Fondazione Agnelli
ZERO SEI

ECEC in **Spain**: so close to, so far away from, the Nordic model

David Palomera - Southern Denmark University
Llorenç Soler-Buades - European University Institute

This paper is part of the Fondazione Agnelli Zero Sei series on early childhood education services

WP72

Fondazione Agnelli
fondazioneagnelli.it

Abstract

This paper examines Spain's rapid expansion of early childhood education and care (ECEC) within a highly decentralised system and asks whether reforms have delivered provision that is universal, affordable, and high quality—particularly for ages 0–2—and with what distributive consequences. Drawing on national and regional data, including paired case studies of Catalonia and the Community of Madrid, we trace how access rules, fees, staffing standards, and financing responsibilities have evolved since the mid-2000s. Enrolment for ages 0–2 has risen, household payments have fallen through fee waivers and subsidies, and expansion has been rapid across regions, producing convergence. Yet unmet demand remains acute in both very small and very large municipalities; access inequalities persist by socioeconomic status (Matthew effects); and selective universalism that prioritises employed mothers often dilutes equal-opportunity goals and a children rights-based approach. Quality pressures endure: staff–child ratios remain relatively high, real wages have stagnated or declined since austerity, evaluation of outcomes is limited, and oversight of private centres—despite substantial public support—lags behind that of public provision. Finally, volatile multilevel financing, including episodic central transfers and time-limited EU funds that seldom cover operating costs, constrains sustainable expansion. We conclude that universalisation without stable finance, targeted affordability, and enforceable quality standards risks widening rather than narrowing territorial and social inequalities, a salient risk in Spain's context of high child poverty and unmet care needs.

Acknowledgements

We thank Francesca Bastagli and Emanuele Pavolini for leading the project's conceptualisation and for their insight and careful review at multiple stages. We also thank all project participants for their valuable contributions. David Palomera gratefully acknowledges the insights gained through his participation in the ECEWEL Project, led by Margarita León. This research was made possible by the financial and organisational support of Fondazione Agnelli. All errors are our own.

About the authors

David Palomera is MSCA Postdoctoral Fellow at the Department of Political Science and Public Administration, University of Southern Denmark.

Llorenç Soler-Buades is Max Weber Postdoctoral Fellow at the Department of Political and Social Sciences, European University Institute.

Corresponding author: David Palomera email: dpa@sam.sdu.dk

About the paper

This paper was completed as part of Fondazione Agnelli's work programme on early childhood education services. It is published in the Fondazione Agnelli *Zero-Sei* working paper series, edited by Francesca Bastagli.

Index

1. Introduction

Compared to many other European countries, Spain is a latecomer in the provision of early childhood education and care (ECEC) services. Like most other Continental and Southern European countries, the mid-1980s were characterised by low coverage both in services for children below 3 years (close to 0%) and in pre-school (38%) (Philipps and Moss, 1989). At the same time, Spain has a remarkable record since then of improving its ECEC system. By the mid-2020s it had achieved a coverage rate of close to 50% in services for children between 0 and 2 years. The increase in enrolment rates over the last decades is particularly striking when one considers 2-year-olds (from 0% to 70% between 1991 and 2023). The 3–5 stage became practically universal by the beginning of the 21st century, rising from 45% in 1991 to 95% in 2004. After successfully universalising the 3–5 stage, Spanish administrations have been promoting extended coverage of the 0–2 stage.

Spain's rapid ECEC expansion has taken place alongside the feminisation of the labour force, requiring administrations to support women in their caring roles. However, women's entry into the labour market has been concentrated in feminised service sectors, often in private services such as retail, hospitality, and caregiving, which typically offer precarious working conditions, including lower wages, temporary contracts, and limited career advancement (Milán-Vázquez, 2015; INE, 2024). Women have also accessed better paid, feminised public sectors like healthcare and education, but have still suffered from the general precarisation of Spanish labour markets, as well as persistent glass ceilings and overqualification (Torns and Cáceres, 2012). At the same time, child poverty rates in Spain have remained high, rising after the Covid-19 period to 29% in 2023 (UNICEF, 2023). These factors have increased pressure on administrations to provide not only good quality but also affordable ECEC services.

Nevertheless, Spain still faces high levels of unmet demand and persistent inequalities in access to ECEC based on socioeconomic background. This poses a crucial challenge in a multi-level, decentralised welfare state, where regions and municipalities finance and manage ECEC centres and where redistribution is needed to address unequal fiscal capacities. After a decade of declining numbers of 0–2-year-olds since the 2010s, which had eased demand pressures, this population is expected to stabilise and grow again from 2025, particularly due to immigration, with many immigrant families entering the workforce under precarious conditions. In this light, ensuring broader accessibility and, in particular, affordability is increasingly critical, given that child poverty rates among migrant populations can reach as high as 60% in regions such as Catalonia (Navarro-Varas & Porcel, 2024).

Against this backdrop, this paper reviews and critically discusses the policy design and implementation of ECEC, taking Spain's multi-level governance system into account. It assesses how ECEC expansion has been distributed across the territory, as well as recent changes in access and cost policies introduced to tackle barriers linked to socioeconomic inequalities. It also evaluates the system in terms of service quality, including professionalisation, staff ratios, and working conditions. Although precise data remain limited, addressing this blind-spot is urgent, since the success of ECEC as an equalising institution for children's outcomes depends directly on quality. The paper further investigates changes in financing responsibilities in a policy field marked by unstable compromises and austerity.

Finally, it considers the role of private centres in ECEC provision, comparing their situation with that of public centres and analysing the extent of public support they receive.

As mentioned, our review considers three government levels: the central government; the autonomous communities (ACs), initially considering all regions but narrowing to selected cases when data collection is more time-intensive, with particular attention to the Community of Madrid and Catalonia; and the municipal level, selecting Madrid and Barcelona as case studies. The choice of Madrid and Barcelona is based, firstly, on their population size, as they are the largest cities in Spain, with populations of 3.3 and 1.6 million, respectively, in 2021. The regions of Madrid and Catalonia are also among the most populous, after Andalusia, with 6.9 and 7.9 million residents, respectively. Secondly, this selection allows for an analytical comparison of two cities and regions with distinct political traditions: Madrid has predominantly had conservative governments over the past two decades; Catalonia has alternated between conservative and social-democratic governments; and Barcelona has mostly been governed by social-democratic and left-wing coalitions during the ECEC expansion period.

In the following section we introduce the main ECEC system's characteristics and its recent changes, including its governance, regulatory, and financing framework. It also explains other relevant family policies that influence the demand for ECEC. Section three makes a brief review of relevant demographic and labour market factors that are also important to understand ECEC demand and its characteristics. Sections four to six makes an intensive review of the Spanish ECEC design and its most recent changes by distinguishing between coverage and access inequalities, service quality and the cost and financing of services. The final section summarises the results and provides the conclusions.

2. Overview of the Spanish ECEC system: increased public support in a fragmented multi-level system

The increasing attention paid to ECEC services in Spain is reflected in the successive regulatory frameworks that have, since the 1990s, supported the expansion of early childhood education coverage and its public provision (León et al., 2022). The 1990 law regulating educational levels described ECEC primarily in terms of social protection and care, without acknowledging its educational role (León et al., 2022). In 2002, under the right-wing government of the Popular Party (PP), ECEC's educational role was formally recognised (LOCE 10/2002). This legislation also designated the 3–5 year stage as a universally guaranteed and free service, although not mandatory, for the entire population (León et al., 2022). Before this law, the Autonomous Communities (ACs) had already begun integrating this stage into the more formalised and compulsory schooling system, which starts at age 6. Consequently, the ECEC services for the 3–5 year stage are predominantly covered through formal, publicly provided ECEC, and mainly financed and regulated by ACs. However, private schooling is also significant in Spain, with roughly a third of all children in full schooling years enrolled in private or subsidised private centres.

As for the 0–2 stage, it remains less developed compared to other educational stages, but has gained increased recognition as an educational service. The 2002 law still classified the 0–2 stage primarily as a nursery service but in 2006, under the Socialist Party's (PSOE) social-democratic government, the 0–2 stage was first integrated into the early education system, and its educational value explicitly acknowledged. This recognition was omitted in the 2013 legislation under the Popular Party (PP) but was reinstated in 2020 (LOMLOE 3/2020), under the left-wing coalition government of the PSOE and Unidas Podemos (UP). However, this legislation and subsequent ones have neither guaranteed nor made ECEC free across the whole territory. The 2020 law also emphasised the need to establish access criteria to prioritise children at risk of poverty and social exclusion in the 0–2 stage. Its general principles reaffirmed a commitment to compensating for the effects of cultural, social, and economic inequalities on children's learning and development, highlighting the early detection of and support for specific educational needs. As we will see later, the changes in the regulatory framework since the 1990s have been successful in expanding the public provision of ECEC, but, at the same time, this expansion has not been matched by a corresponding increase in ECEC funding, which has remained stagnant at approximately 0.5% of GDP (Ibáñez, 2021).

Table 1. Changes over time of the role of ECEC in Spanish education system legislation

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

Source: León et al. (2022)

Compared to the 3–5 stage, which has been consistently expanded through the existing educational system, the expansion of the 0–2 stage has been uneven and highly fragmented at various levels. This fragmentation is partly due to a succession of education laws and their interpretation, along with lenient regulations and mixed public–private management models. The distribution of governance and financing responsibilities between the central government, regional, and municipal levels help explain this fragmentation (Palomera et al., 2024). In Spain, the central government establishes general regulations for the management of ECEC services and has conducted discretionary financing programmes to expand public centres – mainly in 2009 through the *Educo* program and in 2021 through the Next Generation Funds - or support households for ECEC financing costs.

But the responsibility for funding, service provision, and the regulation of both private and public ECEC institutions lies with the ACs. However, it is important to note that regions do not directly collect all taxes. The central government collects part of the tax base and redistributes it to regions according to criteria such as regional income levels, population, and geographical dispersion. Combining their own revenues with these transfers, regions allocate funds to ECEC through their education departments. While the 3–5 stage is integrated into public schools managed by regional education departments, the management of the 0–2 stage is often delegated to municipalities, which establish and run services with regional financial support,

often via programme contracts. According to Ministry of Education statistics, in 2020, 75% of centres providing 0–2 education in Spain were owned by local authorities (Government of Spain, 2021).

This multi-level governance system has resulted in significant variability in the availability and quality of ECEC 0-2 services across different ACs. Analysing the ECEC administrative structure, in terms of costs and access, requires an integrated approach that considers national, regional, and municipal levels. Given the high level of decentralisation of the 0–2 stage and the importance of municipal politics in expanding this stage, such as the construction of new centres and access and cost policies, one could even speak of 8,131 local welfare systems—as many as the municipalities in Spain. Given this complexity, and due to the lack of systematic and comprehensive data on ECEC policies at both regional and municipal levels, in addition to national trends, this paper reviews the experience of specific regional and municipal cases on specific issues.

The public ECEC provision strategy at the 0–2 stage is mainly run through formal and licensed public and private centres, the main focus of this paper. However, it should be noted that alternative provisioning systems are also of relevance for families, including day mothers (*Madres de día*) services, which remain mostly private and unregulated. Additionally, compared to other schooling stages, the presence of private providers is significant in the 0–2 stage. In 2023, 47% of enrolled 0-2 years old attended a private centre (there's great variation across AC, as shown in Table A3). Therefore, while the study focuses primarily on public regulation and provision of ECEC, it also considers the presence and organisation of private centres—especially when discussing quality aspects.

In terms of fiscal policies, both central and regional governments offer tax credits for working mothers. The central government provides a tax credit of up to 1,000 euros for working mothers to cover ECEC expenditures in formal ECEC centres, including schooling and related costs such as school meals. This amount is in addition to the existing tax credit of 1,200 euros for working mothers for each child under three years old in their care. There is no maximum taxable income limit to qualify for either tax credit. Additionally, numerous ACs offer currently their own tax credits for ECEC costs, separate from potential tax credits for newborns or children under three years old in care. The Table A1 and Image A1 in Appendix summarise these tax credits, excluding those for homecare costs[1]. In addition to specific tax credits for ECEC costs, households are also eligible for financial aid for having children, particularly low-income mothers. At the national level, the Minimum Vital Income, a minimum income scheme, includes a supplement for having children[2]. Regions may also have their own minimum income schemes and other forms of aid for households with children, particularly for newborns.

[1] In 2023, twelve out of seventeen ACs provided tax credits for ECEC. On average, ACs offered a tax deduction of up to 27% of ECEC costs, with a maximum of 560 euros per year and child (based on ACs providing tax credits). Eligibility for the deduction generally required an annual income of up to 27,815 euros. The average taxable income for individuals in 2022 was 22,563 euros, meaning that, on average, ACs provided tax credits to individuals with incomes up to 20% above the region's median income level.

[2] The amount for each child under 3 years old in 2024 was 115 euros per month. This financial support is available to households with incomes up to three times the threshold required for the minimum income scheme. For instance, if a household with two adults and two children needs to have less than 1,149 euros per month to qualify for the minimum income aid, they can earn up to 3,444 euros per month to be eligible solely for the child support supplement.

Besides the expansion of ECEC, another family policy that has significantly developed during the same decade in Spain is parental leave. While maternity leave has remained unchanged at sixteen weeks since 1989, paternity leave has increased from four days prior to 2007 to an equalisation of sixteen weeks in 2021 (Alvariño 2025; Gorjón and Lizarraga, 2024). The first six weeks after childbirth are mandatory for both men and women. The remaining ten weeks for each parent can be taken alternately in minimum periods of one week. Both maternity and paternity leave are funded at 100% of the current wage by the Social Security system. Despite these advancements, a significant gap remains between well-paid care leave and guaranteed ECEC. The lack of guaranteed childcare creates a gap of more than two years. In contrast, other European countries do not face such a gap. Countries like Denmark, Finland, Germany, and Sweden offer longer paid leaves, earlier guaranteed access to ECEC, or both (European Commission / EACEA / Eurydice, 2023). Since 2023, families have also been able to opt for leave permissions of up to eight weeks to care for children under eight years old. This leave is unpaid, but the EU directive (EU 2019/1158) regulating these permits requires member states to provide remuneration. The European Commission opened a file against the Spanish government in September 2024 for non-compliance.

