this could be misleading because in Catalonia municipalities have the power to establish their own access and cost criteria, including discounts and pricing. Even so, according to a recent survey by the Diputación de Barcelona provincial council (2018), only 28% of Catalan municipalities apply some type of sliding-scale pricing. Barcelona

**Table 5.** Cost of services according to income

	Pricing depending on income			
	Sliding-scale pricing	Minimum price (depending on household income)	Tax deductions or vouchers for paying private fees	Regional tax deductions
Navarre	Yes	72 €	No	No
Basque Country	Yes	Free	Yes	No
Valencia	Yes	Free	Yes	Yes
Andalusia	Yes	Free	Yes	Yes
Galicia	Yes	Free	Yes	Yes
Madrid	Yes	Free	Yes	Yes
Catalonia	No	118 €* <sup>a</sup>	No	No

\*50% off for a single-parent family or family with 3 or more children; 100% off if there is a household member that is in a special category, i.e. a family with 3 or more children, a household member that is a terrorism victim, or has a disability equal or more than 33 %, or a child in foster care.

Source: authors' own elaboration.

City Council is a key example: it introduced a sliding-scale pricing system in 2017 that strived to foster equal opportunities (Navarro-Varas 2019).

The Community of Madrid is so far the only region that has established free tuition fees through decree 28/2019 (before that, it used sliding-scale pricing). However, extra hours and lunch are still services that are paid for. The other regions have a minimum price set for those who meet the requirements, which results in a completely free or almost free service. And while the thresholds vary between regions, the majority set the free or minimum price using similar thresholds. In the case of Navarre, the minimum price is €72 (excluding tuition in Pamplona nurseries, which has been free from 2021) for families with a per capita income of less than €3,350 per year (€43 in the case of single parents). In Galicia, families that earn between 30% and 50% of the IPREM minimum wage, which was about €3,500 per year in 2021, have access to a free service. Similarly, the service is free in Andalusia for households that have incomes that are less than 50% of the IPREM; in the case of the Basque Country, families with incomes of under €18,000 per year have access to free services (beginning in the 2019-2020 academic year); Finally, in the Valencia region, students of families receiving regional income support have free places. Here, vouchers are also offered for access to private nurseries and prices are regulated. Private nurseries must accept these prices if they wish to be part of the voucher system.

As well as low incomes, regional governments have also been recognising situations of particular social vulnerability. A family in these situations is granted direct and free access to early childhood education. In Navarre, for example, resolution 4/2019 established both immediate access to services and the possibility of being exempted from fees in the case of children with social or psychosocial risk factors and who also have specific health conditions. In Catalonia, families with three or more children and those in special risk categories do not pay fees.

The trend in all regions appears to be to continue reducing costs for families, and even to introduce free services. Madrid and Pamplona (Navarre) have already established free services, and Andalusia has also recently announced that 0-3 ECEC will be free for the 2023/2024 academic year. Both in Catalonia and in the Valencian Community, the budgets passed by their respective parliaments include guaranteeing free ECEC from 2 to 3 years of age, with Catalonia intending to extend it to 0-3 ECEC in general.

In addition to differentiated fees in public nurseries, the regions of Andalusia, Galicia, Madrid and Valencia offer direct payments and tax deductions to cover the cost of private nurseries. The amount of financing given in relation to the total cost of a private nursery and who is entitled to receive this help gives us information about whether the models prioritise work-life balance over improving equality of opportunities or vice versa. For example, the Community of Madrid is the only region that combines a system of grants to cover the cost of private ECEC with a tax deduction scheme. The grants are between €100 and €160 (depending on income), a drop in the ocean compared to

the €2,319 spent per child by the average family on early childhood education in private non-subsidised nurseries (Ministry of Education and Research, 2017). As for tax deductions, the Madrid Community allows up to €1,000 in deductions per child in 0-3 ECEC. Households with an annual per capita family income of more than €25,000 cannot obtain the grants, while all families with a tax base of under €30,000 per member of the family unit can access the deductions. Thus, the system appears to be based more on work-life balance than on improving equality of opportunities, as private schooling costs are financed for families with incomes that are well above the average. The situation is similar to the one in Catalonia, where families do not directly receive subsidies, but instead, it is private nurseries that are subsidised. The ENS/164/2017 law establishes subsidies for privately owned social (i.e. non-profit) nurseries. These are €328 per student per year (with an additional subsidy of €1,094 if over 25% of the students enrolled in the nursery have a degree of disability of over 65%).

