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Problemy Wczesnej Edukacji/Issues in Early Education 12/2(33), 124-142

2016

Artykuł został opracowany do udostępnienia w internecie przez Muzeum Historii Polski w ramach prac podejmowanych na rzecz zapewnienia otwartego, powszechnego i trwałego dostępu do polskiego dorobku naukowego i kulturalnego. Artykuł jest umieszczony w kolekcji cyfrowej bazhum.muzhp.pl, gromadzącej zawartość polskich czasopism humanistycznych i społecznych.

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Selected aspects of institutional early childhood education and care in Warsaw – the perspective of professionals and low-income parents¹

(...) Why is my child not to go on a trip? Am I a worse person not having a permanent job? Am I a worse mother if I do not have a pedicure and high heels? (...)

Quote from the focus group

Summary

The article presents results of research into low income parents as well as professionals involved in the education, care and upbringing sectors. It concerns access to toddler care and preschool, the costs of sending children to such institutions, support for parents on low incomes, as well as the demands parents have of these institutions. The authors carried out two group interviews with parents, as well as three individual interviews with workers from the institutions. In the final part of the article, the results of the research are presented along with recommendations for politics concerning the sectors of education, upbringing and care of children from the ages of 0 to 6.

Keywords: low-income families, early childhood education and care (ECEC), accessibility of ECEC settings, parental expectations

¹ The following article is based on research conducted for the purpose of the European CARE (Curriculum Quality Analysis and Impact Review of European ECEC; Grant Agreement 613318) project. Namely – Report: Inclusiveness of Early Childhood Education and Care: Experiences of Disadvantaged Families in Europe (WP5.3). The research presented in this article was also supported from national funds for science in the years 2014–2016, for the co-financing of international projects. (*Praca naukowa finansowana ze środków finansowych na naukę w latach 2014–2016 przyznanych na realizację projektu międzynarodowego współfinansowanego*).

Introduction

Importance of high quality ECEC provision has been addressed in a number of studies (OECD 2014; Montie et al. 2007; Karwowska-Struczyk 2007). It has been proved beyond doubt that high quality institutional provision has a beneficial influence on the socio-emotional and cognitive development (Mashburn et al. 2008) as well as educational careers of low-income children (Campbell et al. 2002; Campbell et al. 1995; Berrueta-Clement et al. 1984).

In addition, different studies have provided the productivity argument for investing in the educare of disadvantaged children, among them children from low-income families, as investments in the ECEC sector have a high economic return. This leads to the conclusion that providing high quality ECEC provision, especially for disadvantaged children, is of high importance not only for individuals, but also for society as a whole (Heckman and Masterov 2007). Because of this it requires the special attention of all stakeholders (parents, policy makers, academics and practitioners).

The arguments provided above show the value of the child's enrollment into a high quality ECEC system. Meanwhile the attendance rate of the youngest children into the ECEC provision in Poland is one of the lowest in Europe.

To provide a context for further reflections we outline selected aspects of the Polish ECEC system. The sector is split. There are two main steering documents regulating the work of settings: for children 0–3 years, there is the new *Act of 4 February 2011, on the care for children under the age of 3*, and for children 3–5/6 years of age, the *Act on the Education System of the 7th of September, 1991*.

Since 2011, when the new *Act of 4 February 2011 on the care for children under the age of 3* was implemented, the number of settings, places in the settings and children attending different forms of institutional educare in Poland has systematically risen. At the end of the year 2014 7.1% of 0–3 year old children participated in different forms of institutional educare. It was estimated that at the end of the year 2015 8% of children in this age range would be enrolled into different types of settings: crèches, day care centers, individual day care providers and registered nannies² (Sprawozdanie Rady Ministrów... 2014). In total at the end of 2014 there were about 65 thousand places available in different forms of educare (Sprawozdania Rzeczowo-Finansowe... 2014) for the whole population of about 1,500,000 children 0–3 years of age.

Pre-school education is the first tier of the education system in Poland. Different organizational forms for children between the ages of three and six (preschools, pre-primary sections of primary school, pre-primary points, pre-primary education groups) are available. At the end of 2013 the population of children 3–6 years of age was about 1,684,000. In the 2013/2014 school year approximately 75% of 3–5/6 year old children were enrolled in the different types of ECEC settings mentioned above (public and non-public). The ma-

² Sprawozdanie Rady Ministrów... for the year 2015, had not yet been accepted and published at the time of writing this article.

majority of children attending different forms of preschool education (about 88%) are children from urban areas, while those from rural communities account for about 59% of all the children. The attendance rate has steadily increased in the last few years.