3. Social pressures to expand affordable ECEC

Before analysing the evolution of ECEC and its main policy dilemmas and options, we provide an overview of the present and future demand pressures on the system by examining demographic and labour market trends, including the socioeconomic characteristics of rapid labour feminisation in Spain. Changes in the number of very young children are only one aspect of the potential demand pressures on ECEC. To estimate the demand for ECEC, we must also consider household care arrangements and parental preferences, particularly those of mothers. With the rapid expansion of ECEC coverage in recent decades, Spain has undergone significant social changes in gender roles, work, and care. The country has traditionally been considered part of a Southern European welfare regime, where care provision has largely been the responsibility of families, with minimal support through transfers, services, or recognition (Anttonen and Sipilä, 1996). However, the social structures underpinning this model have faced significant changes and pressures.

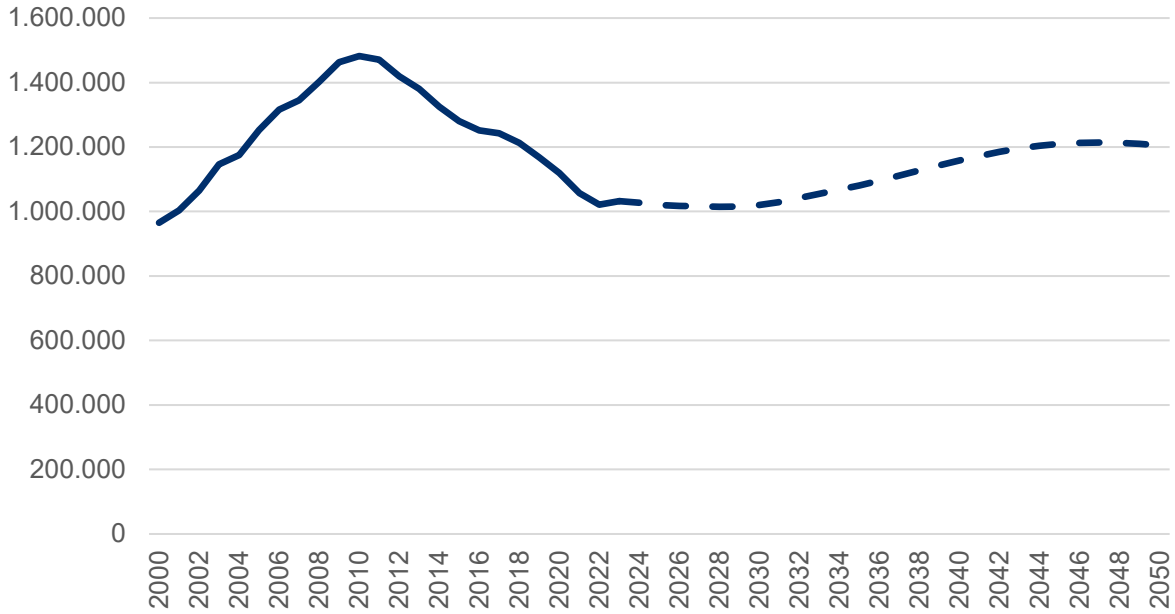
In terms of demography, the population of children aged 0–2 increased from around one million to one and a half million between 2000 and 2011, then declined to reach one million again in 2022 (see Graph 1). Looking forward, the National Institute of Statistics of Spain (INE) projects a slight increase in the fertility rate, from 1.2 children per woman in 2022 to 1.3 children in 2045. This rate is expected to stabilise at this level until at least 2070 (INE, 2022). Alternative projections differ, with some estimating a stronger, linear increase from 2040, reaching approximately 1.5 children per woman by 2070 (Airef, 2023). Airef (2023) projects that the population of children aged 0–2 will remain stable in the coming years, before beginning a slight increase from 2030, reaching an estimated 1.2 million by 2050.

A key factor contributing to the rise in fertility rates is the growing number of foreign citizens in the country, whose fertility rates exceed those of nationals (Airef, 2023). In 2023, the estimated fertility rate was 1.2 children per mother for nationals and 1.5 for foreign-born women. However, this gap is expected to narrow as foreign-born mothers adjust to local norms and have fewer children (Airef, 2023). The increase in children from foreign-born households is particularly significant for ECEC policies. Foreign-born mothers often face greater vulnerability, lower incomes, and atypical working contracts, making them more susceptible to the lack of affordable and adaptable public ECEC (Palomera, 2022; OECD, 2023). In this regard, Spain had one of the highest rates of temporary contracts among the foreign-born population in 2019 across EU-24 countries. Consequently, the poorer employment prospects of migrant women—often including lower wages in female-dominated sectors—may lead some to choose the "motherhood track", which further complicates their ability to access ECEC and other work-life balance policies (Ibáñez et al. 2021). In sum, << migrant mothers, overrepresented at the bottom of the occupational spectrum and with more limited sources of family support, are less capable of balancing family and employment >> (OECD, 2023: 153).

Beyond national averages, population dynamics vary greatly across Spain. The country has a highly dispersed population, with multiple regions facing underpopulation risks. As shown in Image 1, several provinces in Andalusia, Extremadura, the two Castillas, and northern ACs have experienced a significant decline in their 0–2 population between 2000 and 2023. In some cases, the decrease exceeds 20%. The only provinces in Spain to see an increase in this population are Madrid and its neighbouring provinces, along with some Mediterranean and

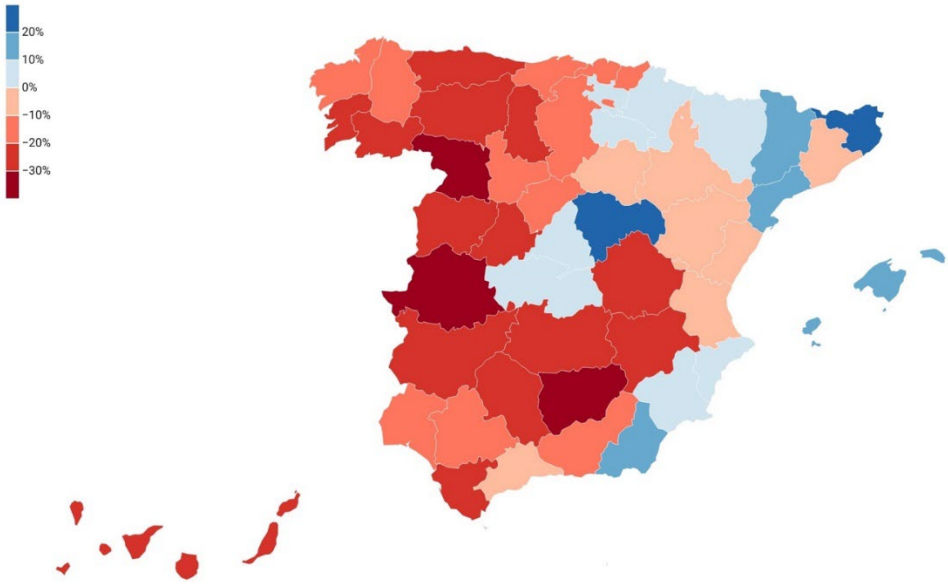
northern provinces. These geographical disparities are also evident at the municipal level, as the population in large cities in Spain continues to grow. Regarding future projections, disparities are expected to persist, albeit less pronounced than in the past two decades. For instance, the region expected to gain the largest population increase of children aged 0–4, the Balearic Islands, is projected to grow by 20% by 2050. In contrast, Asturias, the AC expected to experience the largest decline, is projected to see a 6% decrease.

Figure 1. Evolution and projection of the population of 0 to 2 year-olds in Spain



Source: own elaboration using data from the National Institute of Statistics for past levels and the Airef for projections

Image 1. Child population 0 to 2 years old, change between 2000 and 2023 (percentage) Spanish provinces



Source: own elaboration with data from the National Institute of Statistics

As mentioned previously, demography is only one of the factors needed to understand demand and social dynamics. The feminisation of Spain's labour market is probably a more relevant factor in recent decades and will continue to be so, especially given the conditions under which women enter the labour market.

In 1990, the labour participation rate for women over the age of 15 was 33.3%; by 2023, it had risen to 52.6% (ILO, 2023). Consequently, the gap between male and female labour participation rates narrowed from 33 percentage points to 10 during the same period. Among women aged 25 to 54, employment participation increased from 64% in 2009 to 73.4% in 2023, while for men it rose from 77.3% to 83.4%, reducing the gender gap by three percentage points (INE, 2024).

However, women have entered the workforce under more precarious conditions than men. The percentage of women working part-time covered around 22% between 2009 and 2023, compared to approximately 7% for men during the same period (INE, 2024). Among women in part-time jobs, it is estimated that in 2023, around half worked part-time due to being unable to secure full-time positions (INE, 2024). While this figure has been gradually decreasing since 2020, it remains double the EU-28 average. Additionally, about 16% of women working part-time cite childcare or care responsibilities for sick, disabled, or elderly family members as the reason. Women in households with children in 2023 were significantly more likely to work part-time compared to women without children, with a difference of about seven percentage points (similar to the EU-27 average). For men, this difference is only observed in single-person households and is limited to two percentage points (INE, 2024).

From 2009 to 2021, the percentage of women and men with temporary contracts ranged between 24% and 28%, before declining sharply to 20% in 2023 following the 2022 labour

reforms, which restricted the duration and renewal of temporary contracts. Finally, the gender wage gap for full-time employees, while narrowing, remains significant. The unadjusted gender wage gap for full-time salaries declined from 13 percentage points in 2009 to eight percentage points in 2021 (INE, 2024). In absolute terms, nominal full-time salaries for women increased by 23% between 2009 and 2021, but when adjusted for inflation, the increase was only 3.6%.

In summary, women's increased participation in the workforce has reduced the unpaid hours available for childcare. Furthermore, this reduction in unpaid care work is accompanied by growing political pressure for service expansion from feminist movements, greater representation of women in government, and the emergence of a social investment agenda within the European Union, which has influenced Spanish legislation (León et al., 2014; Daly et al., 2023). However, the data indicate that many women with children have entered the labour market under precarious conditions, including high rates of part-time and temporary employment and slow wage growth. Consequently, the new workforce has limited capacity to 'outsource' care work to private services due to their cost, increasing demand for low-cost options, including public services. Conversely, part-time employment may be caused by a lack of affordable childcare. Maestripieri, Palomera, and Rizza (2024) find that, in Spain, regions with higher public ECEC provision tend to have lower rates of part-time employment, particularly among low-income mothers. Therefore, ECEC public provision demand in Spain it is probably both a consequence and cause of part-time employment, especially for low-income mothers.

4. A bumpy road to universalisation: limited supply and persistent access inequalities

4.1. General increase in enrolment rates through a private-public mix

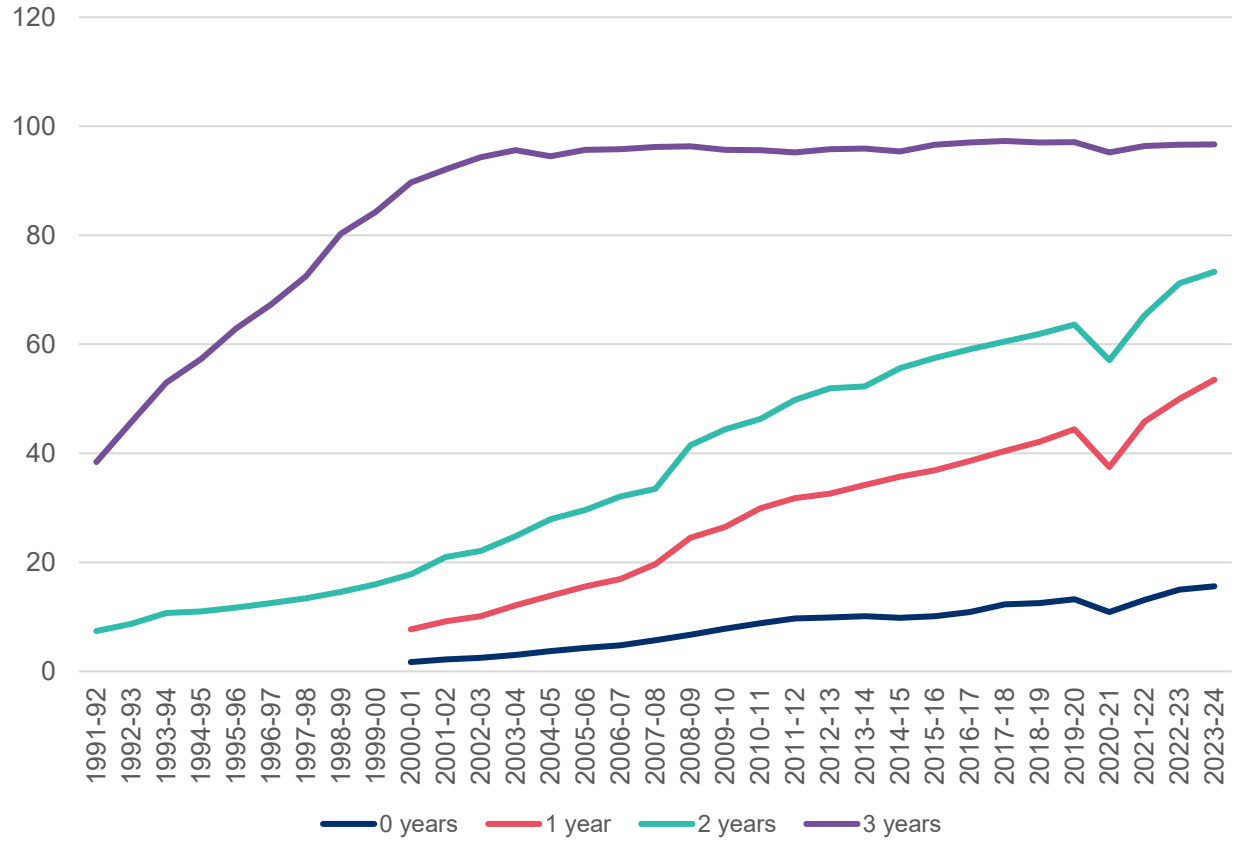
The 3–5 stage became practically universal and fully integrated with mandatory schooling by the beginning of the century (Graph 2). The enrolment trend for the 0–2 stage has also been upwards but slower and driven largely by enrolment rates for children aged one and two years, reaching 50% and 70%, respectively, in 2023. Children aged 0 years are rarely enrolled in ECEC, with rates reaching only 15% in 2023[3]. When contrasted with the demographic trends outlined in the introduction, we observe an interesting supply-demand relationship. The first decade of the 2000s saw a significant increase in both the 0–2 population and enrolment rates. During the period of demographic decline between 2011 and 2020, enrolment rates continued to grow despite budget austerity measures. Post-2020, enrolment rates have continued to rise strongly while 0–2 population growth stagnated. Given these patterns, it is evident that while demographic trends have contributed to higher enrolment rates, the significant expansion of ECEC supply has played a crucial role in meeting demand. However, in order to maintain the increase in enrolment rates, competent administrations will need to expand ECEC more rapidly, as the 0-2 population is expected to increase in the future.

