

Analysis of the schooling programs of 2-3 years old students in Primary and Childhood Education schools in Spain

Análisis de los programas de escolarización del alumnado de 2-3 años en colegios de Educación Infantil y Primaria en España

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ABSTRACT

In the last two decades, the net enrolment rate in the first cycle of Early Childhood Education has increased almost fivefold. This expansion has occurred in all regions across the board, albeit with different magnitudes. Despite the progress made, the fact that the stage is voluntary and not free has led to significant differences associated with the socioeconomic and cultural level of the families. To overcome these barriers, all communities have implemented strategies of social tariffs, rebates, fee exemptions or free education to provide affordable school places. Likewise, one of the public policies that has been adopted in different Autonomous Communities are the programs for the incorporation of

students in the first cycle in Infant and Primary Education schools. These initiatives have focused especially on students aged 2-3 years, although there are also some initiatives that incorporate the entire cycle or the second and third year in schools. This article analyses the possibilities (and challenges) presented by this policy from a redistributive approach that guarantees equal opportunities and early childhood care as a right. To this end, in the light of current regulations, the conditions and scope of these programs are analyzed to achieve the extension of the right to education and access to quality Early Childhood Education for all. It is concluded that these programs allow progress to be made in free education, to bet on universalist and stable policies over time, to promote co-teaching, to incorporate professionals in continuous training plans and to optimize existing investments, resources and facilities. On the contrary, it is necessary to adapt the spaces, preserve the identity of the stage and implement focused measures in favor of educational equity.

Keywords: early childhood education, early childhood care, access to education, early schooling, equity

RESUMEN

En las últimas dos décadas, la tasa neta de escolarización en el primer ciclo de Educación Infantil se ha multiplicado prácticamente por cinco. Esta expansión se ha producido en todas las regiones de manera generalizada, aunque con diferentes magnitudes. A pesar de los avances alcanzados, el hecho de que la etapa sea voluntaria y no gratuita ha llevado a que existan importantes diferencias asociadas al nivel socioeconómico y cultural de las familias. Para superar estas barreras, todas las comunidades han implementado estrategias de tarificación social, bonificación, exención de tasas o gratuidad de las enseñanzas para facilitar plazas escolares asequibles. Asimismo, una de las políticas públicas que se ha adoptado en diferentes comunidades autónomas son los programas para la incorporación del alumnado del primer ciclo en los centros de Educación Infantil y Primaria. Estas iniciativas se han enfocado especialmente al alumnado de 2-3 años, aunque también existen algunas iniciativas que incorporan todo el ciclo o el segundo y tercer curso en los colegios. En este artículo se analizan las posibilidades (y retos) que presenta esta política desde un enfoque redistributivo que garantice la igualdad de oportunidades y la atención de la primera infancia como derecho. Para ello, a la luz de la normativa vigente, se analizan las condiciones y el alcance de estos programas para lograr la extensión del derecho a la educación y el acceso a una Educación Infantil de calidad para todos. Se concluye que estos programas permiten avanzar en la gratuidad, apostar por políticas universalistas y estables en el tiempo, fomentar la codocencia, incorporar a los profesionales en los planes de formación continua y optimizar las inversiones, recursos e instalaciones existentes. Por el contrario, es necesario que se produzca una adaptación de los espacios, preservar la identidad propia de la etapa e implementar medidas focalizadas en pro de la equidad educativa.

Palabras clave: educación infantil, atención a la primera infancia, acceso a la educación, escolarización temprana, equidad

INTRODUCTION

There is a broad consensus among academic literature when it comes to pointing out the benefits associated with Early Childhood Education as an effective tool to fight against the intergenerational transmission of poverty due to its capacity to compensate for inequalities, becoming a key policy to guarantee a equitable that guarantees opportunities and allows their use by everyone (Espinosa Bayal, 2018; León et al., 2022). Investment in early childhood education constitutes the redistributive educational policy par excellence and a clear example of preventive policy and social investment (Ferrer, 2020), being the educational stage with the greatest potential to reduce social differences throughout life compared to investments made. in later stages (Heckman , 2017).