As mentioned previously, high quality ECEC provision is particularly important, particularly for children from low-income families. According to the Polish Central Statistical Office, position on the job market is the strongest predictor of the financial situation of a person living in Poland and his/her family. Because of this reason the unemployed and their families are in the group of the highest risk of poverty. Furthermore, in Poland, more often than other groups, children below the age of 18 are at risk of economic poverty. In total over 10% of them live below the extreme poverty level. In large families the situation is worse. In 2014 11% of children in families with 3 children, and 27% in families with 4 or more children, lived below the extreme poverty level. This rate places large families as a group at the highest risk of poverty in Poland. It is also important to point out that 60% of citizens living below the minimum existence level live in rural areas, while the percentage of the rural population is 40% of all citizens of Poland (GUS, 2014).

Methodology

The main focus of this study is at the mesolevel: the level dealing with reciprocal influences, connections and interactions between two groups of stakeholders: families and professionals (Oppen, Olmsted 1999: 12). Meanwhile, the reason for conducting the inquiry is rooted in research providing evidence for the high importance of stakeholders (parents and professionals) and personal theories (cultural beliefs) for shaping the milieu of children (Bronfenbrenner 1992; Super, Harkness 1986), as well as the communication between microsystems – home and the setting. The objective of this article is to present the opinions, experiences and beliefs of low-income parents and Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) professionals concerning the accessibility and inclusion of ECEC services in Warsaw, to provide new knowledge and create the impetus for further inquiries into the reception of ECEC.

Following the guideline of consortium cooperation on one particular task (Task 5.3. *Access to ECEC for disadvantaged groups*), Polish researchers were interested in the opinions and experiences of ECEC professionals and parents regarding the following themes: equal opportunities, equal treatment and equal outcomes. “**Equal opportunities** refer to exogenous determinants conditioning children’s equitable access to ECEC service; **equal treatment** stands for the elimination of endogenous barriers within ECEC; **equal outcomes** strategies aim at bringing all children to the same level through positive discrimination of the disadvantaged” (Nicaise et al. 2000; quote from the Workplan and Research...).

The Polish research team conducted 2 semi-structured, group interviews with low-income parents and 3 individual, semi-structured interviews with professionals working with children and low-income families. The issues that arose in the interviews were based on the guidelines from the *Revised Research Proposal and Workplan for Task 5.3 and De-*

liverable 5.2 of 06/08/2015. The guideline provided the main themes and categories which were the framework for the Polish interview guide and the analysis of the collected data. Within 'equal opportunities' the following categories were taken into consideration: availability of places, working hours, affordability, maternal employment and home care, as well as cooperation of practitioners with low income parents. The equal treatment theme was discussed in regard to the following: the attitudes of stakeholders towards low-income children, and expectations and opinions concerning the ECEC system. The last theme 'equal outcomes' was presented without a division into categories. The participants of the interviews were Polish, and of Polish origin. They live in different parts of Warsaw. All of the interviewees signed consent forms to participate in the study. Parents also completed a demographic questionnaire before the start of the interviews. Both the consent form and the demographic questionnaire were prepared on the bases of the instructions provided by the WP 5 leaders (Özgün Ünver, Ides Nicaise, Mayke Vandeputte).

The first interview was conducted with two parents cooperating with the All Together in Dignity Association (ATD; web page – http://www.atd.org.pl/?page_id=113), an organization counteracting the social exclusion of people and whole families, including those with low/no-income. Contact with the association was recommended and initiated by the WP 5 leader, Ides Nicaise. Afterwards the Polish team negotiated further steps of cooperation, and the organization of the focus group with the association. The ATD members were responsible for contact initiation with parents. Originally there were ten parents who declared willingness to participate in the interview, they also promised to come with their children. The researchers invited 6 students to cooperate with them and look after the children during the interview. Two people were eventually interviewed who did not come with their children as previously promised. The interviews took place without any children being present and lasted about 40 minutes without any breaks. A second set of interviews involving a new group of people in cooperation with ATD was not possible for organizational reasons. Even though the parents seemed to be interested in sharing their opinions on the ECEC sector with the researchers, they could not agree on a time that would suit the whole or even part of the group.

Table 1. Basic information of the interviewees – parents cooperating with the ATD

Code	Sex/ Age	Education/ occupation	Partner	Children/ Sex/ Age	Children's attendance to settings	Extra help with children/ Comments
ATD/1	W/ 34	Primary/ unemployed	Husband/ participates in upbringing of children in a limited way/ physical work	B-16 yrs	Mid school	Children live with foster family but they spend a lot of time in the family home

Table 1. cont.