[3] Survey data from the National Institute of Statistics shows even higher enrolment rates in 2024, reaching 84% for 2 years old, 62% for one year olds (and the same figure for 0 years old) (INE, 2024).

When analysing coverage rates, service intensity must also be considered. Although current data on actual usage hours are limited, evidence suggests that households in Spain use services intensively. The Eurofound European Quality of Life Survey (2016) found that individuals aged 25 to 34 used childcare for an average of 31 hours per week, compared with the EU average of 24 (Eurofound, 2024). Public ECEC opening hours are not nationally regulated and vary locally, but typically span 8–9 hours a day, from 8:00 or 9:00 a.m. to 4:00 or 5:00 p.m. Some administrations allow extended afternoon hours, often with an extra fee. In Barcelona province, 90% of municipalities offer an early hour of service, but only 30% provide afternoon extensions. The differences in usage of the two services is also stark: 18% of children use the early hour, while only 4% stay later. Part-time use is also limited, with just 11% of children enrolled. By contrast, private centres are generally more flexible and offer longer hours, making them an attractive option for families who can afford them, especially given the availability of public subsidies. These diverse ‘policy mixes’ differ markedly across regions: some provide full-time ECEC services, while others offer only part-time provision, with further variation between public and private institutions.

In contrast to other countries included in the Fondazione Agnelli study (France, Italy, and Germany), the increase in enrolment rates has been accompanied by significant convergence between regions with lower GDP per capita and 'richer regions', reducing territorial inequalities in the access to ECEC (see Table A2). For example, less affluent regions such as Andalusia, Extremadura, and Castilla-La Mancha achieved 2023 enrolment rates close to or even above the Spanish average. To better understand the relationship between a region's economic level and enrolment rates, we plotted GDP per capita against schooling rates for the years 2000 and 2023, as well as their growth between both years (see Graph A1 and A2). From 2000 to 2023, the correlation between these variables has decreased by more than half. A fitted line for all observations demonstrates a weak correlation between GDP per capita and schooling rates. Moreover, the correlation between GDP growth rates and changes in schooling rates between 2000 and 2003 is even weaker, showing a clear de-coupling between improvements in ECEC first stage schooling rates and GDP per capita of regions.

Figure 2. Schooling rates of children in Spain, 1991 - 2023

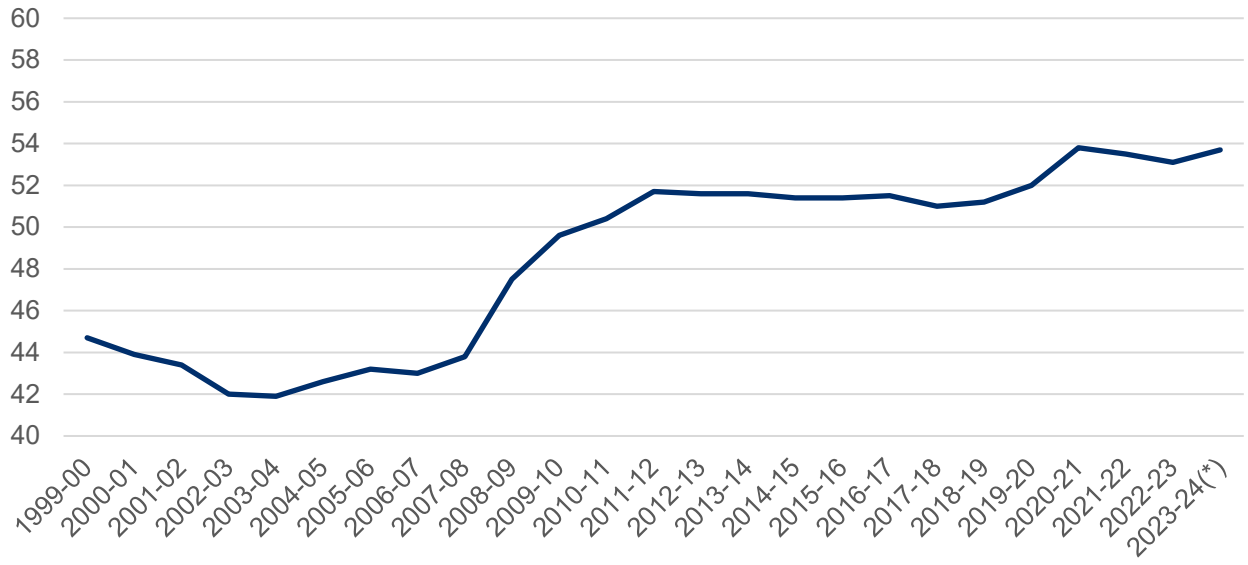


Source: own elaboration with the Spanish Education Ministry data.

Focusing on specific cases, regions such as Andalusia, Murcia, and Castilla-La Mancha experienced considerable increases in schooling rates despite modest GDP growth. These findings indicate that regions with lower GDP per capita have significantly improved their enrolment rates. Furthermore, there has been a catch-up process by these regions with Autonomous Communities (ACs) with higher GDP, even as the latter also increased their enrolment rates. Demographic trends have contributed to this progress, as the aforementioned regions experienced a decline in the 0–2 population between 2000 and 2023. However, it is noteworthy that enrolment rates also rose in regions that saw significant population growth, such as the Balearic Islands, Madrid, and Catalonia.

In aggregate terms, the rise in enrolment rates has been supported by a combination of private and public providers. Prior to the 2008 economic crisis, the private sector accommodated around 58% of children in Spain, but this share declined to 49% following the crisis (see Graph 3). Possible reasons for this include a reduction in household incomes available for childcare expenditures and cuts in public funding for private services. Since then, the share of the private sector has remained relatively stable at approximately 50%, with a slight further decrease after the Covid-19 crisis. This decline coincided with the deployment of Next Generation Funds, which have provided financial support for the creation of new public centres and reductions in public service prices.

Figure 3. Percentage of enrolled children in ECEC first stage in public centres



Source: own elaboration with the Spanish Education Ministry data. * Provisional data.

The public–private mix of ECEC provision varies significantly across regions (see Table A3 and Graph A3 in the Appendix). In 2023, all regions had a substantial level of public provision. However, while some regions achieved over 85% public coverage (Asturias, Navarre, and Extremadura), three regions had less than 50% public coverage, with Andalusia being the lowest at 36%. The evolution of public provision since 2016 has also been mixed: some regions, such as the Balearic Islands and Castilla y León, experienced a marked decrease in public coverage, whereas others, including Aragón, Catalonia, Valencia, and Madrid, saw considerable increases.

It is important to note that household choices for private ECEC are often supported by various fiscal credits, as outlined in the introduction, and subsidies provided by regional governments, discussed in section four on the cost and financing of ECEC. Consequently, it is essential to understand that the expansion of private provision can, in many cases, represent a partially outsourced form of public provision and a broader governmental strategy to expand publicly supported ECEC. It’s also important to mention that it has been common in the last decades for private and subsidised schools offering schooling services from 3 years old to pre-register children of 2 years old, which has helped explaining higher degrees of schooling rates at this stage.

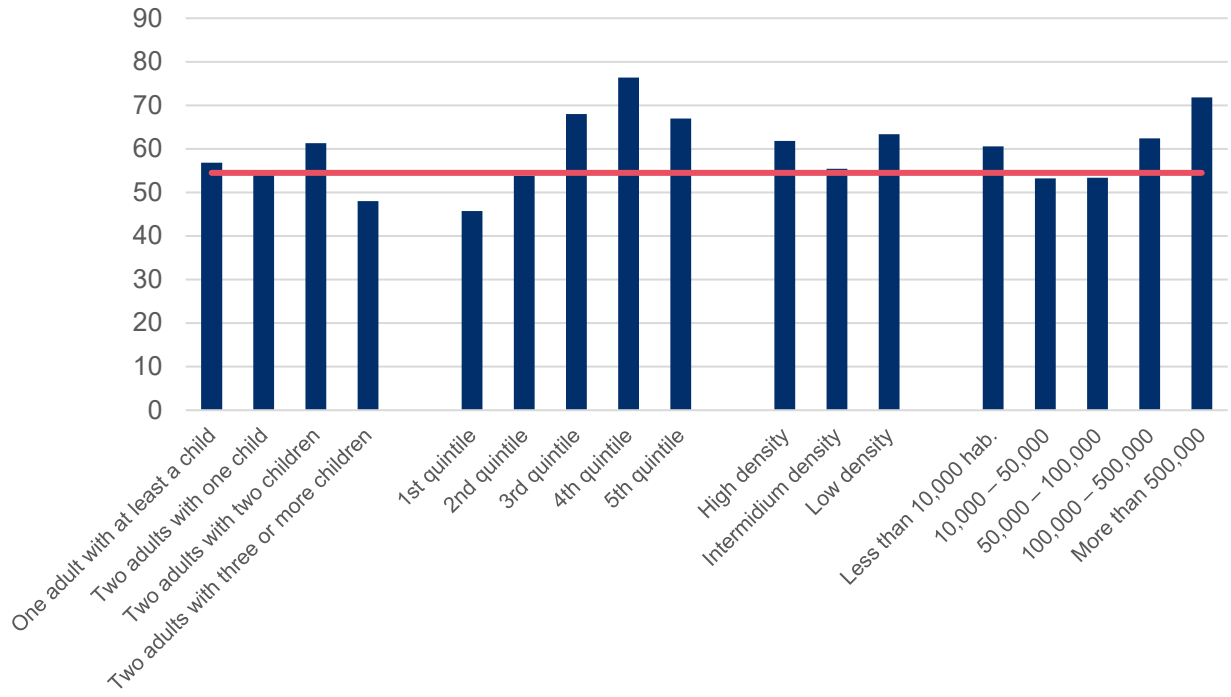
4.2. Persistent socioeconomic inequalities in ECEC access

In Spain, there are marked inequalities in access to ECEC services based on the socioeconomic status of households, particularly that of the mother. This phenomenon has been described as the presence of 'Matthew Effects,' with the higher use of public services among households with better socioeconomic positioning. Among the most relevant variables determining access inequality are the mother’s employment status, the level of formal education reached, their income level, and country of origin. Whereas the preferences of the household could be a factor in different service usage, multivariate analysis does not always

support this hypothesis. Affordability is a central element in explaining inequalities, but other factors must also be taken into account. The availability and adaptability of services to mother's needs, especially single-mothers and mothers with irregular working hours, could be crucial.

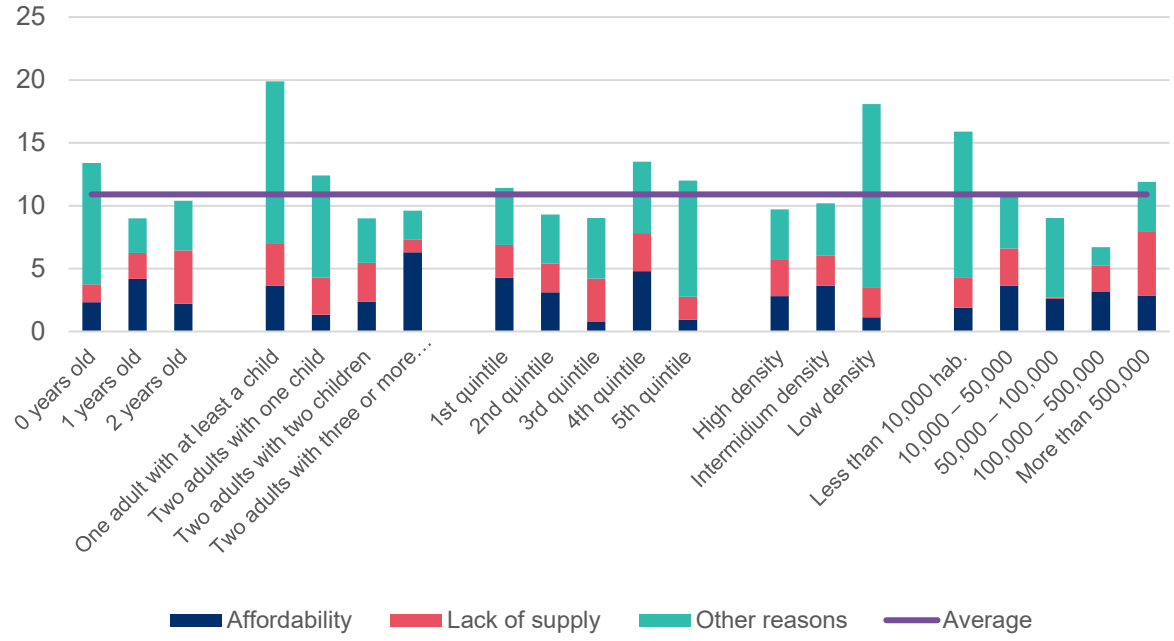
In terms of the socioeconomic status, the situation has improved but inequalities persist. In 2006, the gap in ECEC usage for children aged 0–2 years between unemployed mothers and employed mothers (working more than 30 hours per week) was approximately 30 percentage points, a disparity that decreased to around 20 percentage points by 2016 (Navarro and León, 2022). Regarding household income, in 2016 the difference in ECEC usage for 0-2 children between households earning below 60% of the median income and those earning above 166% of the median income was approximately 35 percentage points. This gap across income levels appears to be still important in 2024 (see Graph 4). Among households with children under 3, lower income is associated with less use of services (with a decrease in the richest population compared to the fourth quintile). Whereas 46% of households use ECEC services in the first income quintile, usage increases to 54% for the second quintile, 68% for the third, 77% for the fourth and 67% for the fifth. Income seems to be a more relevant factor determining differences in ECEC service enrolment compared to other household characteristics (number of children) or municipal characteristics (urban density and size). Children's migrant background is also a key factor in service use. In Catalonia is estimated that children with a foreign nationality use services around 50 and 60 percentage points less compared to children with Spanish nationality (Navarro-Varas and Mayordomo, 2024).