From the individual perspective, different works point out how Early Childhood Education contributes to the stimulation of cognitive and non-cognitive abilities (Bonal and Scandurra, 2019). The PISA 2015 report (and subsequent ones) points out that students who have attended Early Childhood Education show better general results in cognitive tests, even once sociocultural differences have been compensated (OECD, 2016). Thus, the policy of universalization of the second cycle of Early Childhood Education is associated with better academic results and a lower future probability of repetition (Felfe et al., 2015). Along these lines, Pilarz (2018) finds a positive association between early schooling and the development of mathematical, linguistic or scientific skills. For its part, the TIMSS study (2019) specifically analyzed the effect that formal early learning (attendance in the first cycle of Early Childhood Education) and informal learning (reading and mathematics activities carried out at home) has on performance in mathematics and science, concluding that the effect is additive (MEFP, 2020). The effects would be long-lasting since they are mediated by the development of non-cognitive capacities such as creativity, work capacity, personal autonomy or socialization (Mancebón et al., 2018). This would explain its positive relationship with future performance and school dropout prevention (Cebolla-Boado et al., 2017). From a social level, the expansion of schooling in early childhood education has been related to the improvement of work-family conciliation, favoring female work activity (MEFP, 2020). This relationship has been proven in the Spanish case (Nollenberger and Rodríguez-Planas, 2015) although its effect is increasingly discrete to the extent that the group of mothers who could react to this incentive has decreased (González-Motos and Saurí, 2023). Likewise, a positive relationship is found with higher salaries and taxes for both mothers and students in the future (van Huizen and Plantenga, 2018).

The benefits derived from early childhood education, together with the fact that there is no homogeneous access between social groups (given the overrepresentation of the most favored groups), generate a situation in which guaranteeing care and

education in early childhood is a priority in terms of educational policy (MEFP, 2022). This priority has been evident in the recommendations made by the European Commission (2019) which urge that early childhood education be of quality, affordable, accessible and inclusive, as well as the importance of having adequate financing. Accordingly, member states have promoted an intense agenda of reforms aimed at facilitating access to quality educational programs between 0 and 3 years old, with special attention to students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Likewise, along with targeted measures aimed at eliminating access barriers (reducing costs, prioritizing admission, deductions, awareness, information...), others of a universal nature have been implemented. Among others: a) establish a year of compulsory education before starting Primary Education, b) increase the obligation to attend Early Childhood Education by more than one year, c) increase the period of compulsory education to 2-3 years and, d) extend the legal right to an ECEC place ¹ (European Commission, 2020). In this sense, Spain has a level of schooling above the OECD and EU23 average, placing it closer to countries with higher levels of schooling, such as Norway, Sweden or Portugal than to the opposite countries. Efforts in recent decades have focused on creating places and improving accessibility, but there are still important territorial inequalities and certain social groups continue to be underrepresented (Navarro-Varas and León, 2023).

The first cycle of Early Childhood Education in Spain is characterized by being non-free and voluntary education. Consequently, educational administrations do not guarantee places for all students, which has generated a strong presence of the private sector both in terms of ownership and management. The high territorial dispersion, together with lax regulation and the participation of different public institutions, has led to it being the educational stage where there is the greatest diversity of models (Bonal and Scandurra, 2019). At this point, one of the policies that has been developed in some communities in Spain consists of creating specific classrooms for students aged 2-3 years in Early Childhood and Primary Education centers, reserved until now for students aged 3 to 12 years. These programs, which began in isolation in Cantabria, have spread with their own particularities to most of the Autonomous Communities, although with different degrees of generalization.

¹ ECEC (Early Childhood Education and Care)

METHODOLOGY

Objectives

In this work, we seek to analyze the possibilities that these 'programs for the incorporation of students' can offer in terms of equity, and as an example of a redistributive and equal opportunity policy.

Hypothesis

It is based on the hypothesis that these programs have great advantages, but that their optimization will ultimately depend on their institutional design.

Method

To this end, all existing programs to date have been analyzed, as well as those planned for the imminent future, which includes 11 of the 17 autonomous communities. Namely: Aragon, Cantabria

Canary Islands, Valencian Community, Community of Madrid, Castilla y León, Castilla-La Mancha, Foral Community of Navarra, Extremadura, Basque Country and Region of Murcia.

