

The education promise and its disillusion: Access barriers in early childhood institutions

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Getting money and early childhood education into focus: the Heckman-thesis

The idea that public expenditures for early childhood education and care (ECEC) are rather investments than costs as they yield noticeable returns has been pushed prominently by the American economist James Heckman and his colleague Flavio Cunha (Cunha & Heckman, 2007, 2008). As illustrated in the so-called *Heckman curve* (Figure 1), programs targeted towards the earliest years are supposed to be most promising regarding economic outcomes. This assumption is based on the notion that children's abilities develop in cumulative stages: Skills acquired early in childhood form the basis for later skill development and are therefore related to measurable subsequent socioeconomic effects in a skill- and knowledge-based economy.



Figure 1: Heckman's investment curve by Heckman, J. (2008). Early childhood education and care. The case for investing in disadvantaged young children. *CESifo DICE Report*, 6(2), p. 5. Retrieved from <https://www.econstor.eu/bitstream/10419/166932/1/ifo-dice-report-v06-y2008-i2-p03-08.pdf>. Copyright 2008 by ifo Institut.

Heckman's and Cunha's conclusions are drawn from programs like the Perry Preschool Project which have shown significant impacts on the educational development of disadvantaged children. From this economic

perspective investing in young children—understood as human capital—is the most efficient educational intervention.

In addition, public investments in ECEC are supposed to be efficient and effective if they prioritize high quality education, especially for children in deprived families. A whole range of studies in different countries and contexts has supported this finding with regard to both sides of the coin: a) the relevance of quality for the educational development of children, especially those growing up in deprived circumstances, and b) the economic benefit of investments in high-quality early education, e.g. sufficient qualified staff (e.g. Burchinal, Kainz, Cai, et al., 2009; Lesemann, 2009; Pfeiffer & Reuß, 2008; Meluish, Ereky-Stevens, & Petrogiannis, 2015).

In the end, Heckman and colleagues have tied (early) education and public expenditure into a quite powerful relation. The thesis of “returns on investments” stimulated the academic as well as political debate in the 2000s. Consequently, political awareness for the importance of high-quality ECEC rose.

The promise of social investments: the European scene

In Europe, Anthony Giddens and Gosta Esping-Andersen developed an investment strategy within welfare policy that also stresses the importance of activation and promotion of human capital. Similar to Heckman's economic approach, their main argument was to put new emphasis on social investments within the conceptual design of welfare states (Giddens, 1998). Especially child- and family-centered reforms should help to overcome social inequalities and guarantee economic growth in the long run. In this perspective, the child was conceptualized as a future citizen-worker who is capable of dealing with the challenges of a highly competitive knowledge economy (Esping-Andersen, 2002).

Giddens and Esping-Andersen played a key role in defining the education promise in the context of European welfare states. Unlike Heckman, who had drawn his conclusions from US-experiments with children from the most disadvantaged families, Esping-Andersen argued for

an expansion of ECEC to all children, not only the underprivileged ones. Certainly, this would raise costs, but it could also secure the consent of middle-class families and voters (Esping-Andersen, 2008).

The policy discourse around the 2000s incorporated the social investment strategy as a part of welfare state reforms. By that time European countries were confronted with the critique of insufficient solutions for societal challenges, like demographic change or rising labor market orientations of women. Politicians like Tony Blair introduced the idea of redesigning the welfare state into the political bodies of the European Union. To implement this into practice, a massive expansion of ECEC services was considered necessary. At the same time, it should raise female labor market participation and help meeting the risks of demographic change. Several political initiatives and measures were passed to promote such expansion efforts within EU member states. Among the most important ones were the *Barcelona targets* from 2002 that implemented an EU-benchmark:

Member States should remove barriers to women's participation in the labor market and strive to meet the demand for childcare facilities and in line with national supply requirements provide childcare by at least 90% of children between the age of three and the compulsory school age and at least 33% of children under the age of three. (European Commission, 2013, p. 4)

The Barcelona targets initiated various European ECEC reforms, many of them still ongoing. Just recently, the European Commission added the proposal of a quality framework in ECEC. This framework defines a range of quality goals like the improvement of staff qualifications, access for disadvantaged children, or the further development of curricula for the early years (European Commission, 2014).

However, the promise of investing in ECEC to receive economic benefits was transformed into policymaking in many different ways. Due to different welfare state backgrounds and governance structures, some countries—like the Nordic or Baltic and Balkan regions—were more successful in developing consistent policy measures and focusing on integrated systems for all children before school. Although to differing degrees, the problem of unequal access to high-quality services remains an unsolved issue for all countries.

Theoretical considerations: access barriers to ECEC systems

Regardless of whether you follow Heckman's focus on children from disadvantaged families or prefer Esping-Andersen's universalistic approach: For both strategies,

disadvantaged children need access to ECEC—in Heckman's concept as the sole recipients of childcare programs, in Esping-Andersen's approach as a subgroup of all children entitled to ECEC. This raises the question of access barriers, a question closely linked to issues of money and education.