Figure 4. ECEC schooling rates for children below 3 years in Spain, 2024



Source: Living Conditions Survey 2024 Module, Institute of National Statistics. Note: the horizontal line represents the average for all surveyed households with children below 3 years old.

Figure 5. Children below 3 years old with unmet needs for ECEC services in Spain by declared reason by household, 2024



Source: Living Conditions Survey 2024 Module, Institute of National Statistics. Note: the horizontal line represents the average for all surveyed households with children below 3 years old.

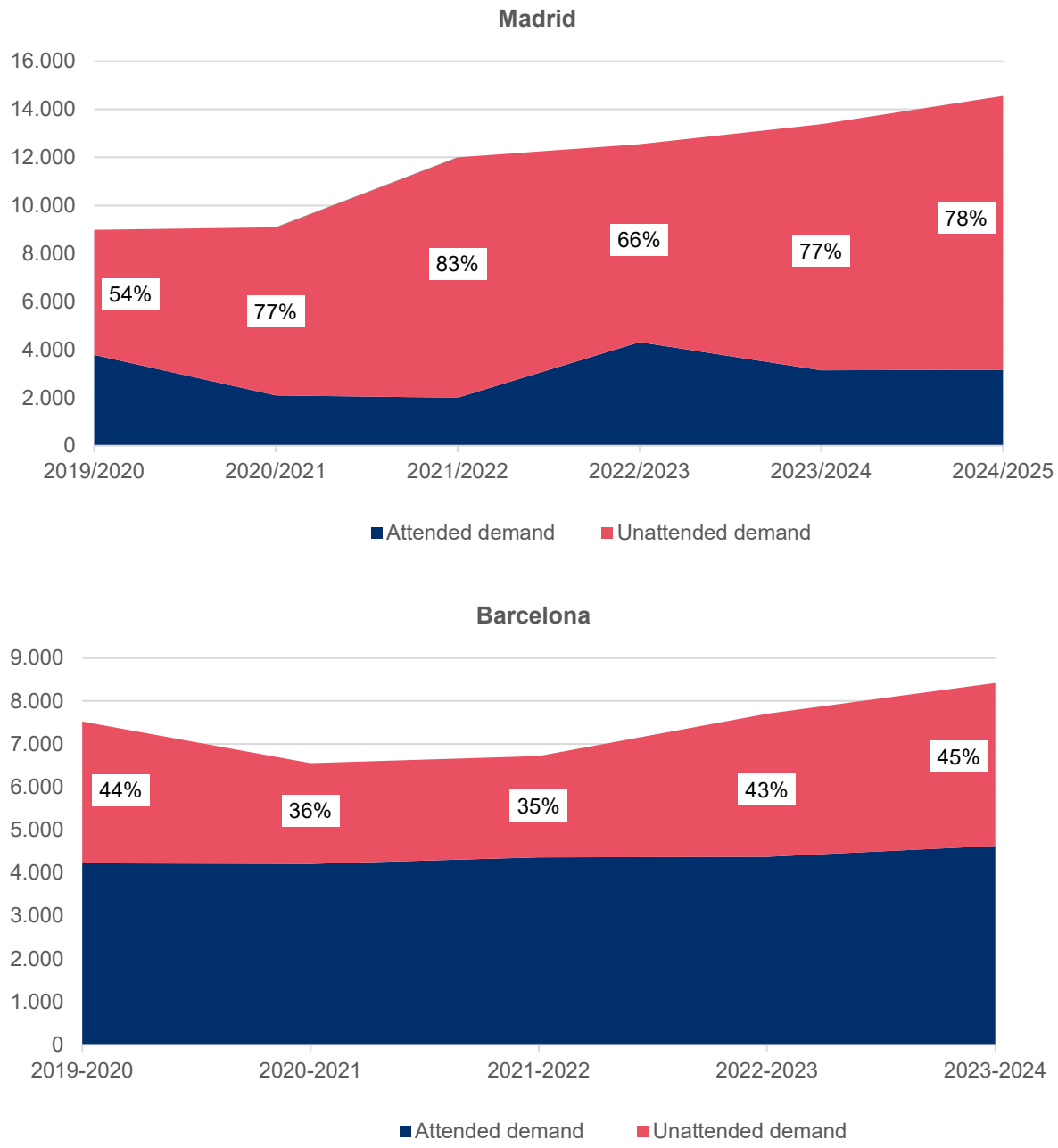
According to a 2024 survey (INE, 2024), around 11% of households with children under 3 years old reported unmet needs for ECEC services. Analysing the stated reasons for non-use among households that wished to access the service can help to illuminate the causes of access inequalities. Affordability is a greater problem for lower-income households, being cited in around 40% of cases as the reason for not meeting ECEC needs. However, despite large differences in service use across income levels, unmet needs do not vary dramatically by household income. This gap may therefore be partly explained by maternal preferences, with some mothers considering that they do not need the services. Navarro-Varas and León (2022) suggest that preferences for formal ECEC may differ depending on a mother's income level, which could explain variation in service use not accounted for by unmet needs.

However, econometric analyses offer a more nuanced perspective (Pavolini and Van Lancker, 2018; Palomera, 2023). According to the latter, which draws on a survey of mothers in Catalonia, although preferences influence service usage, they are not mediated by income, education, or country of origin (however, the sample is only representative of Latin American mothers). Among surveyed mothers without university education, 10% reported not accessing an allocated slot due to changes in their work situation, and 30% changed their minds without specifying a reason. In contrast, only 1% of mothers with university education cited work-related changes as a problem, and just 10% changed their minds.

These results indicate the need to investigate mothers 'preferences together with service conditions and their individual circumstances. Among the barriers identified are irregular working hours, non-standard forms of employment, and a lack of adaptation of centres to these mothers (Palomera, 2023; Navarro-Varas and Mayordomo, 2024); potential discrimination against foreign-born mothers (Palomera, 2023); and a lack of social capital or knowledge for navigating the competitive ECEC application process (Ivàlua, 2020). It is important to note that unmet needs are particularly high among single-parent households (20%), with 65% of these respondents citing reasons other than affordability or supply (Figure 5). This suggests that service features beyond cost and adaptability—such as operating hours or location—may be crucial.

Municipal characteristics also play an important role in explaining unmet demand. Figure 6 shows that unmet needs are especially pronounced in low-density urban areas (18%) and in municipalities with fewer than 10,000 inhabitants (16%). In these contexts, affordability and supply are not the main issues: 65–75% of respondents cite "other reasons", likely related to the specific characteristics of available ECEC or household working conditions. Unmet needs are also above average in municipalities with populations over 500,000, where most respondents identify insufficient supply as the main problem. Data from Barcelona and Madrid illustrate this situation. In Barcelona, approximately 45% of demand for 0–2 services has gone unmet since 2019 (measured as the share of rejected applications) (see Figure 6). This reflects rising demand alongside relatively slow expansion of supply. Between 2019 and 2023, the number of available places grew from 4,295 to 4,765 (11%), while demand rose from 7,527 to 8,421 children (12%). In Madrid, the situation has deteriorated further: unmet demand increased from 54% in 2019 to 78% in 2023, with 11,400 new applicants rejected. This results from a steady rise in demand combined with a lack of new places being created.

Figure 6. ECEC services (0-2 years) applications acceptance and rejection annually in Barcelona and Madrid and unattended demand (%), 2019 - 2023



Source: own elaboration with data from the statistics of the Municipal Institute of Education of Barcelona and press releases from the Municipality of Madrid. It only considers municipal centres. In Madrid the municipality owns around 70 centres and the AC of 65 more. However, the AC does not publish unattended demand data.

4.3. Recent regional policies to prioritise access and make services affordable

In the introduction, we mentioned that the 0–2 stage has only in recent decades acquired an educational purpose. This has prompted policy changes aimed at guaranteeing equal access to services and making them affordable. In practice, across Spain's ACs, public ECEC access criteria vary, reflecting a balance between two goals: supporting work–life balance to enhance women's labour market participation and gender equality, and addressing educational and socioeconomic inequalities in early child development (UNICEF, 2018; Palomera et al., 2024). To understand this balance, it is essential to analyse both access criteria and the cost of public ECEC. As argued above, the central government requires prioritisation of vulnerable households in access to 0–2 ECEC. However, the specific criteria are mainly determined at the regional and municipal levels, depending on centre management and local decisions. Simply put, while all the regions studied are moving toward institutional designs that emphasise equal opportunities based on household income, there remains considerable variation in how much weight is placed on work–life balance, resulting in a rather mixed picture. In addition, all regions appear to be moving quickly toward making services free of charge. However, without guaranteeing equal access, such policies risk disproportionately benefiting households from higher socioeconomic status.

Our own analysis of criteria published by regions finds that in 2025, around 65% of the ACs prioritise working mothers by granting extra points to single working mothers or households where both parents work during the admissions process. However, regions also allocate extra points based on household socioeconomic conditions. Criteria include measures to address inequalities related to low income, single parenthood, disability, and gender-based violence (León et al., 2022). In order to understand the overall outcome and identify access-criteria models, León et al. (2022) weigh each access criterion by the total potential points a household can receive. Of the regions studied, all assign at least a moderate weight to income-related criteria (see Table 2). There is greater disparity in the weight given to work-life balance, with some regions (Madrid, Galicia, and Navarre) awarding a high number of points to working mothers, while others (Valencia and Catalonia) award none. The result of this comparison reveals a mixed picture across the regions, with many intermediate cases[4].

[4] Madrid, which awards high scores in both domains, offers an illustrating example of the complexity to detect a clear model. In this case, parents' employment status accounts for 25.6% of the total score. At the same time, being in the lowest income bracket confers the same score but income-related points decrease as income increases. As a result, unemployed mothers can only receive the same points as employed mothers if the household is in extreme poverty. Households with higher incomes but still poor that have an unemployed mother might lose against medium-income households with working mothers.

Table 2. Weight of income and work–life balance measures in the points system for accessing ECEC for children aged 0–2 years in the Autonomous Communities

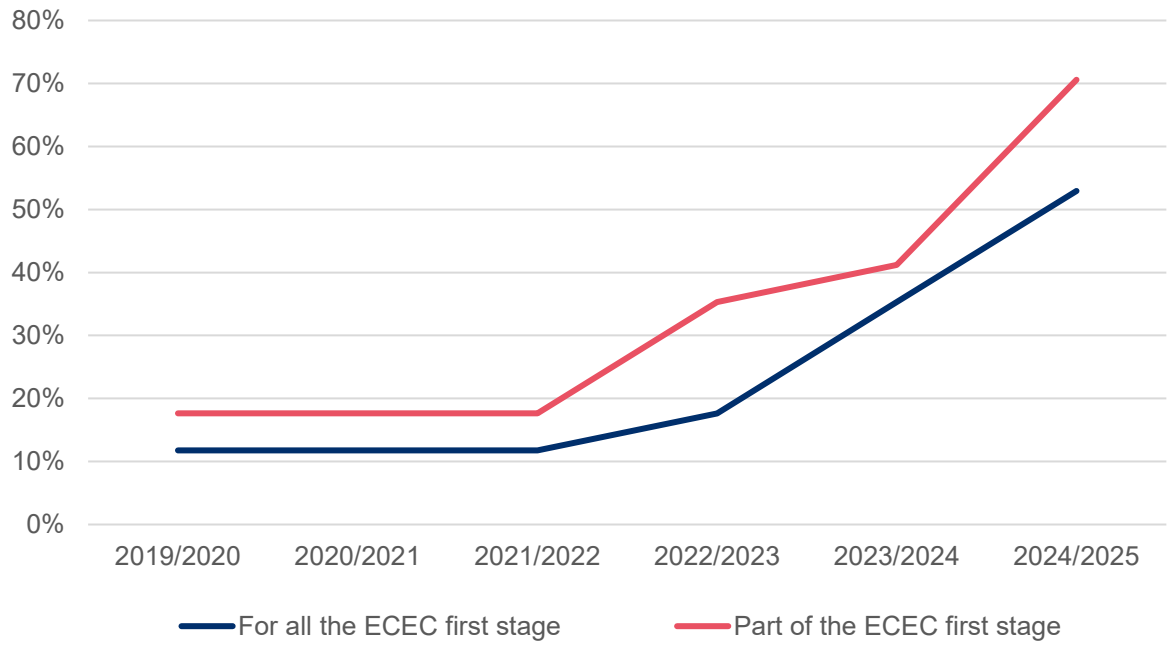
		Weight of household's income		
		High	Medium	Low
Weight of work-life balance measures	High	Madrid	Galicia Navarra	
	Medium		Andalusia Euskadi	
	Low	Valencia	Catalonia	

Source: León et al. (2022)

Given the high decentralised nature of ECEC, we must ask whether municipalities diverge from regional criteria. In cases such as Catalonia, 90% of ECEC centres fall under municipal competence. Furthermore, the Catalan government assigns household income a weight of only 10% among all possible criteria, leaving room for municipalities to be more ambitious in this area. However, survey data show that only a minority of municipalities apply criteria different from those of the Catalan government and, when they do, they rarely establish economic criteria. Of the 64.5% of municipalities that manage pre-registration and admissions, only 26% reported applying criteria different from the Catalan government, meaning that only about 17% of public nurseries in Catalonia have their own access rules (Palomera, 2024). Furthermore, only two municipalities in the survey considered declared family income. Therefore, in a case such as Catalonia, regional criteria can be taken as the general guiding principle across municipalities, aside from a few exceptions.