Starting from current regulations, the elements that these programs have in common are analyzed, as well as the main effects they have in the regions where they have been operating for the longest time. This work is completed with the bibliographic review and analysis of secondary documentation available in each region.

Analysis procedure

The analysis has been structured in the following dimensions. Firstly, the expansion process of the first cycle of Early Childhood Education is presented, paying special attention to territorial differences and social inequalities. The early schooling programs are presented below, pointing out their main characteristics. Finally, the opportunities and risks associated with the institutional design of these programs are analyzed.

The conclusions summarize the main ideas derived from this analysis and some elements for debate.

ANALYSIS

The expansion of the first cycle of Early Childhood Education

The evolution of schooling in the first cycle of Early Childhood Education has been exponential, going in recent decades from a net rate of 3.3% in 1991 to 41.8% in 2022. Analyzing the historical series, this progression has been constant, only attenuated during the pandemic due to fear of contagion and parents' loss of employment (Turienzo et al., 2022).

The expansion of the first cycle of Early Childhood Education has occurred across the board, although important territorial and social differences hide behind the schooling rates. Regarding territorial inequalities, in Table I, it can be seen how the net schooling rate presents a polarization with regions that exceed the national average by more than 10 points (Basque Country 54.4% and Madrid 51.7%) and others with 15 points below (Autonomous Cities, Principality of Asturias, Castilla y León, Region of Murcia and the Canary Islands). The former come to double the latter.

Table 1

Net school enrollment rates in the first cycle of Early Childhood Education

	1991-92	2001-02	2011-12	2021-22
Spain	3.3	10.6	30.7	41.8
Andalusia	0.7	1.3	33.7	50.8
Aragon	2.6	4.3	31.7	36.1
Asturias, Principality of	0.8	1.8	16.9	27.1
Balearic Islands	1.7	6.6	21.5	28.5
Canary Islands	1.0	1.1	7.1	25.1
Cantabria	0.5	3.4	24.0	33.2
Castile and León	1.6	8.2	16.9	24.1
Castilla la Mancha	1.0	1.9	33.9	34.6
Catalonia	9.9	26.9	36.4	39.6
Valencian Community	7.7	6.8	25.3	39.7
Extremadura	0.7	1.3	3.3	34.8
Galicia	2.8	12.9	22.8	50.5
Madrid, Community of	2.6	16.3	43.3	51.7

	1991-92	2001-02	2011-12	2021-22
Murcia, Region of	1.4	8.6	15.6	21.7
Navarra, Foral Community of (2)	0.0	13.2	10.5	31.7
Basque Country	2.1	23.1	51.9	54.4
Rioja, La	1.5	2.5	15.7	50.6
Ceuta	0.9	3.4	3.8	21.5
Melilla	0.1	8.5	17.8	31.1

Fountain: Own elaboration based on MEFP data (2023).

These divergences respond both to the different public policies carried out and to the productive structure, demographic characteristics, and historical trajectories of each region. Likewise, the institutional design more focused on prioritizing a model focused on conciliation or equity could contribute to facilitating or hindering access to this stage (León et al., 2022). Some factors such as low financing, the absence of a coherent financing model and the fragmentation of powers between different administrations have contributed to these differences. However, it should be noted that in the last two decades disparities in access have been mitigated to a certain extent in a process of regional convergence (Mancebón and Villar, 2020).

Secondly, there are gaps in access, since the schooling rate varies significantly depending on the socioeconomic and cultural level of the families (Navarro-Varas and León, 2023; Requena and Salazar, 2022). This bias in favor of the middle classes is not exclusive to Spain, but affects most countries (European Commission, 2019) because educational systems have been designed as a conciliation tool (Palomera, 2022). This approach tends to prioritize the family situation of the parents, overrepresenting families with double incomes or breadwinners and penalizing unemployment situations (Navarro-Varas, 2022). This regressive nature of investment has been widely known and documented as part of the Mateo effect (González-Motos and Saurí, 2023). Access depends largely on the socioeconomic status of families, regardless of whether social class is defined by educational or economic factors, with the greatest differences appearing between low positions and the rest (Requena and Salazar, 2022). According to the analysis of Flisi and Blasko (2019) based on the European Union survey of income and living conditions EU-SILC (*Statistics on Income and Living Conditions*), significant differences appear depending on the level of income (24.2% T1; 39.1% T2; 50.9% T3)², mother's

² 24% of families located in the first income tertile use Early Childhood Education services, compared to 39.1% in the second tertile and 50.9% in the third tertile.

education (46% with higher education compared to 32% in otherwise), risk of poverty (24.9% at risk compared to 43.7% without risk) and risk of social exclusion (25.5% at risk compared to 44% without risk).