Code	Sex/ Age	Education/ occupation	Partner	Children/ Sex/ Age	Children's attendance to settings	Extra help with children/ Comments
				G-15 yrs	Mid school	
				B-13 yrs	Mid school	
				B-6 yrs	Preschool	
				B-12 yrs	Child adopted by foreign family. There is no contact with the child	
				G-1 yr	at home	–
ATD/2	M/ 43	Secondary/ builder	Partner/ participates in upbringing of the children/ unemployed	B-12 yrs	Primary school	Boy is the son of the ATD/2 from the previous relationship, sometimes spends time with mum
				G-7 yrs	Primary school	–
				B-2 yrs	–	

As the number of parents from ATD that were interviewed did not fulfill expectations, the researchers decided to organize an interview in cooperation with a different organization, members of the Catholic Neocatechumenate Community. The parents who participated in the interview declared that their income per family member was below the level of the social minimum³. One exception is the family of the P2 interviewee whose income per family member at the time of conducting the interview was above the minimum. Researchers decided to include P2 in the focus group nevertheless, as the family has limited access to the public ECEC system due to their daughter's severe food allergy. P6 and P7 are husband and wife. None of the interviewees or their partners use social benefits. Families with three or more children are exempted from fees in the setting (it is an option under law). All of the children of the interviewees attend public settings. The interview lasted about 60 minutes, and was conducted without a break.

Table 2. Basic information of the interviewees – parents cooperating with the CNC

Code	Sex/ Age	Education/ occupation	Partner	Children Sex/Age	Children's attendance to settings	Extra help with children
P1	W/ 40	Higher/ Administrative officer/full time	Husband/ participates in upbringing of children/ farmer	B-12 yrs	Primary school	Grandma (free of charge)
				B-10 yrs	Primary school	–
				B-6 yrs	Preschool; 5 h/day; 5 days/week; for 2 yrs	–

³ According to the measurements from: INSTYTUT PRACY I SPRAW SOCJALNYCH/ INSTITUTE OF LABOUR AND SOCIAL STUDIES Warszawa, 12 grudnia 2014 r. Informacja o wysokości minimum socjalnego we wrześniu 2014 r. (mortgage was taken into consideration).

Code	Sex/ Age	Education/ occupation	Partner	Children Sex/Age	Children's attendance to settings	Extra help with children
				G-2 yrs	Crèche; 3 h/day; 5 days/ week; for a month	–
P2	W/ 29	Higher/ unemployed	Husband/ participates in upbringing of children/ IT specialist	G-4 yrs	Preschool; 8,5 h/day; for 3 months	–
				B-3 yrs	Preschool; 8,5 h/day; for 3 months	–
				B-1 yr	-	–
P3	W/ 32	Higher/ unemployed	Partner/ participates in upbringing of children/ self- employed	B-8 yrs	Primary school	–
				B-1 yr	-	–
P4	W/ 32	Secondary / kitchen designer- seller/ 50 h /week	No	B-10 yrs	Primary school	–
P5	M/ 44	Higher/ pensioner	Wife/ participates in upbringing of children/ pedagogue in preschool	G-7 yrs	Primary school	–
				B-6 yrs	Primary school	–
				G-4 yrs	Preschool 6–8 h/day; 5 days/week; for 2 yrs	
P6	W/ 27	Higher/ resident (doctor)/ participates in upbringing of the child/ full time	Husband and wife	G-6 months	–	–
P7	M/ 31	Secondary/ seller/ paternity leave				

For the purpose of the study the researchers conducted three individual interviews with professionals who work with low-income families in the poor neighborhoods of Warsaw. All of the professionals work in public settings. The longest interview was conducted with the head of a crèche, and it lasted about 60 minutes. The other two interviews with professionals lasted about 30 minutes.

Table 3. Basic information of the interviewees – professionals working in the ECEC settings

Code	Position held in the ECEC setting	Social characteristic of the location of the setting	Children enrolled in the settings
P/H	Head of a public crèche	<i>P/H: I think that the situation over the years has evolved. This neighborhood used to be of older people, now there are more and more young people, new blocks of flats are being built, people with higher SES are moving in. But still a lot of families who live here are not very wealthy, with low SES and they need support.</i>	Children 0–3 years of age, also children with disabilities
P/T	Teacher in a primary school	<i>P/T: The school is in an area where a lot of disadvantaged (alcohol, drugs and problems with violence) and low income families live.</i>	Children 5/6 years of age (last, obligatory year of preschool education) Children 6–8 years old (lower primary school)
P/A	Liberian/ Administrative worker/ Teacher; public primary school	<i>P/A: There are many families with different problems in this neighborhood, often very serious problems.</i>	Children 5/6 years of age (last, obligatory year of preschool education) Children 6–12 years old (primary school)

The other reason for narrowing the context of the article and its conclusions is that all the interviewees were inhabitants of Warsaw and have experiences and knowledge concerning the ECEC services in the city.