In terms of affordability, an increasing number of ACs have eliminated fees for the first stage of ECEC or specific educational levels within it. As shown in Graph 7, while only 12% of ACs had eliminated fees for the 0–2 stage in 2021, this figure rose to 18% in 2022, 35% in 2023, and 53% in 2024. Based on government announcements, the percentage could exceed 60% by 2025 (see Image A2 in Appendix for more details). The percentage is even higher when considering ACs that have eliminated fees for specific age groups within the 0–2 stage; in 2024, 71% of regions offered full or partial fee waivers for public centres. Additionally, some ACs that have not yet implemented full gratuity offer significant fee reductions, such as in Asturias and the Canary Islands. Many regions also extend fee reductions or full gratuity to private centres, as in Andalusia, Catalonia, Galicia, and La Rioja. However, extending gratuity to private centres in a context of access inequalities—especially since private centres are often located in medium- and high-income neighbourhoods—could undermine the goal of universalisation.

Figure 7. Percentage of ACs that have eliminated ECEC fees for the 0-2 stage fully or in part, 2019 - 2024



Source: own elaboration with administrative data.

The rapid expansion of fee elimination in public ECEC centres since the Covid-19 crisis may have been helped by the financial support from the NGEU funds. In addition to funding the construction of new centres and the rehabilitation of existing ones, the funds also provided support for the running costs—mainly labour expenses—of two-thirds of the total new places, to facilitate the initial expansion of existing centres. Although they cannot finance gratuity programmess, the funds still offer indirectly a fiscal boost to regions and municipalities that had already planned to expand ECEC places and received corresponding funding for both construction and operational costs. Furthermore, while the funds were initially allocated under the 2023 Central Government budget, the government has committed to continuing funding support beyond 2024 through the Multiannual Financial Framework of the European Social Funds (FSE+). In sum, although the funds do not directly finance gratuity, increased central government support for ECEC financing likely helps foster gratuity policies.

Beyond regional programmes, municipalities also have the authority to set fees for their local centres. However, data on the adoption of fee reduction policies is scarce. In Catalonia, a survey of municipalities in the province of Barcelona found that 38.8% applied sliding-scale pricing in 2022/2023 (Palomera, 2024). Scholarships, regulated at the regional and municipal level, also play a role in supporting access. According to data from the Ministry of Education, around 44% of children in the 0–2 stage received some form of scholarship or aid in 2022/2023, with an estimated average of €830 per child annually.

As mentioned, making services free could lead to further inequalities if access disparities are not addressed. To illustrate this, it is insightful to examine the evolution of public ECEC policy design in the region of Madrid and the municipality of Barcelona, governed by conservative and left-wing parties, respectively. Madrid was among the first regions to eliminate fees for the

0–2 stage. However, this policy was accompanied by access criteria that placed significant emphasis on prioritising working mothers. Additionally, as observed, the level of unattended demand for municipal services has increased considerably, with 78% of applicants in 2023 having to resort to private services. In contrast, during a similar period, Barcelona introduced a progressive sliding-scale pricing system for its municipal centres, based on household income. The municipal government did not prioritise working mothers, instead granting some priority to low-income households. Despite also being unable to meet all new demand, the level of unattended demand in Barcelona has remained constant since 2019, with 45% of applicants in 2023 turning to private services.

In sum, in Madrid it is likely that a working mother with a high income would receive high priority and avoid paying fees for a public centre. Conversely, in Barcelona, a working mother would not have priority and would pay fees according to her income. Thus, while both governments have implemented measures to advance the universalisation of ECEC, their policy designs differ significantly, with potentially varying impacts on household inequalities in childcare access. The comparison of these two cases illustrates the complexity of assessing the impact of public policies on alleviating or aggravating inequalities. The rapid adoption of free services in public centres by regions and municipalities may aggravate inequalities if access disparities are not addressed. Moreover, regions only partly prioritise low-income households, while also granting high points to working mothers irrespective of income, giving them priority over unemployed mothers. Quantifying the actual impact of these policy designs requires precise survey data. It is also essential to consider how governments promote access to private centres through tax credits, assess their associated costs, and regulate the quality of both public and private ECEC. These aspects are explored in the following sections.

5. ECEC service quality and working conditions: Spain's Achilles heel?

Quality is a highly relevant factor in determining ECEC enrolment and outcomes. Research has linked the educational and equalising potential of ECEC to service quality (Esping-Andersen, 2009: 133, in Abrassart and Bonoli, 2015). Achieving higher educational outcomes for low-income children through ECEC investment requires high-quality services. Expanding public or subsidised private ECEC with low-quality services could compromise its ability to provide children from low-income households with the same educational opportunities as those from high-income households who can afford expensive private services. Assessing quality is therefore essential for evaluating the extent to which governments prioritise ECEC as an educational policy rather than merely a childcare policy.

ECEC quality can be assessed at the structural, process, and outcome levels. At the structural level, key variables include physical infrastructure, student-to-teacher ratios, the training and qualifications of teaching staff, and working conditions. At the process level, the pedagogical curriculum is a critical element. Finally, at the outcome level, it is important to define benchmarks and evaluate how they are assessed.

In Spain, the national government establishes minimum and general guidelines for certain quality characteristics that ECEC should possess for both the first and second stages. Royal Decree 95/2022 sets forth the principles and objectives of education, ensures the effective fulfilment of children's rights, and defines the main elements that curricula should include (as explained below). Regarding infrastructure and staffing requirements, Royal Decree 132/2010 establishes a maximum of 25 children per schooling unit and sets minimum size requirements for schooling units in the 3–5 ECEC stage. Requirements for the 0–2 stage are left to the competent authorities, i.e., the regions and municipalities. The decree also establishes minimum qualifications for teachers in both stages (explained below). Therefore, beyond these general guidelines, understanding the current situation and past trends in ECEC quality—especially for the 0–2 stage—requires examining regional data, as services are primarily regulated at that level. The quality of ECEC provision for the 0–2 and 3–5 stages is heavily influenced by the type of provision (public or private), as well as by regional and municipal policies on financing and quality standards.

5.1. Structural quality: increased professionalisation but deficiencies in staff ratios and working conditions

Studying the situation of staffing and professionals in the ECEC sector shows in general deficient resources and support to centres, especially in the 0-2 stage. Overall, there have been slow improvements in staff-to-children ratios, but these are still below European standards, especially in private centres. Regions have also advanced staff professionalisation, but this is not general across all regions. Working conditions have worsened, especially for labour in lower professional categories in the 0-2 stage and after the 2022 inflationary period. This has led to union protests, which have also denounced staff shortages in the 0-2 stage.

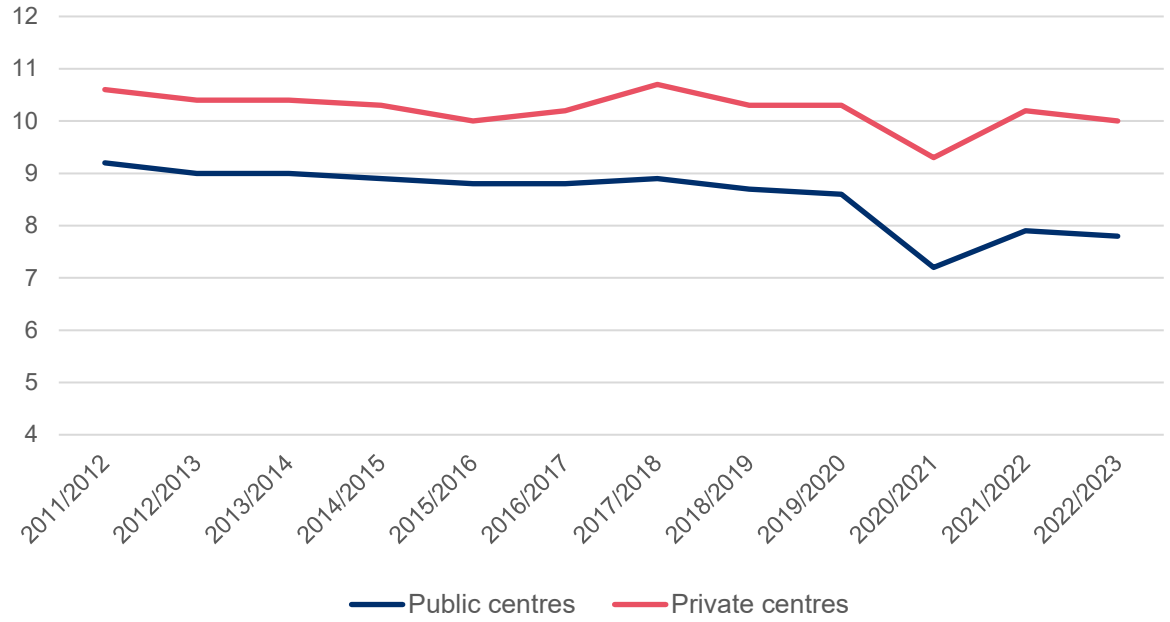
5.1.1. Increasing but low staff-to-children ratios

On average, in Spain, there has been a slow reduction in student-teacher ratios for both public and private centres providing ECEC (see Figure 8). Public ECEC for the whole 0-5 stage has improved from around 9 full-time equivalent students per teacher in 2011 to 8 in 2022. Private ECEC has seen a similar progression, from approximately 11 students per teacher in 2011 to 10 in 2022. These data indicate consistently better staff ratios in public centres compared to private centres throughout the period from 2011 to 2022.

At the level of ACs, there has been a general trend towards lower student-teacher ratios across all regions during this period (see Figure A4 in the Appendix). The reductions in the poorer regions of Extremadura and the Canary Islands are particularly notable, with decreases of 8 and 4 students per teacher, respectively. No ACs report private centres with better staff ratios than public ECEC. In most regions, public ECEC outperforms private centres by a margin of 30% or less, typically with 1 or 2 fewer students per teacher. However, in four regions—Aragon, Asturias, the Euskadi, and Galicia—public ECEC outperforms private ECEC by more than 30%.

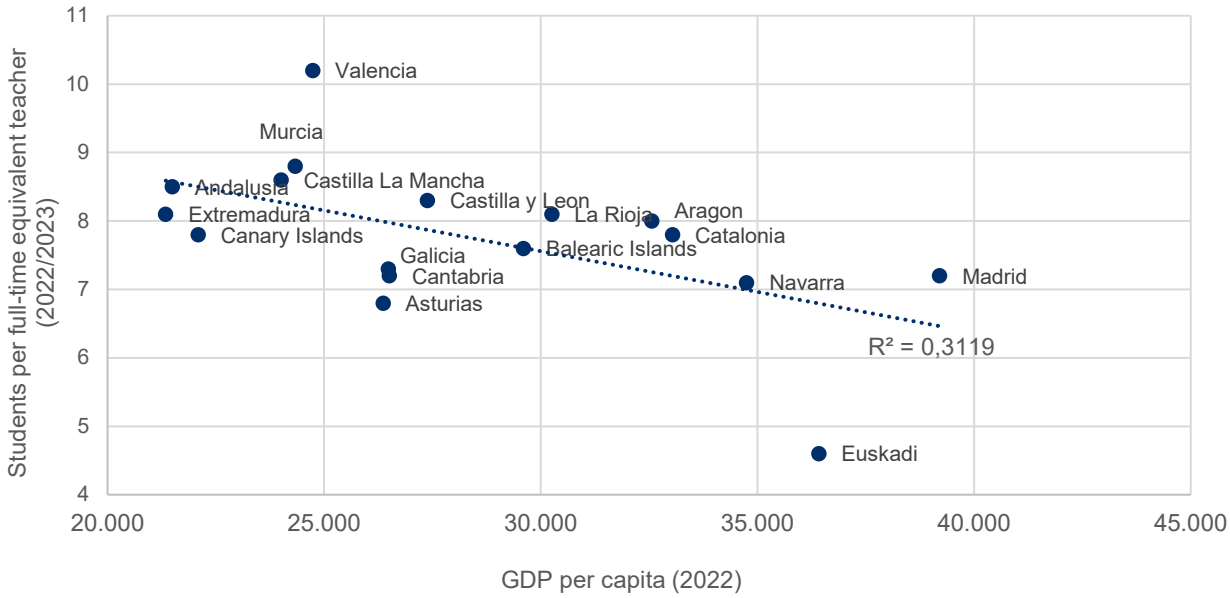
When plotting staff ratios against GDP per capita for each region, a positive correlation emerges (Figure 9). In 2022, regions with higher GDP per capita were more likely to have lower student-teacher ratios. This implies that richer ACs are associated with higher human resources per child. This has important implications on the capacity of poorer regions of providing educational policies able to tackle educational inequalities among children.

Figure 8. Number of students for full-time equivalent teachers in private and public ECEC in Spain (0 - 5 years), 2011-2022



Source: own elaboration with data from the Ministry of Education of Spain.

Figure 9. Scatter plot of GDP per capita and students per full-time equivalent teachers in ECEC (0-5), 2022/2023



Source: own elaboration with data from the Ministry of Education of Spain and INE. Data on Euskadi doesn't include data on municipal ECEC.