## 6. The importance of the municipality in institutional design

Thus far, we have illustrated the aim of each autonomous community's public policies. However, the distribution of powers and funding between the regional and municipal levels plays an important role in how the access mechanisms are designed and the cost of the services. This distribution varies considerably between different regions and over time, as shown by periods of economic crisis and austerity. In the case of the Basque Country, the Haurreskolak Consortium has established a collaboration agreement with municipalities for managing nurseries and care facilities (BOPV No. 252, 26/12/2003). This consortium has promoted measures regarding 0-3 ECEC, both to facilitate the work-life balance and to provide financial aid and tax benefits to foster use of the services. In Catalonia, according to law 12/2009, the Generalitat (regional government) is responsible for offering childcare places, but in practice between 2013 and 2019 they did not meet their financing commitments. This meant that municipalities, provincial councils and families had to increase their contributions significantly in order to sustain the system. For example, in 2013 Barcelona City Council went from financing 35% of the cost to 50% (with families paying 40%) (Ombudsperson, 2015). In Navarre, although the regulations (OF 79/2012) contemplate the funding for each module being divided into three parts (distributed, approximately, as 43-45% paid by the government of Navarre, 25% by the municipalities and 30-32% by the families), in Pamplona, according to its own estimates, the city council finances approximately 55% of the cost. The reduction in fees that was made in previous years has meant that the contribution of families has dropped to 28%, while the Department of Education's contribution is estimated at 17% of the cost of the service. Madrid City Council has also been very proactive: it created its own network of schools in 2017-2018 due to the cuts in regional funding following the outbreak of the economic crisis.



It should also be remembered that municipalities can establish their own access criteria, so that the redistributive capacity of the system may vary. Despite this, the variations are not necessarily all that great. For example, in the case of Catalonia, the Generalitat (regional government) issued decree 282/2006, which promotes the delegation of powers to municipalities in the pre-registration and admissions processes for 0-3 ECEC (Diputació de Barcelona, 2019). This is especially relevant if we take into account the weight of local authorities in the ownership of nurseries in Catalonia. Of the 3,755 public nurseries that provide 0-3 ECEC, only 331 (8.8%) are owned by the regional government, while the remaining 3,424 are run by local authorities (91.2%). However, these all follow criteria set out by the Generalitat. In a 2015 survey of 200 municipalities, 53% answered that they were in charge of pre-registration and admission (Diputació de Barcelona, 2019). Of this 53%, 37% stated that they had their own grading criteria, and of this 37%, only 40% stated that they used social assistance criteria (while 34% stated that they used work-life balance criteria). Therefore, about 8% of the municipalities surveyed had their own different social assistance criteria.

## 7. Conclusions

Since the early 2000s, investment in early childhood education has been growing in Spain. Over the last two decades, both the numbers of children under the age of 3 in nurseries and the supply of public nursery places have increased. Although the growth of 0-3 ECEC has received far less political attention compared to 3-6 pre-school, schooling for the under-threes has gained prominence in the various education laws in Spain. At the state level, the commitment to early years schooling can be seen in the investments made in creating new nurseries, but there appears to be less emphasis placed on how they operate or on developing new regulatory frameworks that guarantee some form of structural support to finance the system. Consequently, there are stark differences between regions. A mixed public-private management model prevails in 0-3 ECEC services. Since this is not underpinned by any common regulatory framework, it means that there are stark disparities in supply, not only between different regions, but also within each region, as well as inequalities in access to the services and their quality. It should be borne in mind that decentralisation in this public policy area is a tendency throughout Europe, and it is also important to stress that decentralisation from one level of the administration to another is not in itself a problem. In the Spanish case, the fundamental problem with 0-3 ECEC is administrative dispersion, with the regions and municipalities holding quite broad powers, in an area where the central state's regulations are minimal. Ever since the economic crisis of 2008 and in the aftermath of budget cuts made by the regions, which left the issue to be dealt with by local administrations, some city councils, notably Madrid and Barcelona, have been forced to expand their supply in the face of growing demand. This greatly complicates comparisons between regions and

also means that analyses at state level have limited validity. In addition, this has also affected the availability of adequate and reliable data on equality of opportunities (both in terms of access and cost) and on the quality of the services.