Findings

Equal opportunities: Availability of places

All the interviewees agreed that in terms of crèches and preschools, the biggest barrier in enrolling children into a setting is the insufficient number of places in public settings, not only for low-income parents but all of them. It is possible to say, therefore, that according to the interviewees' opinions, the lack of places in the settings is the reason why families may become low-income/poor, as one working parent is not able to earn a living for the whole family.

P4: Not all the parents meet the conditions set out in the application procedures to a crèche, and they do not have a chance to get a place.

P/H: In our crèche 500 families were not accepted, and in about half of the cases those are family dramas, because somebody had to give up work, or was fired, there is not enough money to pay the mortgage and it becomes a great problem.

P/T: In our neighborhood the number of available places for preschool-age children is not sufficient. The choice of staying with a child at home is not the parents' choice but a necessity.

As mentioned in the Methodology section of the text, the research is focused on Warsaw. The first reason for this is that regulations concerning recruitment procedures to public settings vary throughout the country. In different municipalities, therefore, financial indicators may be of differing importance. From the perspective of low-income parents it seems to be crucial how their financial situation influences their chances to get a place in a setting. The Act on the Education System art. 20c (Ustawa o Systemie Oświaty... art. 20c) set out the national criteria that are to be taken into consideration at the first stage of the recruitment procedures in public preschools in the country. Some of the priority criteria are: large family, disability of a family member, single-parent family, foster family. Additional criteria established by the municipalities are to be applied when candidates have received equal points, or there are more available places in the setting. One of the criteria may be a low-income per family member, however its importance (amount of points) is up to the municipality. In Warsaw the financial situation of the family is one of the 6 additional criteria.

In terms of preschools low-income families are not prioritized in any way in the recruitment process. However, criteria which are often associated with poverty/low-income families like large family, single parenting are taken into account⁴.

P/T: I think that the procedures are really clear, parents can easily find out what are the criteria for acceptance of a child, what they get points for.

Recruitment procedures in public crèche are structured at the municipality level. One of the criteria which is taken into account is the parents' employment. The system favors working parents. There are also programs like *Mum and dad go back to work and I go to crèche*⁵ which support parents in a complex way to go back to the job market. One of the solutions the program offers to help parents is providing places for their children in a crèche. Parents in particularly difficult situations, who are unemployed, may apply for a place on an individual basis.

P/H: The way to increase the chance of the unemployed parent to get a place in a crèche is to write about his/her difficult family situation. Additionally a parent has to attach information from the social services confirming the situation. The parent does not have to be a client of social services permanently. In most cases a special commission accepts the application. So there is a way for parents with low SES to get a place even if they do not meet the requirements.

The recruitment process is via Internet in the case of both crèche and preschool. None of the interviewees mentioned that it is an obstacle for parents in the enrollment of their children into the settings. There are many possibilities for parents who do not have Inter-

⁴ Detailed recruitment criteria to public preschools in Warsaw http://edukacja.warszawa.pl/sites/edukacja/files/rekrutacja/7951/attachments/rekrutacja_cz3.pdf

⁵ Program implemented in chosen settings of the Warsaw crèche network; *Mama i tata wracają do pracy a ja idę do żłobka* <http://www.zlobki.waw.pl/aktualnosci.php?pid=21179>).

net access to complete the application, for example in the setting or social service offices. When parents require any kind of assistance in completing the application form they are provided with help in the institutions.

P1: I had a problem, as the applications to public crèche are via Internet, and I do not know why my family was not recognized as a large family, but a parent with one child.

P/H: Signing up on the waiting list to the crèche takes place via the Internet, and I think that even when the family does not have the Internet there are possibilities to do so. Parents may for example ask for help in a social service office or come to the crèche and we help them to complete the application. Every parent who wants to sign a child to a crèche has a chance to do so when he/she makes some effort.

P/A: I think that the procedures are really clear, children get points for their background, siblings etc. The procedure is via INTERNET and parents who do not have access to it may use the computers at school.

The only obstacle mentioned by parents is the recruitment schedule which takes place only once a year, and which limits access to the crèche to children born after March.