Unfortunately, we lack national-level data on staff ratios for each age group, particularly for the first ECEC stage. This is a significant gap, as staff ratio recommendations vary considerably depending on the age of the children. According to official regulations, the majority of ACs establish the following student-to-educational unit ratios: 8 children per unit in the case of children below 1 year old; 10 to 14 children per unit for children between 1 and 2 years old; and 16 to 20 children per unit for children between 2 and 3 years old (Eurycide España, 2023). These ratios are above what the EC Childcare Network recommended in a 1996 report: 1 adult for each 4 (1:4) children for children below 1 year old, 1:6 for children between 1 and 2 years old, and 1:8 for children between 2 and 3 years old (European Commission, 1996).[5]

5.1.2. Increased professionalisation with significant regional disparities

To start with, it is important to understand the different professional categories. In Spain, there are three professional categories authorised to teach in ECEC (in both 0-2 and 3-5): lead teachers, ECEC educators, and support assistants – for which different levels of training are

[5] Catalonia provides statistics on student-to-educational-unit ratios for different age groups from 0 to 2 years old in both private and public centres (see Graph A5 in the appendix). The trends are similar than what we have seen for the whole 0-5 stage. Staff ratios in public centres in Catalonia vary significantly by age. In 2022, the ratios were 6 children per unit for children under 1 year old, 12 for 1-year-old children, and 16 for 2-year-old children. These ratios are below the average ratios per unit that regional governments establish but well above European levels in case of children aged 1 to 2 years old. The data also indicate a general trend towards lower staff ratios in public centres over time, with a notable acceleration since 2020–2021. Private ECEC centres in Catalonia have generally reported lower student-to-educational-unit ratios compared to public centres, likely due to lower occupancy rates in these facilities.

required. Lead teachers, in both public and private schools, are required to hold a degree that qualifies them for the regulated profession of Teacher in ECEC or be a Teacher with a specialisation in ECEC. It also qualifies the ‘old’ Graduate in “General Basic Education” specialising in ECEC (Royal Decree 1594/2011). In contrast, for ECEC educators, it is necessary to complete only Higher Vocational Training in ECEC (VET). In private ECEC, education will be provided by lead teachers — with the same qualifications as those in the public sector — and, in some cases, by other personnel holding VET or "other titles deemed equivalent".[6] Regarding assistants, there is no specific qualification required for this group of professionals in Spain, who are considered support personnel – training is typically offered through private courses.

A key indicator of quality of the 0-2 stage is the professionalisation of the sector and its alignment with the 3–5 stage. The 2006 law (LOE 2/2006) established the foundations for professionalising 0–2 ECEC. Since then, becoming a lead teacher has required a university degree in this stage. Order ECI/3854/2007 specifies the curriculum requirements for this degree, including the competencies students must acquire and the programme’s duration, which is set at 240 ECTS credits (European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System). Additionally, a B1 level certification in a foreign language is required (Cobano-Delgado et al., 2020).

This qualification enables educators to work across the full ECEC cycle, from ages 0 to 5. However, there is also the VET ECEC qualification for ECEC educators, which allows employment exclusively in the first ECEC cycle (0–2 years) within formal settings. This qualification entails 2,000 hours of study and includes competencies such as designing, implementing, and evaluating educational projects and programmes for the first ECEC cycle in formal settings. In non-formal settings, this qualification applies to the entire 0–6 age range, focusing on creating safe environments and collaborating with other professionals and families (Royal Decree 1394/2007, Art. 4).

Cobano-Delgado et al. (2020) argue that the 0–2 stage should not be devalued by assigning lower qualification levels to its professionals compared to those working with children aged 3–5. This is particularly relevant given that integrated ECEC models have been shown to positively impact students’ academic performance (Melhuish, 2013). In this context, Spain appears to be undergoing a "wave of professionalisation" — albeit a slow one — within the sector, with increasing recognition of the importance of professional training for educating 0–2-year-old children.

The growing emphasis on ECEC in Spain has prompted several regions to prioritise the professionalisation of the sector, recognising its crucial role in child development and long-term educational outcomes. However, while some ACs have introduced specific training programmes for current and future ECEC professionals, not all have done so, and there are notable differences in the focus and content of these initiatives. Since 2018, 41% of ACs have implemented regional initiatives offering specific training for ECEC professionals working with the 0–2 age group (see Table A4 in the appendix, detailing whether training applies to all

[6] The qualifications required are the same for both public and private institutions; however, it appears that in the private sector, likely due to a shortage of lead teachers, centers are allowed to delegate educational responsibilities (those typically held by lead teachers) to Higher Technicians for ECEC.

professionals or only those in the public sector). The remaining regions provide training aimed at the broader educational community.

The ACs placing the greatest emphasis on professionalisation include Aragón, the Balearic Islands, the Valencian Community, Catalonia, and Murcia. The Valencian Community stands out for its focus on this issue. Its "Annual Teacher Training Plan" (2018) offers extensive training for 0–2 professionals, aligning their development with later educational stages and updating scientific, curricular, didactic, and methodological knowledge across all subjects. Catalonia recently mandated that professionals working with children aged 0–2 must stay professionally up-to-date and participate in training activities to continuously improve their practice. Building on Decree 21/2023 for ECEC, the region has implemented workshops for ECEC teachers in public centres (0–2 and 3–6). These workshops aim to provide training and encourage reflection on children's learning during the 0–6 ECEC stage and its application in the classroom. In contrast, Madrid lacks specific legislation addressing the 0–2 education stage. Order 2453/2018 regulates the continuing education and professional development of non-university teaching staff in the region, but it does not include specific provisions related to ECEC.

5.1.2. Worsening of working conditions and staff shortages

Salaries stipulated under collective agreements primarily depend on the professional category of the worker and their years of service. For public employees, base salaries and overtime are determined by state regulations, while ACs set the complementary allowances. This results in lead teachers earning different salaries for performing the same role across regions. In 2023, public lead teachers in Spain earned an average of €2,433 per month, with salaries ranging from €2,300 to €2,900 across ACs (UGT, 2024). While this average wage is 25% above the median wage in Spain for the same year (INE, 2023), educators and support assistants in these settings earn lower salaries, typically close to the national minimum wage, which is approximately 60% of the median wage in Spain. Since 2010, lead teachers across all ACs have seen their gross salaries increase by 13%. However, when adjusted for inflation, their real wages have declined by 13% over 2010 and 2024. This decline in real wages is largely attributable to stagnant gross wages under collective agreements between 2010 and 2019, in the aftermath of the 2008 economic crisis and within the context of austerity policies.

Interestingly, regions typically associated with lower wages, such as Andalusia and Murcia, fell at the lower end of the wage range, but so did higher-wage regions like Madrid or Catalonia. Notably, no correlation is found between regional GDP per capita and the salaries established by collective agreements. As for the loss in purchasing power over time the variation across regions is significant: while regions like Asturias experienced a 5% reduction in real wages, this figure reached 19% in Catalonia.

Significant and strong differences exist in the salaries of lead teachers in private and subsidised ECEC schools, where collective agreements stipulate considerably lower wages compared to their public counterparts. Although salaries in these schools have increased since 2019, they remain only marginally above the minimum wage. In 2019, lead teachers in private and subsidised schools earned an average of €1,370 per month, rising to approximately €1,500 per month in 2023, excluding additional supplements. However, this 11% increase falls short of the accumulated inflation over the same period, which was 18.5%, resulting in a real

wage decline of 7.5%. Compared to public sector workers, lead teachers in subsidised and private schools earn between €500 and €900 less per month, depending on the region. Only in some ACs, such as Catalonia, salaries for subsidised schools are regulated, with lead teachers earning €1,677 per month, slightly above the national average for this category.

In addition to low salaries, many ECEC workers face a challenging working environment exacerbated by staff shortages. There's a lack of official estimations for ECEC, but the CSIF union — *Central Sindical Independiente y de Funcionarios*, a representative union in Spain of public employees — estimated for the academic year of 2024-2025 a shortage of 14,160 for lead teachers in ECEC and primary levels to cover the reduction in staff since 2010 and reduce temporary contracts from 21% to 8% of the total educational workforce (CSIF, 2024). This issue has become a growing concern among professionals, trade unions, and the media. Significant staff shortages are reported in regions such as Andalusia, Valencia, the Canary Islands, and the Balearic Islands, among others (ElDiario.es, 2024). The issue has gained not only media and union attention but also a place on the political agenda. For instance, the PSOE has highlighted staff shortages in many ACs, particularly those where the expansion of free 0–2 education has been partially or fully implemented, such as Andalusia, Galicia, and the Balearic Islands (Europa Press, 2024).

Precarious working conditions —characterised by low salaries and high student-to-teacher ratios, particularly for educators and assistants— are most acute among private sector ECEC staff. These conditions have triggered significant mobilisation within the sector, supported by leading unions such as UGT and CCOO (*Union General de Trabajadores* and *Comisiones Obreras* are the major unions in Spain and considered the entitled social agents in tripartite negotiations with the government and employer's organisations in issues such as minimum wage and other labour issues). The unions argue that workers in these centres dedicate considerably more hours than those in fully public institutions. Moreover, they point out that 90% of the sector's workforce in the private sector falls below the poverty threshold defined by the European Social Charter, as wages barely exceed the minimum wage and fail to reach 60% of the national average income (ElDiario.es, 2023).

In response to these issues, the sector called for several strike days at the start of the 2023/2024 school year, which received widespread support (UGT, 2023; El País, 2023). Against this backdrop, unions and employers have entered negotiations for the 13th Collective Agreement for ECEC Centres, which has been stalled for over two years. While the employers' association has pushed for greater flexibility in working hours and changes to the disciplinary regime (AD, 2024), both UGT and CCOO remain steadfast in their demands to improve working conditions. These include wage increases, reductions in working hours, and reserving a portion of working hours for non-teaching tasks, such as administrative duties, lesson planning, and report writing, which workers frequently perform outside of their official working hours (UGT, 2023; CCOO, 2023)[7].

[7] Beyond traditional unions, these debates have also been raised by platforms and local social actors, such as the platform "*Bressols en Lluita de Catalunya*" and "*Dignitat pel 0-3*",, who call for a political commitment for childcare quality and better working conditions. (Social.cat, 2024, El Diari de l'Educació).

5.2. Process quality: improvements in pedagogical practices and curricula

Improving the quality of ECEC services requires the adoption of regulated and standardised pedagogical practices and curricula. To this end, the Spanish government passed a Royal Decree in 2022 to establish minimum teaching standards for ECEC, recognising it as a distinct educational stage with its own identity, organised into two cycles (0–3 and 3–6), both aligned with the same educational objectives. For the first time, this legislation defines the goals, objectives, and general pedagogical principles for the entire 0–2 stage, along with the key competencies to be developed from the outset of schooling (RD 95/2022). According to government spokesperson Isabel Rodríguez, the aim of this law is to << treat education for children aged 0 to 2 as a distinct educational stage, rather than merely a phase of care or assistance >>, underscoring its crucial role in the formative and academic development of young children (RTVE, 2022)[8]. The reform is also framed as a step toward equating the formalisation of the 0–2 stage with that of the 3–6 stage, integrating them into a continuous educational process with its own distinct characteristics.

The law sets out a series of general principles, pedagogical guidelines, and basic competencies to be achieved. However, the responsibility for defining the curriculum for the entire ECEC stage lies with regional educational administrations. Schools, as part of their pedagogical proposals, are tasked with developing and expanding on the curriculum established by regional authorities, adapting it to the specific characteristics of each child and their socio-educational context (RD 95/2022). The competencies outlined in the framework serve as guiding objectives for the first cycle and as regulatory foundations for the second.

In Catalonia, the curriculum and pedagogical practices for ECEC were initially regulated under Law 12/2009. This legislation specifically addressed the 0–2 stage, emphasising educational content related to motor development, body control, early communication and language skills, social interaction, and exploration of the children's immediate environment (Art. 56.6). The law also required the government to define the educational content for the first cycle of ECEC, establish the minimum characteristics of centres providing these services, and determine facility and staff qualification requirements in collaboration with local councils. Thus, as early as 2009, Catalonia demonstrated a commitment to enhancing ECEC quality.

The new national framework introduced in 2022 prompted the Catalan Government to enact Decree 21/2023, which reorganises ECEC services under Articles 12–15. This decree governs planning, educational content, and centre operations for children aged 0–3, specifying staffing

[8] The law 95/2022, which laid the groundwork for regional policy-making on curriculum and pedagogical practices, involved the participation of unions through various amendments. More in particular, Spanish unions introduced amendments aimed at promoting pedagogical practices that address social inequalities, emphasise education in values, foster respect for diversity, and strengthen the early introduction to reading and writing, among other objectives. The discussion also took place in Parliament. During a parliamentary hearing, the PSOE Minister defended the new curricular model, which she described as being oriented toward a competency-based approach. According to her, its structure strengthens the integration of key competencies outlined in the Council of the European Union's Recommendation. The development of the curricular proposal was carried out collaboratively with all regional administrations, involving ministry professionals alongside teachers from various stages (0-3, 0-6 and so on), specialties, and regions, as stated by the minister. However, the curricular proposal under RD 95/2022 also faced significant opposition, especially from far-right party Vox, which was against introducing "gender ideology" into a transversal curriculum – for all ages, including 0-3. The conservative PP stated that the new curriculum would increase inequalities among children, since some regions would cover more content than others. As an alternative, they proposed a single curriculum for the entire country.

requirements, teacher qualifications, and personnel roles. It outlines competencies such as linguistic, mathematical, and social development, which are presented as guidelines for the 0–2 stage and mandatory for the 3–6 stage. The curriculum is structured around four developmental axes, tailored to socio-educational contexts and children's needs. Article 8 regulates pedagogical practices, emphasising inclusive, high-quality education while respecting diverse developmental rhythms. For rural schools integrating 0–3 children, the decree mandates adapting practices to their routines within the school project. It also prioritises linguistic projects reflecting children's sociolinguistic realities, with Catalan as the primary language of instruction. These measures align with values such as equal opportunities, coeducation, gender equality, sustainability, responsible consumption, and democratic awareness.

