

EDUFIRST

**Improving Early Childhood Education and Care services (ECEC) for inclusion,
equity, community participation and climate justice**

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Expansion without *schoolification*: are community and partnership approaches the way forward for quality ECEC services?

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General description on research questions, objectives and theoretical framework

There is extensive research highlighting the importance of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) for children's development (OECD 2022; Kettlewell et al., 2020). High-quality ECEC has been shown to significantly enhance children's cognitive and academic skills, and also their social and emotional development. Furthermore, the benefits of ECEC extend into adulthood. Research indicates that children who attend high-quality ECEC are more likely to achieve higher educational qualifications, have better job prospects, and enjoy better health outcomes (OECD, 2020a).

As a result, education authorities are expanding and supporting the system of ECEC, not only to make these more accessible to a diverse range of families but also to guarantee a level of quality (OECD, 2020b). Although the idea of having an expanded and strengthened ECEC system apparently respond to the importance of early childhood, recent trends have raised concerns about the potential denaturalization of early childhood education, thus posing the question of what counts as quality at the very centre (OECD, 2017). In particular, the expansion of primary schools into the final(s) year(s) of nursery education could potentially challenge these the potentials of ECEC services, as it is not only the initial years that are important, but also the particular nature of ECEC services, that significantly differentiates itself from other compulsory education stages (León & Maestripieri, 2022).

Including, for example, 1 year of pre-compulsory education in public kindergartens might seem a feasible way to both expand early childhood and guarantee a publicly funded and supervised education. However, to make children “ready” for these new environments often involves exposing who are still in ECEC to the culture of primary school. Known as “*schoolification*”, this can drive ECEC settings to adopt practices that are usually more related to primary school, such as higher staff-pupil ratios, longer hours away from home, more teacher-directed pedagogies, greater attention to academic content and less playtime (OECD, 2017).

This is why some countries – especially the Nordic countries – take a child-centred perspective, adapting the cultures of both ECEC and school to the needs of the child. This implies that it is not just the responsibility of ECEC to prepare children for school; schools also need to be ready for children (Fjällström et al., 2020). In other countries where ECEC are not universalist or well-funded, like in the Southern Europe, there are other mechanisms to counter-balance this “*schoolification*” trend, by expanding, diversifying and opening ECEC services into the community, creating more innovative *educare* services (Barcelona

City Council, 2023) – thus putting networks and communities at the very centre - or by creating a 0-6 continuity education outside the realm of primary school settings (Lazzari & Balduzzi, 2023).

The present communication reflects on the particular characteristics of ECEC services and the idea of “*schoolification*” to ask:

To what extent the community and family-oriented nature of ECEC services can contribute to counterbalance “*schoolification*” processes at the policy and practice level?

This overarching research question can be subdivided into the following more specific research questions:

1. In which ways the community and community-oriented practices can permeate how quality is understood in ECEC settings?
2. Are there alternatives to guarantee the continuity of 0-2 and 3-5 stages outside primary school settings?
3. What is the role of partnerships and networks when framing ECEC services as a distinctive educative and health (EDUCARE) approach?
4. How can policymakers design initiatives to better fit the needs of children, families and their community in ECEC services?

Method

This communication is based on an ongoing research project involving three European cities: Barcelona, Milan, and Tampere. The project, EDUFIRST, aims at rethinking ECEC services as a fundamental lever against the production of segregation, educational inequalities and school failure. By promoting international comparison and reflection on good practices and up-to-date research, the project aims at putting ECEC services at the forefront of the fight against the formation of that “entry inequality”. Moreover, the project builds on these existing good policies, practices and challenges in these three cities to raise key perspective to reflect on new ways of thinking and *making* ECEC happen.

The methodology of the project includes city visits and the creation of a City Background Report, SWOT analyses, group discussions, informal interviews, questionnaire to practitioners, peer-learning activities and a focus on emerging innovative policies and strategies. For this communication, we focus on different particular features of these cities that we believe can help policymakers outline new ways of supporting ECEC services and how to understand quality in ECEC services using a community lens.

First, from the case of Barcelona, the communication presents and discusses the community orientation of the ECEC agenda in Barcelona (Gallego & Maestripieri, 2022), and also their success in attracting “hard to reach” families to these services (González-Motos & Saurí, 2022), against a background of having the 3-5 years stage within primary schools and now expanding (including) year 2 also in primary schools.

Second, from Milano, we select their “*poli per l’infanzia*” national law initiative to outline ways in which the continuity of 0-6 outside primary school settings can be achieved. Furthermore, we also pay attention in the way Milano and Italy have used the Child Guarantee initiative to strengthen this approach (León et al., 2023).

Finally, we discuss the privileged situation of ECEC in Tampere to outline its contradictions – having a universal provision but showing lower attendance rates than Barcelona or Milano

(Trætterberg et al., 2023) – to shed light into the importance of understanding the communities these services serve. This why their efforts when advancing intercultural education at ECEC are so important, including the need to think of services putting not only children, but families at the centre (Salonen et al., 2020).

Results

The communication will outline a framework to understand quality (and the nature) of ECEC services through a community, family centred lens. This would not only offer an up-to-date and comprehensive way of approaching ECEC services, but it will allow us to understand how the cluster of intersectional services, the particular governance at of these services at the local and regional levels, and the pedagogical and relational features of ECEC settings, anchor them in a way that makes it difficult to fit it in within the primary schools buildings. Rather than focusing on creating a “schoolification vs. community” duality, this communication will discuss ways in which the features of public, mandatory education can strengthen the expansion of ECEC and, more interestingly, how ECEC can help schools become more inclusive, open to the community and ready for ECEC children.

The discussion will build from promising cases in the three cities, connecting common features and challenges, while at the same time reframing narratives of parental involvement and the ways in which communities and schools can benefit from each other. These features, and the discussion underpinning them, will focus on community projects arising from ECEC premises; services being tailored to family needs; intercultural education; creating pedagogical continuity from 0 to 6 years; and strategies to attract “hard to reach” parents. It will also reflect on the limits of universalism and access *per se* and thus will put the focus on the particular needs of 0-6 years-old children; and their families.

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