Access to ECEC means that parents—with reasonable effort and at affordable costs—can enroll their children in an ECEC setting that suits the child's development and meets the parents' needs (Friese, Lin, Forry, & Tout, 2017). Availability and affordability, one could say, are the main aspects of access. But the issue seems to be more complex, as Vandenbroeck and Lazzari (2014) argue:

Availability and affordability do not necessarily make provision accessible, as multiple obstacles may exclude children from poor and immigrant families, for example, language barriers, knowledge of bureaucratic procedures, waiting lists, or priorities set by management. (p. 331)

Some of the potential barriers are regulated locally and, therefore, vary widely not just across but also within countries (Scholz, Erhard, Hahn, & Harring, 2019).

Additionally, subtler and sometimes unconscious aspects like the professionals' attitudes towards children from disadvantaged backgrounds or culturally induced restraint towards families with a migration background influence access probabilities. According to Vandenbroeck and Lazzari (2014), services need to be supportive and open to negotiate values, beliefs, and educational practices with families. Therefore, accessible ECEC services need to correspond to different demands and socio-cultural diversity—they need to be embedded in a consistent policy that provides the necessary resources. Ensuring equal access and therewith reducing access barriers implies a well-functioning interplay of policy levels, responsible stakeholders, professionals, and families.

Against the backdrop of the social investment promise, reducing access barriers should be a top priority on the political agenda and at the core of policy initiatives. However, using the example of Germany, we will show that this strategy is difficult to pursue in practice.

The case of Germany: the disillusion of the education promise

In Germany, two laws—namely the Day Care Development Act (Tagesbetreuungsbaugesetz) from 2005 and the Childcare Funding Act (Kinderförderungsgesetz) from 2008—made far-reaching efforts to raise the ECEC participation rates of children

under the age of three. In addition to the expectation of rising maternal employment, these policies were accompanied by remarkable hope for comprehensive effects in support of children from disadvantaged families (Bundesregierung & Regierungschefs der Länder, 2008). The expansion of services was successful, at least concerning general levels of attendance: In 2002, the ECEC attendance rate for children under the age of three had been 2.8 percent in Western Germany; in 2018 it already reached 29.4 percent. Even in Eastern Germany, with its long-lasting tradition of institutional childcare dating from socialist times, the attendance rates continued to grow from 36.7 percent (2002) to 51.5 percent (2018) (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2004, 2018).

However, to date, the ECEC expansion did not lead to a degradation of social disparities. Research shows that especially parents with higher education respond to scientific theses of the importance of early education for later success in life (Jessen, Schmitz, Spieß, & Waights, 2018), while ECEC attendance rates of young children whose parents have low educational degrees did not increase significantly. At present, only 15 percent of children under the age of three from these families are enrolled in ECEC, without any apparent increases over the last years (Rauschenbach & Meiner-Teubner, 2019). Given the fact that attendance rates in families with parental high school degrees are three times higher, the winner in the race for educational promotion is clear. It is not the child from low-income, low-educated families.

After 15 years of German ECEC expansion especially for children under the age of three, the results are quite sobering. We may have lots of evidence that children from disadvantaged families benefit from early daycare more than others (Smidt & Schmidt, 2014). But how can society use this potential if those children who would benefit the most do hardly attend day care at all? The Heckman curve reaches its limits when services aiming at the early years are mainly used by middle-class parents who have already optimized care and education for their children. The education promise cannot be realized if there are hardly any disadvantaged children in daycare.

Linking universalistic and targeted policies: a strategy for efficient and accessible ECEC

The questions arising from these observations therefore are: How can ECEC systems reach out to children from disadvantaged families? Is there a policy

approach that uses state funds more aligned with this goal?

Past experiences have shown that neither Heckman's targeted approach nor Esping-Andersen's universalist concept can solve the outlined problems alone. In a strictly targeted approach, services addressed to the poor often remain poor services. Lean state funding, in this case, does not allow for intensive support of children from disadvantaged families. On the other hand, a completely universalistic approach allows for middle- and upper-class families to take the lead in the struggle for better ECEC services for their children.

In our opinion, a combination of both approaches seems reasonable. This *progressive universalism* combines universal and targeted approaches with the intention “to realize high quality in provisions for all families with children, including poor and migrant families” (Geinger, van Haute, Roets, & Vandebroek, 2015, pp. 9–10). To realize that, all responsible governance actors at the federal, state, and local levels are jointly challenged to develop coherent policies.

Initial approaches can be observed in Germany. Based on national entitlements to childcare for children between 1 and 6 years of age, cities like Mannheim, Munich or Bremen have begun to finance their local daycare systems targeting regional disparities. As a consequence, daycare facilities in high poverty neighborhoods are better equipped financially. To improve quality, they get extra funds to hire more and higher qualified staff. Moreover, some cities directly address parents in these communities by offering them daycare places, hoping that a combination of better ECEC infrastructure and lower access barriers increases the participation of disadvantaged children.

Progressive universalism requires investments across welfare sectors as well as political responsibility to underline the importance of education as a public—and not just an economic—value. Due to the highly decentralized governance system in Germany, implementing such a sector-crossing strategy is challenging. Nevertheless, it is the state's—and no other stakeholder's—responsibility to invest in social infrastructure. The current national law on quality development (‘Gute-Kita-Gesetz’) makes a first step: it defines quality goals and provides 5 billion Euros (BMFSFJ, 2019). But to increase the efficiency of this public expenditure, progressive universalism needs to be pushed further in political awareness and subsequent policymaking.

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