These differences are due to a wide range of factors related to both supply (affordability, accessibility, availability, etc.) and demand (care needs, alternative systems, parenting models, etc.). However, there are three that are decisive: 1) the lack of public places, 2) the admission systems, and 3) the cost of the service. On the supply side, especially in some territories, it does not cover demand, leaving broad social layers without a school position. Given the fact that there are not places for all students, it is essential to resort to admission systems. Although notable progress has been made both in the creation of public places and in the adoption of an equity approach, admission scales continue to prioritize employment status (León et al. 2022). The lack of public provision and financing has generated a strong presence of the private sector where a large part of the resources is provided by families. The cost of the service that families must assume, higher than in later stages, means that many do not use these services or do so to a lesser extent than desired (Velaz-Medrano et al., 2020). The differences in access between the most advantaged and least advantaged households gradually reduced before 2011. Starting this year, the differences between groups widen again and in 2016 access rates are recorded that are even more unequal than in 2008 (Bonal, 2020).

At this point it is worth remembering that the benefits of participation in early childhood care and education programs have been shown to be especially beneficial for those students from more disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds (Heckman, 2006; van Huizen and Plantenga, 2018) since it allows them to participate in richness of the pedagogical and social context that preschool represents, mitigating social inequalities and childhood educational poverty (European Commission, 2019; MEFP, 2022). In this way, the paradox arises that the students who can benefit the most from this policy are precisely those who have the most difficulty accessing and are most at risk of not doing so under optimal conditions that make it possible to compensate for the initial disadvantages (Ferrer, 2020).

Early schooling programs for 2–3-year-old students in CEIPs: characteristics

In terms of educational policy, the first cycle of Early Childhood Education is presented as the most diverse in terms of provision models. Furthermore, the fact that the offer is fragmented into administrations of different levels (autonomous and local) and ownership adds extra complexity that materializes in diverse realities. One of the solutions that have been articulated are early schooling programs for 2–3-year-old students in the CEIP or CEIPSO.

These emerged in 2003 in Cantabria, where they are fully established and were soon adopted by the Basque Country and the Foral Community of Navarra (on a voluntary basis and at the initiative of the centers themselves). For its part, the Valencian Community implemented the program experimentally in 2015 with the particularity of extending it free of charge to municipal schools and offering aid to private centers. In 2016, the first 2-3 classrooms were created in Aragón and later in Extremadura, which in 2022 also incorporated the second course of the first cycle of Early Childhood Education (1-2 years). Following these initiatives, early incorporation programs have been extended, especially in 2022, whose progress has been favored by the arrival of European *Next Generation funds*. For its part, Castilla y León developed a proposal for 2-3 years of schooling in schools, the particularity of which is to extend free education to public and private public and private nursery schools and public schools. In a similar sense, the Region of Murcia has incorporated part of the 2–3-year-old students into both public and subsidized CEIPs. In the case of the Community of Madrid, the entire first cycle of Early Childhood Education has been added to the CEIPs. For its part, Canarias designed an experimental program that, in addition to groups of 2-3 years, included mixed classrooms of 1-2 and 2-3. In the case of Castilla-La Mancha, this program has been developed to guarantee schooling in areas suffering from depopulation.

At this point it is worth pointing out some similarities of these programs in which their virtues also lie.

- Ownership: in most cases, the program is only developed in public centers, which represents a considerable expansion of the available offer and a commitment to a solid public system. The exceptions would come from Castilla y León, the Basque Country and the Region of Murcia.
- Free: except in the case of the Basque Country, where only part of it is financed, in all cases socio-educational assistance is free so families should only assume the same costs and fees as in other stages for complementary services.
- Collaboration between administrations: these programs usually involve collaboration between local administrations, responsible for the maintenance and adaptation of the centers, and the regional administration.
- Co-teaching: the programs are committed to co-teaching, either through a teacher and a senior technician (Cantabria, Comunitat Valenciana, Aragón) or two senior technicians in Early Childhood Education (Extremadura) or even three specialists (Canary Islands).
- Ratios and group size: analyzing current legislation, classroom size varies between 18 and 20 students per group. However, the inclusion of more than one professional means a reduction in the ratios in practical terms.