P2: The child has to be 6 months old to get into a crèche. The recruitment to crèche is only once a year. When the child is born later than March, parents cannot sign the child for the following year as the child is not 6 months old in September. There is also a big problem when parents move because there are no available places in settings even for large families.

Equal opportunities: Working hours

The next issue raised by the moderators concerned the opening hours of ECEC settings. Both the professionals and the parents agreed that settings are not able to provide opening hours suitable to all parents. The working hours of the settings do not cover the time required by some of those who are employed. Nevertheless the opening hours are flexible in the settings that were discussed and meet the needs of most of the families.

ATD/1: It is normal, they are open from seven till five, when someone is working at the time grandma or someone else may pick up the child.

ATD/2: But in the morning it is a problem to bring the child to a setting when people start work at seven, sometimes at eight. It also depends if it is in the same direction as the work place.

P4: A lot of people work during office hours 8 a.m.-4 p.m. They are often not interested that others do not work like that. Someone has to be in this shop when those people want to buy something after work. Also settings work during office hours, till 5 p.m. I think. On the other hand, it is hard to leave a child in the setting for such a long time.

P/H: Every year we adjust the opening hours to the parent's needs. At the same time we have to remember about legal regulations concerning the length of working hours of caregivers (8 h per day) and the maximum length of time that a child may spend in the setting daily (10 h a day).

P/A: There are many possibilities that allow parents to adjust to the time that a child spends in the setting and their needs. But still for some parents the opening hours are not good enough.

Equal opportunities: Affordability

Fees for public preschools are regulated at a national level, and for the crèche at the municipality level. Both the parent and the professionals stated that the monthly costs are reasonable and affordable for most families. Low income families may apply for financial support which allows them to enroll a child into a setting. Fees are not a barrier for low-income parents as long as they are informed about the possible support, and make an effort to apply for it.

ATD/2: As it is obligatory, the government should exempt parents from payment for preschool, because it is too difficult for parents.

P4: From my calculations it is better to enroll a child to a setting because of meals. It is cheaper when children eat in the setting.

P/T: There are a number of possibilities (for parents with low income) to lower the fees, get different types of benefits. Parents may even apply for a refund for materials like pencils, color paper, glue etc. People working in the setting: teachers or the pedagogue, but also social workers who work out of school cooperate, and help provide for the needs of families, especially children. This help here, is absolutely necessary to allow the children to function normally in the center.

P/A: There are also financial barriers, when low-income parents earn slightly above the limits, they cannot use the discounts/benefits then.

P/H: Parents with low SES may apply even for a 100% refund for the child's stay in the crèche. Meals may also be refunded by social services. The cost of the crèche is not a limit for low income parents.

Interviewees raised the problem of additional costs, that may be a barrier for some parents to ensure the full participation of a child in some activities offered by the settlements, such as trips or having photos taken. The parents underlined that those activities are not obligatory, but still they would like their children to benefit from them like other children. The parents pointed out that the short notice concerning these extra costs is a big problem for them, as they often do not have time to raise the money. They also claim that they are often

asked in the settings to bring things like tissues, paper, paint etc. which at some times of year may be a financial burden.

P/T: There are sometimes additional/extra costs, now when I think about it, it's probably because the preschool/school teachers do not think about the fact that parents have to pay. There are expenses that are not planned long in advance for example: Dear parents in two weeks there will be a trip to the candy factory. We will collect 20 zł (about 5 euro) for the ticket and sweets for the child. This extra, unexpected cost could be a problem.

ATD/2: Parents are not prepared for these extra costs. Like with my daughter for whom we had to buy a swimming costume and cup recently.

ATD/1: At the very beginning when we sign up a child in preschool, we find out about the fees. They do not tell us about additional costs, it comes up later. Sometimes teachers say openly that they do not know how much money will be required for extras. It is better for children to go and see different things from an early age than not to know anything. The head or the teacher cannot predict the prices for all the museums or different attractions. In my opinion it should be organized like this: There is a trip account where every month parents pay for example 10 zł into it, one day's notice is not enough. For me or other people one day is not enough to organize for example 35 zł for a trip.

ATD/2: I agree it is about the organization.

Home vs institution

The barrier mentioned by the interviewees is a psychological one. According to the P/A, some parents are not able to provide appropriate care for their children.

P/A: I think that so few children attend crèche/preschool, because parents do not feel like looking for settings like this. The other thing is that they would have to pay for this kind of service and they would prefer to spend the money on something different. Very often mothers in our neighborhood state simply that they do not feel like getting up in the morning. Later we see that younger children are brought to the setting by older siblings, not the parents, or they do not come at all.