The Community of Madrid recently enacted Decree 36/2022, which establishes the curriculum and pedagogical framework for ECEC. Unlike Catalonia, Madrid had no prior legislation specifically regulating the curriculum for the 0–2 age group. Consequently, this decree serves to regionally implement the provisions of the national framework introduced by Royal Decree 95/2022. The decree outlines curricular principles closely aligned with national guidelines, focusing on key developmental goals such as body control, self-concept, emotional regulation, emotional security, and confidence to promote healthy lifestyles. It also emphasises social interactions for identity formation, highlighting values like friendship, respect, and empathy. However, in contrast to Catalonia's framework, Madrid's decree does not explicitly mention values such as equal opportunities, gender equality, responsible consumption, or democratic awareness. A notable feature is its emphasis on "Attention to Differences", stressing the importance of addressing individual and diverse student needs to ensure equity and inclusion by adapting educational practices to each child's characteristics, development, and interests.

5.3. Outcome quality: a lack of results evaluation in the 0-2 stage

Evaluation in Spain is overseen by the High State Inspectorate, the National Institute for Educational Evaluation (INEE), and regional educational inspection bodies. However, evaluation processes are inconsistent, and there is no specific system of quality indicators for the 0–5 age group (Otero-Mayer, 2021). While the LOMLOE provides a general framework, evaluations of ECEC in Spain have been limited. Almost all regions include both internal and external mandatory evaluations conducted by inspectors from regional education departments. Yet schools mainly carry out self-assessments, while regions do not publish inspectors' procedures. Evaluation at the 3–5 stage is more standardised, focusing on quality in terms of areas and competencies acquired by children. At the end of this stage, individual reports are prepared for the transition to primary school, but there is no systematised external evaluation. As a result, there is no transparent monitoring of children's outcomes across regions.

Beyond administrative evaluation, few studies have been conducted by external agencies or researchers. Otero-Mayer (2021) identified one pilot study (2005) and five reports from 1996 to 2012, all focused mainly on the 3–6 age range, with no specific studies dedicated to the 0–2 stage. These studies consistently found low quality in this early stage. The most recent report (Sandstrom, 2012) highlighted deficiencies in developmentally appropriate activities and instruction, with high student-to-staff ratios linked to lower-quality language modelling, teacher

feedback, and personal care routines. At the same time, the study noted a positive classroom climate and constructive relationships with families.

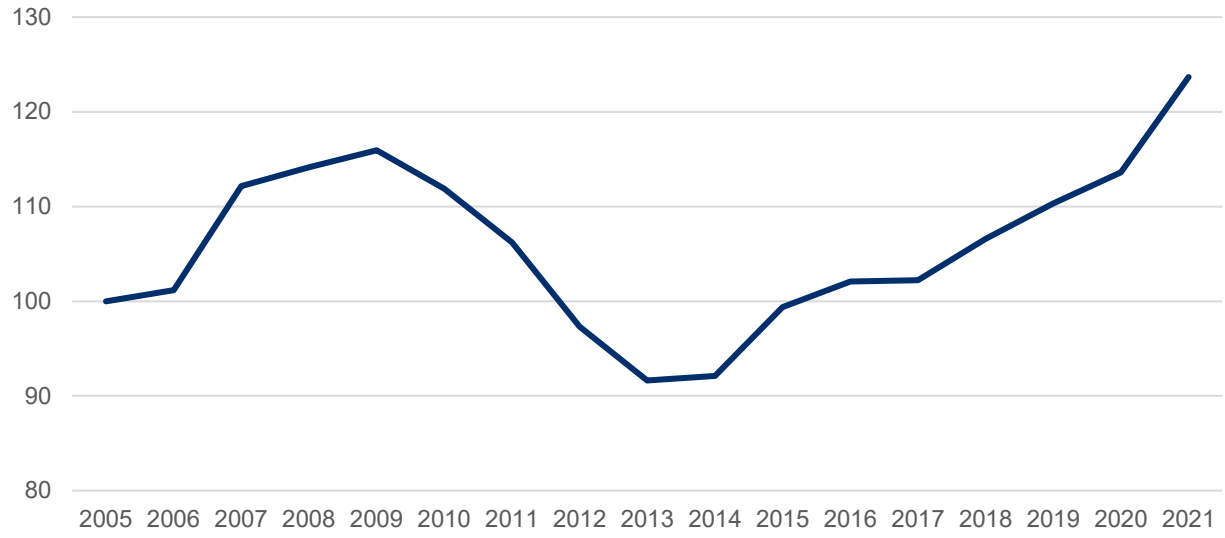
In this context, Otero-Mayer et al. (2021) call for the development of systematic quality indicators for 0–5 education and reliable tools to generate comparable results, similar to those used in other European countries.

6. Unstable public financing but diminishing costs for households in the 0-2 stage

As explained in the introduction, Spain has a multi-level and highly decentralised ECEC system, where financing and management responsibilities fall on the regions, which in turn may delegate them to municipalities, especially the 0-2 stage —municipalities manage around 75% of public centres in this stage. As a result, financing arrangements and public ECEC prices for schooling and related services vary across regions and municipalities, and so do family costs of the 0-2 stage. These costs have also fluctuated over time, with financial burdens on households rising during economic crises and austerity cycles and easing in periods of fiscal expansion. Support for 0-2 ECEC stage expansion has likewise depended on the central government's discretionary funding plans —typically introduced by social democratic governments in times of fiscal expansion— as well as on fiscal rules imposed on the regions, whether relaxed or strict deficit limits.

Unfortunately, available statistics on overall public financing of ECEC in Spain do not distinguish between its two stages. In terms of GDP, spending in ECEC by regional and municipal administrations since the beginning of the XXIst century has remained stagnant at approximately 0.5% of GDP (Ibáñez, 2021). Spanish regions and municipalities spent 5,851 euros per student in 2021, compared to 3,850 euros in 2005 (Ministry of Education, 2024a; Ministry of Education, 2024b). Graph 10 illustrates the evolution relative to 2005, using 2005 prices as the base. The austerity period following the 2008 crisis led to a significant decrease in real ECEC spending, reaching a low point of 8% less in 2013 than in 2005. Spending levels began to recover and only surpassed 2005 levels after 2018. In 2021, expenditure per student was 24% higher in real terms than in 2005.

Figure 10. Evolution of the average spending per student in ECEC (0-5 year olds), in relative terms and prices of 2005.



Source: own elaboration with data from the Ministry of Education. Spending statistics follow the Normalised International Classification on Education.

In previous sections, we saw that over the past decades the central government developed financial programmes under discretionary investment schemes to support ACs in building new centres. These include the Educa3 Plan in 2008, which was halted due to austerity measures following the 2008 crisis, and the more recent EU Next Generation funds post-Covid-19 crisis.

Box 1: The implementation of the NGEU funds for ECEC in Spain

In 2021, under NGEU's Component 21, the Spanish government approved 670 million euros for developing 65,382 new 0–2 stage ECEC places over a three-year period by 2024. The programme aimed to extend children's rights by ensuring access to an affordable, inclusive, and high-quality ECEC service at the 0–2 stage. It emphasises prioritizing access for students in areas with higher poverty or social exclusion risks, as well as in rural areas, to counteract economic, social, territorial, and cultural inequalities.

The funds covered both investments in new infrastructure and equipment, and the running costs for up to two-thirds of the new places to support the initial rising costs. The total amount was based on an estimated annual cost per student of 5,471 euros, with 67% of that cost attributed to personnel expenses. Funds were distributed annually through agreements between the Autonomous Communities (ACs) and the central government, while the educational administrations of each AC were required to establish agreements with municipalities for fund allocation. The allocation to ACs was determined by multiplying the population of 0–2-year-olds by three weighted factors: 40% for the educational level of the 25–64-year-old population, 40% for the schooling rate of 0–2-year-olds, and 20% for population dispersion.

According to a recent study, by December 2023, 57% of the initial 670 million euros had been approved, but only 15.5% had been executed (Ministry of Social Rights and Educo, 2024). In total, it is estimated

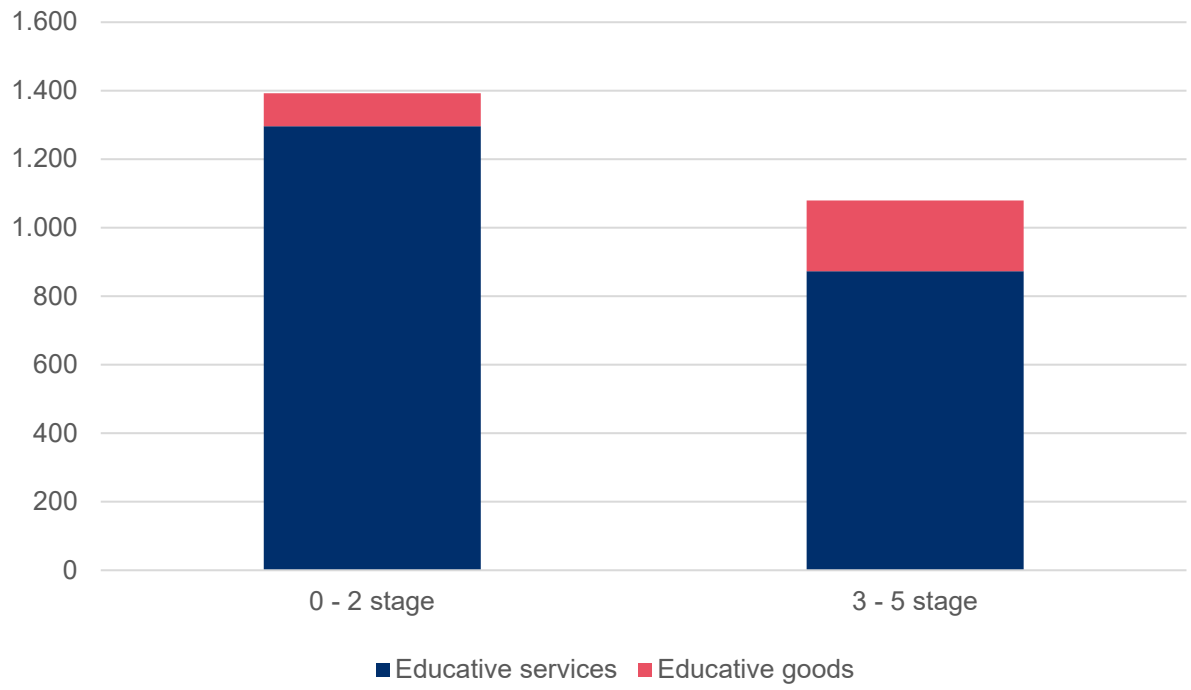
that by that date, 16,400 places had been created with these funds—only 25.1% of the target. The execution of the budget has been extended to the end of 2025. As signalled by Navarro-Varas and Mayordomo (2024), a potential reason for the programme low execution could be the lack of guarantee for funding centre running costs beyond the duration of the programme, which is seen for administration as a future burden.

However, there is significant variation across regions in both the executed budget and the number of places created. For instance, the Balearic Islands achieved 66% of their place creation target with only 12.8% of the budget executed, whereas other regions show more balanced figures. These differences may be related to how the budget is allocated, whether for constructing new places or covering running costs. Additionally, Andalusia rejected part of the NGEU funds, possibly because the funds cannot be used to subsidise private ECEC—a priority for the current Andalusian government.

The ambivalent financing responsibility of the administrations, especially ACs, which are the ones with the higher financing responsibility in ECEC, translates into also changing costs for households and municipalities. We lack national data but the case of Catalonia can be illustrative. From 2009 to 2017 the regional government reduced its yearly transfers to municipalities for funding municipal nurseries (Palomera, 2022). From around 80 million euros for municipal ECEC running costs and 20 million euros for building new centres to 0 euros in both items in 2015. It was only in 2018 that financing increased again, recovering spending levels of 2010 in 2019 and reaching in 2022 120 milion euros for running costs and 20 for building new centres. Municipalities, in turn, had to run deficits or increase prices for the 0-2 stage, leading to higher costs for households.

Unfortunately, it is also hard to find data on the costs that households pay for 0-2 stage ECEC services. Public centres in the 3–6 stage are funded by regions and free of charge. However, it is important to mention that other significant costs can still impose a considerable burden on low-income households. These include expenses for meals, educational materials, and out-of-school activities (including summer programmes). The most recent national data available on ECEC costs comes from the Household Expenditure in Education Survey conducted by the National Institute of Statistics for the 2019–2020 academic year. On average, in Graph 11 we see that households using 0–2 stage ECEC services spent approximately €1,400 per year on ECEC services (schooling, meals, etc.) and goods (books and other materials), while those using the 3–5 stage spent €1,080 (see Graph A6 for details on the weights of each type of good purchased). The relatively similar costs are likely due to the inclusion of private services in the data for both 0-2 and 3-5 stages. According to the survey, out of the costs of educative services, schooling fees accounted for only 50% of the average costs associated with ECEC services. A quarter of the costs were spent on school meals, and a tenth on out-of-school activities.