However, the possibilities of these programs do not reside in their nature *per se*, but are conditioned by their specificities and implementation processes. Therefore, it is necessary to point out (Table II) also some of its differential characteristics.

Table 2

Differences in the organization of early incorporation programs

Autonomous community	Age	Ownership	Start year
Aragon	23	Public	2016
Cantabria	1-2 and 2-3	Public	2003
Canary Islands	Mixed 1-2/2-3. Classroom 2-3	Public	2022
Valencian Community	23	Publish (and help private)	2015
Madrid's community	the whole cycle	Public	2022
Castile and León	2-3 (1-2 in 2024)	Public and private (subsidized)	2022
Castilla la Mancha	2/3 years	Public	2022
Foral Community of Navarra	2-3 years	Public, concerted and private	2006
Extremadura	1-2 and 2-3	Public	2018
Basque Country	the whole cycle	Public and concerted	2005
Murcia Region	23	Public and concerted	2023

Source. self-made.

Along with the differences in institutional design, it should be noted that the scope is very unequal. In certain regions its impact has been residual, as is the case of the Foral Community of Navarra, while in others such as the Basque Country or Cantabria it has contributed to shaping the organization and distribution of students.

Opportunities and risks associated with the institutional design of these programs

The characteristics described make these programs an opportunity, not without risks, to advance the provision of educational opportunities for all. Table III shows both the opportunities and risks of these early entry programs.

The advantages in terms of educational equity, quality and inclusion are related to free education, to the universal nature, to the articulation under one administration, to the simplification and homogenization of admission processes,

to the optimization of investments, to the improvement of the conditions of the teaching staff, with co-teaching and reduction of ratios as an improvement in quality and progress in the integration of both cycles.

Table 3
Opportunities and risks of early entry programs

Opportunities	Risks
Consolidation of the public system	Loss of private provision and school segregation
Free	Regressive inversion if not universal
Universal character	Lack of targeted compensatory policies
Investment optimization	Understaffing
Increase in quality	Inadequacy of spaces
Integration with later stages	
— Greater educational recognition	
— Improve transition processes	Organizational rigidity
— Personal incorporation into training plans	Loss of self-identity
— Inspection service optimization	
— Improve working conditions	
Administrative harmonization and governance	Inattention to schooling 0-2

Source. self-made.

Each of these opportunities is analyzed below, in contrast to their risks.

Consolidation of the public system

The fragmentation of public provision, together with the historical underfunding in childhood policies, has led to the expansion of the first cycle of early childhood education having constantly occurred with insufficient provision, especially in certain cities and communities (Bonal, 2020). Despite the progress that has been achieved in recent decades, a system with a strong presence of the private sector still prevails, which together with lax regulation has generated a great divergence in the offer both in terms of access and quality of service. educational service (León et al. 2022). The benefits of Early Childhood Education are greater when it comes to quality interventions and public provision, compared to private or mixed services (van Huizen and Plantenga, 2018). Overall, in Spain private centers have lower quality, derived from the priority given to healthcare aspects over educational ones (Río et al., 2022). Likewise, they sometimes operate in a kind of legal limbo due to

the different types of activity permits (Save The Children, 2019; Martínez- Virto et al., 2022).