In terms of children from 6 months up to 5 years of age, the parents decide if they want to send a child to a setting or provide him/her with home care. The interviewees agreed that for the youngest children it is better to be at home with their mothers. Most of the interviewees stated that the age of starting preschool education (3 years of age) is right for the child.

ATD/1: So few children from 0 to 3 years of age attend settings, because it is better to bring them up at home. The child comes back ill from a setting. Everyone knows that when one child in the setting is ill, all the others fall ill too. For example, my daughter, Róża, is 13

months old and I cannot even imagine that she would go to a crèche. To preschool maybe yes, so that she can prepare for school, see this bunch of kids, but a crèche...

P5: I think that 3 years, as it is said in the Legal Act concerning preschool, is ok to send a child to a setting. I think that earlier it is not good for the child. It is not good for his/her emotions. Parental care is better for a child.

When both parents work, the interviewees found the settings a good solution for the child.

ATD/2: When both men and women are working, the child should go to preschool to learn something, because there is no time at home to teach him/her and explain things. But of course when a woman is at home, it is better for a child to be with her.

The head of the crèche stressed that parents who decide to enroll a child into a setting need to feel/be assured that he/she is taken care of well.

P/H: When looking at life through rose-colored glasses, the child should stay at home with parents after birth, for as long as possible. But I know that there is a social need to send children to a crèche. I am aware that parents are very emotional during the adaptation process, the truth is that it is the parents who need to adapt to the new situation, not necessarily their children. Parents need support, good quality care, they need to feel that they do not harm their child leaving him/her in a crèche when they have to go back to work. The question about how long the child should stay at home with parents is rather up to each parent, I (as head of a crèche) can see a social need.

Regarding children aged 6, parents in the whole country may decide if they would like their children to be enrolled in one year of compulsory school preparation in a preschool or primary school (when both forms of educare are available in the municipality). P/T stated though, that the poorest parents in the neighborhood where she works often choose schools, as there are more hours of care free of charge.

P/T: From my perspective, parents in our neighborhood prefer their children to go to school earlier. It might be because school offers more hours of educare free of charge.

Equal opportunities: Cooperation of practitioners with low-income parents

In general, parents are viewed by professionals as a demanding group, no matter what their financial situation is, but low-income parents seem to be more demanding in relation to such cooperation.

P/A: In our setting there are about 70% low-income parents. In general there is not much of a difference between them and the wealthier parents, they are all very demanding.

One may say, according to the experiences of the professionals that expectations differ among low-income parents. The first group are parents who have been using benefits for a long time and do not want to, are not able to, or do not try to change the situation. The second group are parents who are actively trying to improve their situation.

P/H: It always depends on the people. There are parents who know the system of family support of our city/country inside out and use it; they are an extremely demanding group of low-income parents who always claim they should get more. And there are also people who have sudden financial problems because of different circumstances. For them a crèche not only provides care and food for the child, but also gives them an opportunity/time to go to work and improve the family situation. There are a couple of different groups of low-income parents. It is very hard to compare them, to talk in general about the expectations of low and not-low-income parents, as within both of these groups there are parents with different expectations. There are at least two groups among low-income families: those who have used benefits for generations and those who suddenly get into financial trouble. The first group knows how to use the system of benefits, those parents advise each other how to get more support, I heard many times when they exchanged information when to get benefits from the church and when from other services, when to apply etc. I have to admit that all that help together allows them to function and not look for work. I also have to add that those parents know that they are not qualified for 'demanding' jobs that could bring them more money than the benefits. So they decide that working for a low salary is not worth the effort.

P/T: In general, cooperation with low-income parents is alright, but sometimes it gets hard. From my experience, it is harder than with middle class families. These are parents who are often very demanding. They are not even cooperative but just think that because of their difficult situation they are entitled to things from the setting. At the same time these parents are not so demanding when it comes to themselves and their children. But these are not all the parents, of course. When we were organizing a campaign to support the poorest children in our setting, and we had to decide who would get the support, there was so much arguing that next year the donors withdrew their support. It is a hard environment to work in.

From some parents' perspectives, the contact with the setting and the level of understanding of their situation relies on the openness of parents.

ATD/I: Contact with the setting depends on how parents conduct conversations, on the openness of parents. It depends on people. It is like in hospital, it does not matter what the building is, but who works there.

Equal treatment: Attitude of stakeholders toward low-income children

It appears from the interviews that two types of approaches concerning the attitude to low-income children may be distinguished. The first one favors low-income children (positive discrimination), and provides them with extra support, so that they can fully participate in the ECEC provision.