In this study we have attempted to analyse the extent to which different regions incorporate equal opportunities criteria both in access to 0-3 ECEC services and in its costs to families. We intend to categorise regional institutional designs according to whether mechanisms exist in them that explicitly try to balance access to this service by giving priority to the most vulnerable groups. The diversity of the existing models greatly complicates making comparisons between territories; however, we have been able to reach two important conclusions. First of all, over the last two decades, the administrations of all the Autonomous Communities studied have made a clear commitment to the growth of the 0-3 ECEC services.

Although the public spending cuts in the aftermath of the 2008 economic crisis led to an increase in the cost of these public services for families, in recent years both the central government and the regional governments have introduced measures to change 0-3 ECEC policy so that it fosters equal opportunities, at least in part. In this sense, in terms of access criteria and pricing, all regions have recently begun to grant more importance to families' economic and social conditions. There is also a movement to provide nursery schooling free of charge to more families, whether only for 2-3 year-olds, or for 0-3 ECEC as a whole. Therefore, the evidence would run counter to the hypothesis raised in the introduction: all the Spanish Autonomous Communities do in fact appear to be converging towards a model that favours equal opportunities.

However, in terms of the weight they give to work-life balance, there is more disparity between regions. State laws frame early childhood education as an educational, inequality-reducing policy, but most regions have access criteria that prioritise families where both parents are in employment, indicating that it has also been usual to understand 0-3 ECEC as a work-life balance policy and one geared to encourage women to participate in the labour market. Despite this, in recent years there are some regions, such as Navarre, that have tried to correct this situation by also favouring single-parent households' access to the service, or other regions, such as Madrid or Galicia, that have favoured access by households headed by women as the only parent. The case of Madrid is the perfect example of how complicated it is for a region to implement a perfectly balanced institutional design. The Madrid region has promoted policies that favour both equal opportunities and work-life balance, with free services guaranteed to the neediest families, and low incomes being an important factor in its access criteria; however, the number of children attending public nurseries is low with respect to other regions, and several of the policies there favour work-life balance above equal opportunities, in addition to giving considerable weight to employment in the access to public nurseries or the financing given to families who opt for a private one.

In the same way, and although this is outside our scope of study, there are other indicators that reflect the importance that different regional governments

give to 0-3 ECEC services: the funding given to the nurseries, the qualifications and working conditions of the teaching staff and, in general, the quality of the teaching. This last aspect is fundamental, since several studies indicate that the quality of the service is a necessary condition for a true reduction to occur in inequalities between children from different socio-economic backgrounds. Thus, lowering prices, or even introducing free services is not enough: an underdeveloped public network with insufficient funding and with significant outsourcing being made to private services which are not monitored and inspected enough can compromise the redistributive capacity of 0-3 ECEC. In the same way, poor access criteria in terms of equal opportunities can cause a somewhat regressive situation, since the investment intended for free or cheaper services in these nurseries is not distributed equitably.

Finally, it should be reiterated that decentralisation, which shifts powers to local levels, introduces greater complexity into the system and means that the various regions offer different services. Even so, by examining the case of Catalonia, we have seen that, in general, despite gaining powers in terms of access criteria and pricing, few municipalities actually introduce their own criteria or reduce prices significantly. The risk of decentralisation is that, without the appropriate mechanisms to control financing and levelling at the supra-local level, better-off municipalities will be the only ones able to offer a good quality, affordable public network of nurseries; this perhaps reflects the case of Barcelona compared to smaller municipalities in its vicinity. Whenever the central or regional government fails to meet its commitment to 0-3 ECEC services, as in the aftermath of the 2008 economic crisis, there is a risk of further inequalities occurring between regions.

## Financing

This paper is part of the “Investing in early childhood: politics, policy and outcomes”, project, funded by the Spanish Ministry of Science, Innovation and Universities CSO2017-88906-R.

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