On the other hand, the fact that the public offer is frequently fragmented in different administrations (Velaz-Medrano et al. 2020) contributes to an unequal offer, not only between different autonomous communities but even in the same territory. Therefore, this measure, which frequently stems from greater collaboration between administrations and commitment on the part of educational administrations, can lead to the consolidation of a robust public Early Childhood Education system. However, the benefits of this policy do not prevent certain externalities from existing. One of them is the closure of private schools, and therefore the reduction of supply in the short term. In this sense, some communities such as Castilla y León, the Basque Country or the Region of Murcia are choosing to finance private (or subsidized) centers, guaranteeing free tuition. On the other hand, in those regions where it is decided to establish subsidies or aid for private centers, a double risk is generated. Firstly, an increase in segregation can occur through partial concerts that act as a socioeconomic filter and condition subsequent itineraries (Save The Children, 2019). Furthermore, there is a risk, when establishing agreements with private entities, that nursery schools become managed by investment funds with the consequent risk of commercialization. On the other hand, subsidizing private centers under a free competition regime can generate dysfunctions in educational planning, with there being simultaneously oversupply and overdemand in the same territory, with proximity acting as an access barrier (Save The Children, 2021; Río et al., 2022). From the perspective of promoting access of certain social groups to Early Childhood Education, subsidizing private centers to reduce the cost borne by families has shown limited effectiveness, which is why it is considered more pertinent to increase places in public Early Childhood Schools. (Bonal, 2020; Sola-Espinosa et al., 2023).

Free

The literature identifies the availability of places and the price that families must assume as the main barrier to schooling (Sola-Espinosa et al., 2023; Río et al, 2022; Castellanos-Serrano and Perondi, 2022; González-Motos and Saurí , 2023). According to the *Living Conditions Survey* (2016), 52.4% of families that do not use educational or formal care services do so for economic reasons (Velaz-Medrano et al. 2020). For this reason, most of the autonomous communities have developed strategies aimed at reducing the price that families have to assume. These policies have varied depending on the model, often opting for: general reduction in public rates and prices, agreements and subsidies with private centers, bonuses for certain groups, tax relief and social pricing systems. Likewise, different autonomous

communities have opted for total or partial free of charge. Early schooling programs would eliminate this barrier and facilitate access to disadvantaged families who are left out of redistributive actions (Save The Children , 2021). On the other hand, it would allow the incorporation of broad social layers that have part-time jobs, the informal economy or receive low remuneration, who currently must make a cost-benefit balance (Río et al. 2022). However, advancing free of charge without having incorporated social groups that are currently underrepresented, such as students at risk of social exclusion, can increase the regressive nature of this investment (Navarro-Varas, 2022) and reduce its effectiveness in the fight against the intergenerational transmission of poverty (Requena and Salazar, 2022). For this reason, in a scenario of public undersupply, a social pricing system is considered more appropriate than general reductions (Palomera, 2022). Bonus systems have improved access to certain social groups, although their effects have been diverse (León et al., 2016; Martínez- Virto et al., 2022; González-Motos and Saurí , 2023) because sometimes They have not been able to meet the needs of families that are in a situation of constant precariousness (Rio-Ruiz et al., 2022) or they have been poorly financed, which has not allowed them to display their full effectiveness (Bonal and Scandurra , 2019). .

To guarantee access, free educational services must be accompanied by a place guarantee (European Commission, 2019) in such a way that there is no gap between demand and supply (Ferrer, 2020).

Universal character

Given the social differences that exist in access to the first cycle of Early Childhood Education, and that the benefits of this policy are greater in the most disadvantaged groups, the need to take measures to move towards the universalization of these teachings seems clear. Compared to other proposals, universalizing teaching makes it possible to eliminate not only barriers related to affordability and availability but also barriers derived from lack of information or administrative procedures. However, different works have already calculated that greater investment is not only viable in budgetary terms, but that the returns would exceed the investment made in most of the scenarios analyzed (Castellanos-Serrano and Perondi, 2022). Universalizing the last year of the first cycle through the creation of free places in Early Childhood and Primary Schools can constitute the first step in the universalization of Early Childhood Education (Mancebón and Villar, 2020). Currently, there is an important difference between Cantabria and the Basque Country and the rest of the cases analyzed due to the consolidation of the early schooling program in the first case and the long tradition of schooling in Early Childhood Education in the second. In the case of Cantabria, the net schooling rate at 2 years is 79.1% (2021-

2022) while the Basque Country has a rate of 91.3% at 2 years, which brings it closer to the universalization (MEFP, 2023). The risk at this point comes from a traditional dilemma in public policies that is decided between opting for universal or targeted actions. In the case at hand, expanding supply without mechanisms that allow compensating and favoring access to traditionally underrepresented groups, can entail limitations in its redistributive capacity (Navarro-Varas and León, 2023) and in universalization itself due to self-exclusion processes. The accumulated evidence indicates that it is necessary to establish a *progressively universalist approach* that combines the provision of educational services for all, with targeted programs that improve access for the most vulnerable groups (European Commission, 2020).