P1: If we are to build a well-functioning society in general, this group feeling of community/solidarity among the youngest is needed – whether they are first graders or high school students. I remember that in my high school we all cleaned the windows for someone to earn money for students who could not pay for a trip. And it wasn't that if I had money for the trip it is not my problem, but the whole class participated in helping others.

P4: It depends on the head of the setting. From my experience, some of them really do their best to support children, they favor children from low-income families, so that they could use all of the opportunities in the setting, participate in trips, get presents, etc. Others do not care at all, they do not make any effort to help the poor family. It is good that some heads favor low-income children, but it should be done quietly, without showing off.

The second approach is to treat all the children the same, no matter what their family financial situation is.

P/A: I think that low-income children are treated the same in our setting, but very often they are not taken care of well at home.

P/T: It is hard to say if low-income children are treated in any special way in our setting, because the majority of children are from families with low SES. Being poor is normal among our pupils. In the majority of these families there is an alcohol problem, in some of them there is violence. Last year when we were organizing a Christmas campaign supporting the poorest children in our setting, and we had to decide who would get the support, there was so much arguing that the next year the donors withdrew their support. It is a hard environment to work in.

P/H: I think that in my public settings, all the children are treated the same, also because we had to learn how to work with those families conducting the program "Mum and dad..."

The issue of relationships with peers was raised by one of the parents who stated:

ATD/2: When it comes to peer contacts, my children were treated well.

Expectations and opinions on the ECEC system

The interviewees mentioned all kinds of developmental skills: academic, fine motor and social skills. Nevertheless, all of them put more emphasis on socio-emotional ones like: self-esteem, self-confidence, peer relations, independence, self-sufficiency and self-regulation.

Issues concerning personal care like washing and combing their hair, or dressing, were also mentioned as the expected outcomes. According to childcare professionals, ECEC settings should equip children with ideas how to spend their free time at home, especially those children who cannot count on their parents' care.

P2: In preschool, children also learn how to organize work, for example that there is time for certain activities. At home it is often like: Well mum we will do it later, I don't feel like it now. And at preschool they know that they do it now, or not at all.

ATD/2: Values, no sadness, fears. It should be child-centered. From my own experience, solving simple tasks, learning how to behave with peers.

ATD/1: Preschool is the time for preparation for work with books, manual exercises, educational activities. Skills how to cooperate with others in a group. When they go to school, there are many kids, not one or two.

P5: Children going to school should have self-sufficiency skills, be independent in a way, and have some knowledge.

P/T: Thinking about my children (disadvantaged families), it is most important to support their self-esteem and skills to deal with problematic situations. These are children who react aggressively or they withdraw when there is a problem. The best that teachers in a preschool can do is to show them their good sides and ensure them that they are good enough, that they can do it. On the other hand, there are social skills, dealing with peer conflicts. Thirdly, there are personal care skills they have problems with, like washing, combing their hair etc.

P/A: Cooperation in a group, awareness of the fact that they should learn. Manual skills, children should be able to color in a picture, make things from plasticine. Also independence is very important, as well as basic knowledge, names of colors, days of the week. Children in our neighborhood often come to school not knowing these basic things. It is also good that they train their memory in preschool, they learn poems and songs. Children who are left alone (without supervision/care of parents) at home should also find out about different ways of spending their free time. Very often they spend most of the time watching TV, or playing computer games.

P/H: Settings for 0–3 year-old children should first of all care for the children. There cannot be talk about any para-educational activities when the child does not feel safe. Sending a child to a crèche in a way destroys this self-confidence built at home and we need to rebuild it here in the setting, make every child feel secure and comfortable here. These adaptation programs have to be built keeping in mind this need of the child, but also the parent. Sometimes these traditional three days of a parent's presence in the crèche, when the child comes to us, are not enough. It also applies to preschoolers who did not attend a crèche, and spent the first years of their lives at home with their relatives. We also have to remember that children have more and more knowledge these days. Now the day in the oldest group of the crèche is almost the same as in the first group at preschool. At the same time in this group in the crèche there are more caregivers than teachers in preschool. This first year in preschool, from my experience, is spent by the teachers trying to achieve a similar level of functioning in the setting among those children who attended different forms of educare and those who did not.

Equal outcomes

All the parents considered the performance of their children in an ECEC settings positive. One may say they consider the offer of the ECEC settings as adequate to their children's needs.

P4: I also remember that my son learned a lot in preschool. I was very surprised that a four-year-old boy can know things like that.

Nevertheless, the professionals noticed differences between children from low-income and wealthy families. From their experience, low-income children are more self-directive and independent and they deal with peer relations better, but they lack basic academic knowledge. At the same time, children from wealthy families deal better with new situations, for example when they go on a trip, and with different kind of para-educational activities. None of the professionals mentioned that they change the program according to the particular needs and abilities of the children.

P/T: Regarding typical para-educational activities, low-income children are doing much worse. They do not understand instructions, they do not know what to do. But there are things which they can deal with better. For example, they do not put the blame on each other so often, do not complain. These are children who do not go to the nurse with a scratched finger.

P/H: Yes, there are differences. Children from wealthy families are usually more open to educational work, new experiences. It is easier to go on a trip with them for example. I also have a feeling that children from the families with low SES go through the adaptation process worse. I think it is because more wealthy children have been in different places before they came to us, they functioned with other people rather than only their relatives, and because of that, they deal with being without their parents better. At the same time, children with low SES seem to get on better in peer relations. I don't know why. Maybe it is because there are usually more people in their homes, siblings. Looking at the application forms in my crèche, it is clear that in wealthy families there are one or two children in most cases, and in low-income ones there are more than two children. From my observations, low-income children have more problems with behaving according to the rules, they react more to new unexpected situations.

Conclusions and Recommendations

This article presents selected aspects of the ECEC system from the perspective of low-income parents and professionals cooperating with low-income families. Participants gave their opinions and shared their experiences concerning three main themes: equal opportunities, equal treatment and equal outcomes.

The biggest barrier according to all the parents and professionals is the lack of a sufficient number of places in both crèche and preschool sectors. The natural recommendation is to continue the policy of increasing the number of places, especially in settings dedicated to children from 0 to 3 years of age. The government implemented legal decisions

which should improve the availability of preschools on a national scale. From September 2016, every preschool-age child will be entitled to get a place in a setting. One may state that this legal solution should meet the expectations of parents.

The interviewees declared coherence between the opening hours of ECEC settings and the needs of most of the parents. The strategy mentioned by the head of the crèche (P/H), who each year adapts the opening hours to the parents' needs, is highly recommended.

The parents and professionals agreed that fees are not a barrier for enrolling children into ECEC settings in most cases. Low-income parents may apply for benefits and discounts. However, the parents agreed that additional/unexpected costs like trips or materials, burden their home budget. It was recommended by one of the parents (ATD/1) that a special parental fund should be established to collect money (a fixed amount per month), which would cover all the extra expenses.

The parents' value system seems to have a major influence on parental decisions concerning the moment of involving the child in the ECEC system. For most of them, it is better for children to stay at home until the age of three. At the same time, parents agreed that when both parents work, sending a child to a setting earlier than the age of 3 is justified.

The decision regarding the place for compulsory education (last year of preschool) seems to be particularly important from the perspective of low-income parents. All the parents may choose between preschools and primary schools. According to education professionals, low-income parents often choose schools for financial reasons. Municipalities should consider unifying fees for both types of institutions, to allow all the parents to make educational decisions on the basis of their preferences, not their economic situation.

The interviewees distinguished two types of attitudes of professionals toward low-income children.

The first is *positive discrimination*. Both parents and professionals mentioned different ways of supporting low-income children, and their positive experiences proving the professionals' good will.

The second is the neutral approach – treating all children the same. All the interviewees agreed that positive discrimination is the approach which may help with inequalities, and because of that, it should not only be promoted among professionals and parents, but also children.

The expectations of low-income parents from the settings vary from the perspective of the professionals. In general, the professionals distinguished two groups of parents. Firstly, there are parents who are very demanding of ECEC settings, but also of other social service institutions. They often feel entitled to different kinds of support, because of their difficult financial situation. The second group are parents who expect good quality care from ECEC professionals at the time they are working or looking for a job. ECEC settings should cooperate with social services in terms of complex work with low-income families, in order, for example, to increase the knowledge of parents about how important a child's early experiences are for his/her development and education.

In terms of developmental expectations, the interviewees mentioned different skills that children should acquire: personal independence, socio-emotional skills and academic knowledge. All the professionals and parents stressed the importance of the socio-emotional competence of children. The recommendation is to make professional training programs more sensitive to the diverse needs of children and to the expectations of parents and professionals, as now in many cases they focus more on the educational aspects of a teacher's work.

Low-income parents stated that their children perform as well as their peers in the settings. Nevertheless, professionals see a difference in the performance of low-income children. Because of this, it is required from professionals to be sensitive and responsive to the individual needs of each child, as parents may not have the knowledge and skills to assess the development of their child.

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