Optimization of investment derived from population loss

Considering birth rates, the demographic winter is already a reality that will be transferred to the educational system in the coming years and whose effects are already being felt in the initial stages. According to Eurostat estimates, in the coming years Spain would lose more than 800,000 students (National Foresight and Strategy Office of the Government of Spain, 2021). In addition to the demographic challenge that will affect the entire population, rural depopulation will especially affect certain territories. The combination of both phenomena will produce the closure of classrooms and centers. This situation offers the possibility of increasing educational quality without the need to increase the budget. The incorporation of 2–3-year-old students will avoid the loss of school population while serving an older age range and contributing to mitigating depopulation. On the other hand, it is evident that from the point of view of expense and efficiency it is more profitable to enable a classroom in an already created center than to build a school from scratch. This is the case of Castilla-La Mancha, which has authorized the creation of 60 classrooms (about 1,200 places) in areas suffering from extreme depopulation. For its part, the Valencian Community has taken advantage of the arrival of *Next Generation* European funds to adapt and enable classrooms at CEIP, instead of creating new facilities, reinforcing this transformation process.

Increase in educational quality

The benefits derived from early schooling are not automatic, but rather these must be comprehensive quality interventions (Heckman, 2017). The programs for the early incorporation of students into the CEIP clearly support co-teaching as a tool to improve educational quality. This idea has been materialized through different profiles and options such as two Higher Early Childhood Education

Technicians per classroom (Extremadura, Region of Murcia), one Higher Early Childhood Education Technician and one Teacher (Aragón, Comunitat Valenciana, Cantabria) or even three profiles in the same classroom (Canary Islands). This formula has a clear impact on the students, but also on the teachers, since it influences the teaching induction processes, the complementarity and division of work, feedback and professional learning in practice (Fernández- Enguita, 2020). Regarding students, it is necessary to highlight that the quality of early childhood education programs is linked, more than in other stages, to the numerical relationship between students and teachers (MEFP, 2022). In these programs, a maximum classroom size of 18-20 students per classroom is established, but since they are attended by 2 professionals, the ratio is close to the recommendations of the European Early Childhood Education Network for this age (8 students per teacher), assuming a great reduction compared to the other proposals for schooling at 2 years. The great challenge at this point comes from the adaptation and adaptation of the facilities to the specific needs of 2–3-year-old students. These requirements are even greater in the case of communities that incorporate the entire stage (0-3) given the specificities of children under 1 year of age. Structural elements constitute a basic pillar of educational quality, but the absence of common regulation regarding minimum requirements has generated gaps in quality (Bonal and Scandurra, 2019).

Integration with later stages

Currently there is a clear fracture between the first and second cycle of Early Childhood Education. These differences affect staff, facilities, provision of places, authority on which they depend, governance, schooling rates, curriculum, cost, resources, etc. which lead to both stages being difficult to compare (León et al. 2022). De facto, it is common for there to be differentiated standards for the first and second cycles (Velaz-Medrano et al., 2020). This reality does not only affect Spain, but is common in most OECD countries regarding schooling before and after age 3 (MEFP, 2022). However, participation rates in these programs are higher when the offer is part of the educational system and is free (Castellano-Serrano and Perondi, 2022). Early schooling programs, through the integration of personnel into educational structures, can contribute to the improvement of employment conditions, currently very unequal between centers, networks and institutions (Martínez- Virto et al., 2022). Likewise, different services could be optimized through effective extension to 2–3-year-old students, such as educational inclusion services, teacher training plans or the educational inspection itself, which currently has limited work at this stage. especially in certain communities where centers with different administrative regimes coexist. The risk at this point would come from a

rigid school organization or schedules that do not adapt to the needs of families (González-Motos and Saurí, 2023). In this sense, atypical schedules and lack of job stability (Palomera, 2022) could influence the decision not to attend school even if there are places available.

In another order, the integration of the last year of the first cycle of Early Childhood Education in the CEIPs would facilitate the transition processes between this stage and the subsequent ones. Furthermore, it would contribute to improving the social perception and valuation of this stage as educational, attenuating one of the access barriers related to family expectations and values associated with upbringing (Save The Children, 2019). At this point, there is a risk of forgetting the very nature of Early Childhood Education, considering this stage as preparatory and preparatory for subsequent ones.

Administrative harmonization and governance

The first cycle of Early Childhood Education is the educational stage with a greater weight of the private sector, with a public offer that does not cover all demand and where the management and governance models are more diverse. In this sense, the ownership falls on different administrations (municipalities, consortia, education departments, councils, non-educational administrations...) and the private sector that has different incentives. This diversity of actors translates into the existence of a fragmented offer and different policies in the same territory. In practical terms, they involve different offers, procedures, admission periods, fees and criteria, which means that many families encounter an administrative barrier since these procedures presuppose certain skills and living conditions that not all families have (Sola- Espinosa et al., 2023). For this reason, in the recommendations for Early Childhood Education (European Commission, 2019) emphasized the need to have a *coherent government under a single authority*. This issue does not refer so much to the fact that the powers fall to an exclusive administration, but rather that all centers have standards related to evaluation, quality, accessibility, affordability, curriculum or similar facilities. In the case of Spain, the dispersion of policies can compromise the effectiveness of investment. However, among early schooling programs it is common to either opt for collaboration between administrations (Cantabria) or assume a common framework for administrations (Comunicat Valenciana). Harmonization would reduce the complexity of the procedures that schooling processes sometimes entail and that especially affect families with multiple situations of vulnerability (Save The Children, 2019).

At this point, one of the fundamental elements that can contribute to the generation of a solid system is the increase and commitment of financing by the educational administrations of the autonomous communities. This process would

entail a solid policy that would correct the historically scarce financing of this stage and establish long-term dynamics far from cyclical fluctuations, as was seen with the 2008 crisis (Bonal, 2020). The underfinancing of Early Childhood Education has been associated with the limitation of teacher training, the devaluation of facilities and the prioritization of minimum compliance with healthcare aspects rather than the development of the educational project (Río et al., 2022). One of the risks entailed by a policy focused on 2-3 years is the lack of attention, in terms of public policies and social perception, of the preceding years, which would generate a gap between the end of the childcare permits and the schooling.

3. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The personal and social benefits associated with participation in early childhood education and care programs, together with the fact that there is unequal access between groups, has led to this being a priority for most European countries, and one of the objectives of the 2030 agenda. Therefore, most educational systems are implementing measures to increase child schooling rates. In this process, universal policies are combined with other targeted ones. In this context, the early schooling programs for students in the first cycle of Early Childhood Education (especially 2-3 years old) in Early Childhood and Primary Education Schools implemented in different Spanish regions are framed.

According to the review carried out, it can be stated that these programs contain important possibilities associated with increasing the offer and consolidating the public system through a free and universal service. Including students from the previous cycle in schools makes it possible to optimize educational investment, especially in a context of demographic decline, while achieving greater integration with subsequent stages, improving the transition between them. Such integration would facilitate administrative harmonization, better governance and greater recognition of professionals. Because of the greater and better investment, there has been an increase in educational quality derived from the commitment to co-teaching and the reduction of the teacher-student ratio.

On the other hand, although these types of programs can improve the Early Childhood Education stage, there are also risks that must be assessed. Firstly, the increased schooling of 2–3-year-old students in education can generate gaps with the preceding years, as well as overlooking the necessary advances in parental permits and licenses. In the process of incorporating students from the first cycle of Early Childhood Education in schools, it is necessary to pay special attention to the adaptation of spaces and educational processes considering the nature of this stage, among others, guaranteeing a certain flexibility to meet family needs. Progress in access to education must go hand in hand with improvements in quality, especially

through attention to the specific care and education needs of students. Finally, it should be noted that the specific characteristics of some programs entail certain risks such as the incorporation of private centers, which could ultimately generate dependence on them and loss of strategic capacity to design an Early Childhood Education network. Something similar happens with the lack of piloting in some Autonomous Communities.

It can be stated that early schooling programs, and especially some of their characteristics, although not perfect, can contribute to the generation of universal, inclusive and quality Early Childhood Education, which in the end will be one of the keys. to guarantee a more equitable, fair and effective educational system.

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