Figure 11. Average yearly household expenditures on educational services and goods by ECEC stage, 2019-2020



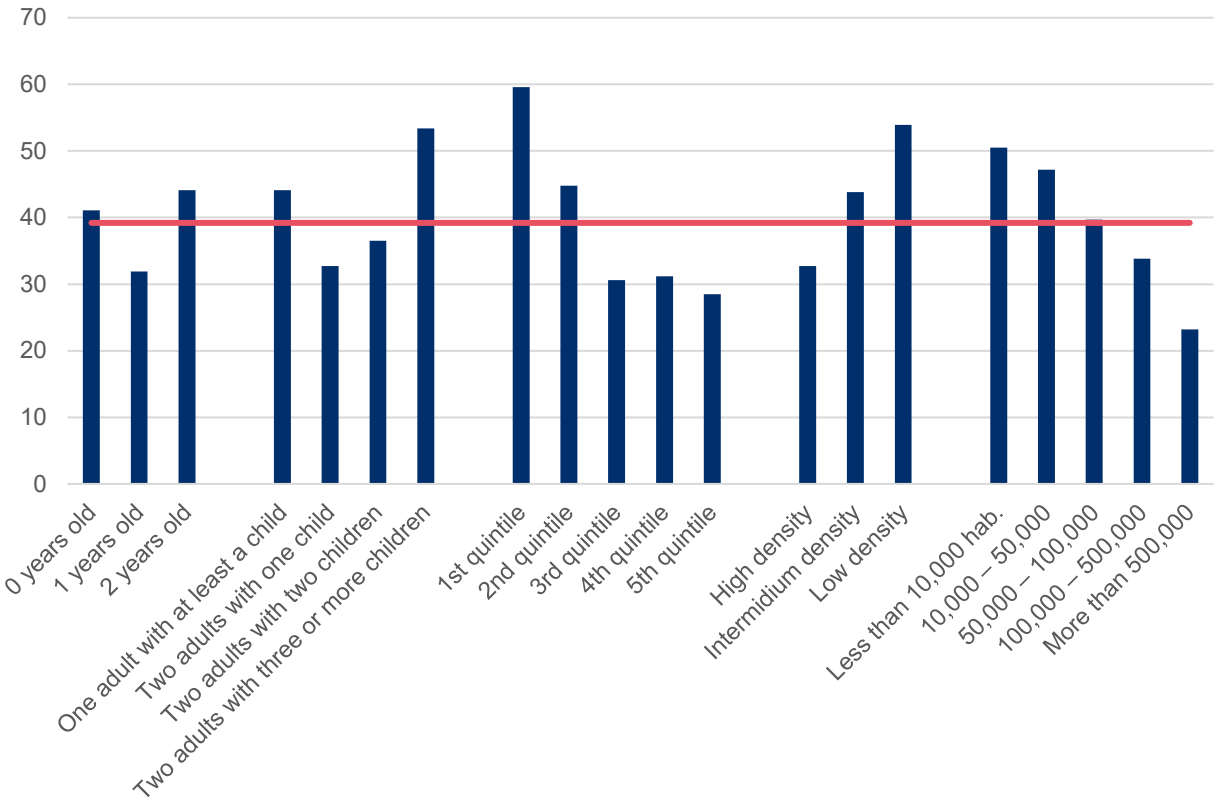
Source: Own elaboration with data from the Household Expenditure in Education Survey of the National Institute of Statistics. The survey asks net average costs for households, including tax credits and other policies.

Nevertheless, beyond averages, cost differences can vary significantly for households receiving scholarships or other forms of financial aid, with the impact of such aid being greater for the second stage. According to the survey, households with children in the first ECEC stage that received a scholarship (of any type of administration) experienced an average reduction of just €87 per year in ECEC service costs, compared to a reduction of €414 per year for those in the second stage. Tax credits provided by both the state and ACs must also be taken into account. However, the survey does not clarify whether households factored these tax credits into their reported expenditures. If not, the state tax credit of €1,000 for ECEC costs could alleviate up to 70% of average costs. When also ACs' tax credits (see Table A1 in the Appendix) are included, average ECEC costs in certain regions could be reduced to near-zero levels.

However, these estimations based on 2019–2020 data do not account for the recent expansion of fee elimination in various regions, which should have considerably further reduced average ECEC costs for public provision. Survey estimates indicate that in 2024 around 40% of households using ECEC for children aged 0 to 2 declare they do not have to pay schooling fees (see Graph 12). The rate reaches 44% for 2-year-olds but decreases to 32% for 1-year-olds. Data by household type reveal that the percentage of households exempt from schooling fees increases with the number of children: 33% for households with two adults and one child, 37% for those with two children, and 53% for those with three or more children. Single-parent

households also exhibit higher fee exemption rates, reaching 44%. In terms of household income, gratuity is clearly progressive in Spain, though not very targeted. In the first income quintile, 60% of children do not have to pay for schooling services; this figure decreases to 45% in the second quintile and to 30% in the remaining quintiles. Figure 13 also shows that households in lower-density and smaller municipalities have a higher proportion of children receiving free schooling services. This is likely because public centres constitute a larger share of providers in these areas, while larger municipalities tend to have wealthier households demanding more extensive private ECEC options.

Figure 12. Households Reporting Free Schooling in the 0–2 ECEC Stage in Spain in 2024, by household characteristics and out of the total using 0-2 ECEC services

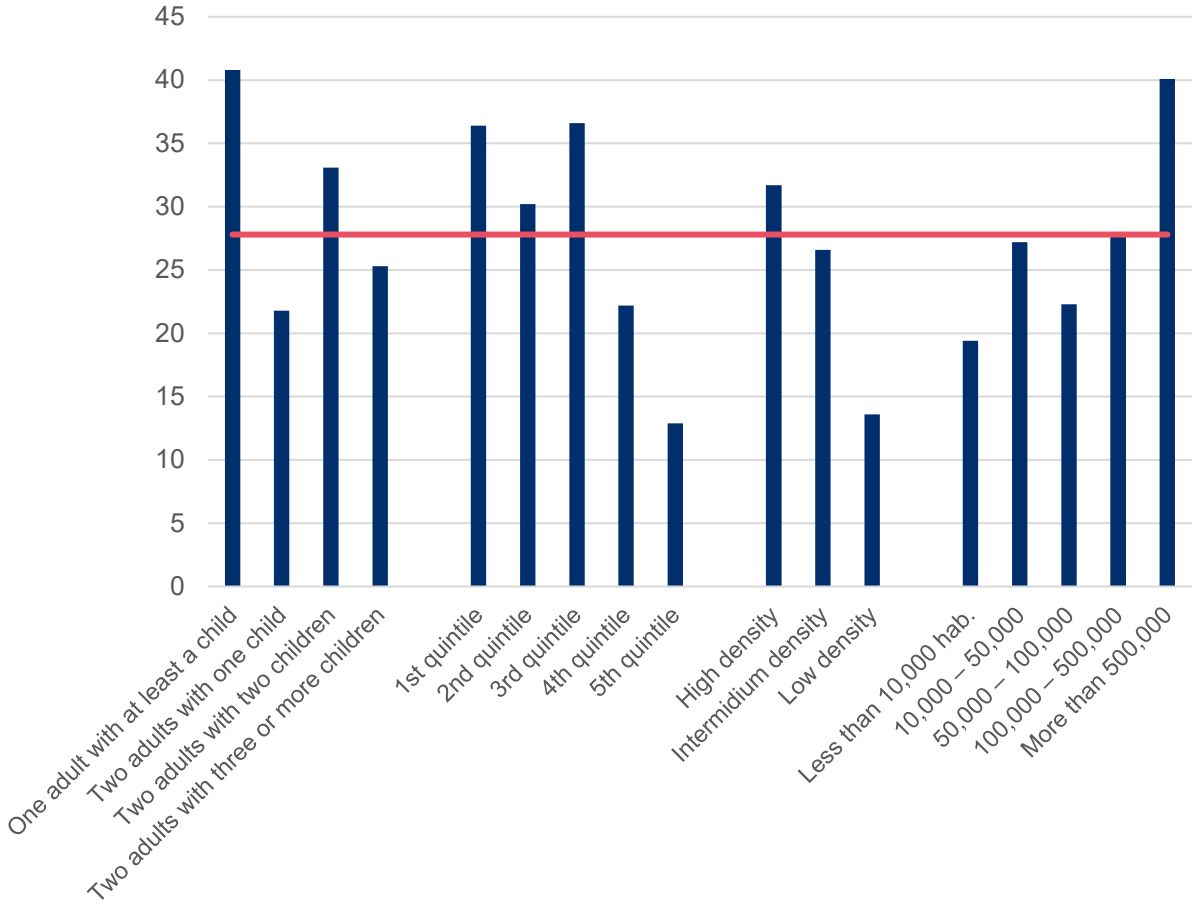


Source: Living Conditions Survey 2024 Module, Institute of National Statistics. Note: the horizontal line represents the average for all surveyed households with children below 3 years old using 0-2 ECEC services.

Survey estimates for 2024 also provide insight into the difficulties households face in paying for 0–2 stage ECEC services (Figure 13). We aggregated responses that indicated low, medium, or high levels of difficulty in covering ECEC costs. On average, 28% of households in Spain report difficulties with these costs. Single-parent households and those residing in large municipalities are particularly affected, with 40% in each category reporting challenges. As expected, difficulties generally decrease with higher income quintiles, with the exception of

the third quintile, where 36.5% of households report difficulties—the same percentage as in the first quintile.

Figure 13. Percentage of households using 0–2 stage ECEC services in Spain in 2024 reporting low, medium, or high difficulties in covering ECEC costs, by household characteristics



Source: Living Conditions Survey 2024 Module, Institute of National Statistics. Note: the horizontal line represents the average for all surveyed households with children below 3 years old.

To gain a deeper understanding of cost and financing structures of public ECEC, we examine the municipal cases of Madrid and Barcelona. In both cases, prices have been reduced considerably in the last decade. In the case of Barcelona, there has been a progression towards a reduction in prices of municipal ECEC (see Table 3). Before 2015, a household would be required to pay 290 euros per month (including meals) in a municipal centre. Low-income households were eligible for price reductions of up to 90% of the prices but based on budget availability. Therefore, a household with one child and an annual income of 12,000 euros would have to assume in the application the cost (a total sum of 2,959 euros a year) and apply for a price reduction. In the case of receiving a 50% reduction, it would have paid 1,497 euros. A household with higher incomes would pay the full cost, around 2,959 euros. In that year neither the central government nor Catalonia offered tax credits.

In 2017 the municipality introduced a sliding-scale price system for both school and meal fees based on household income and members, and in 2022 the Catalan government implemented the gratuity of schooling fees for 2-year-old children. Also, the central government offered the tax credits mentioned in the introduction. Therefore, in 2023 a household with an income of 11,951 euros with a 1-year-old child would pay 50 euros a month (550 euros a year) and be able to receive a tax credit for all the ECEC costs. In the case of a household with the 2023 Catalan average household income (38,888 euros) with one 1-year-old child and one 2-year-old child, it would pay only the meal fees for the former (913 euros a year based on the sliding-scale system) and 2,310 euros for the latter. The household would be able to receive a central government's tax credit for the whole 3,223 euros a year. In sum, from 2015 to 2023, households up to a certain income, including the average household income, have all the ECEC costs covered for a municipal centre (this is not the case for private centres that have a much higher cost). However, according to the municipality, on average households still pay around one fourth of all ECEC municipal costs, probably due to the capacity of the sliding-scale system to reduce prices for low-income households and increase it for high-income households, which paid more in 2023 (395 euros per month was the highest fee) than in 2015 (290 euros per month).

Table 3. Estimated yearly costs for different household typologies in a municipal centre in Barcelona and Madrid

	Barcelona		Madrid	
Number of children in household and household yearly income	2014	2023	2014	2023
1-year-old and 12,000 euros	1,497€ (in case of 50% price reduction)	0€ after tax credits	2,471€	0€ after tax credits
1-year-old, 2-year old and 38,888 euros	1,497€ (in case of 50% price reduction)	0€ after tax credits		
1-year-old and 60,000 euros	2,959€ per children	0€ after tax credits		
1-year old, and income above 50,000 euros			3,901€	0€ after tax credits
1-year old, two more children and income above 50,000 euros			1,950€	0€ after tax credits

Source: own elaboration of administrative data.

In Madrid, in 2014, a sliding-scale price system was implemented for school fees, applying only to households with incomes below 25,000 euros per capita per year. A household with one child and an annual income of 12,000 euros would pay 225 euros per month, totalling

2,471 euros per year (the cost would increase to 3,614 euros for children aged between 0 and 1 year). For households earning more than 50,000 euros, the cost for 1-year-old children would rise to 3,901 euros. Households with more than two children would see their costs reduced by 50 percent, to 1,950 euros. Thus, high-income households with more than two children could end up paying less than low-income households with one or two children. Following the elimination of school fees in 2019, costs were considerably reduced, with households only needing to pay for meal fees (96 euros a month). Consequently, both a household with an annual income of 12,000 euros and one with the average household income would pay approximately 1,056 euros per year. The central government tax credit for ECEC costs allows for the deduction of all the expenses.

In sum, there has been a significant reduction in ECEC costs, including a reduction (or elimination) of public ECEC fees and an expansion of subsidies and tax credits for both public and private ECEC costs. In municipalities such as Barcelona and Madrid, a household with an average income can access the first stage of ECEC incurring very little or no cost after accounting for tax credits. In both cases, the move towards the gratuity of schooling fees has been promoted and financed by the autonomous community governments. However, as mentioned previously, municipal strategies have differed. Barcelona introduced a strong progressive sliding-scale system that increases prices for very high incomes, and this reduction has also been applied to school meals. In Madrid, however, school meals remain costly, although households can reduce their costs through a tax credit by the central government. Madrid also provides significant subsidies for costly private ECEC centres, strongly prioritising working mothers and large families over income criteria. In summary, while public policy in Barcelona seems to have followed an economically progressive perspective, in Madrid, public resources have not followed the same path, focusing instead on prioritising working mothers and devoting resources to medium- and high-income households.

7. Conclusion

In Spain, the second ECEC stage (ages 3 to 5) is universal, with free provision in public centres and subsidies for many private centres. Integrated into the education system, it differs notably from the first stage, which is neither guaranteed by law nor universally free across all ACs. Nevertheless, households still face significant costs in the second stage, particularly for school meals and educational materials. Challenges also remain in quality, including high child–staff ratios, limited systemic evaluation of children's outcomes, and the deterioration of teachers' working conditions in recent years due to rising living costs, highly connected to inflation.

The first ECEC stage (ages 0 to 2) is rapidly acquiring an educational role and moving toward integration into the education system. Enrolment has expanded significantly across the whole territory, with growing numbers of public centres but private centres still playing a major role —supported by public funding through subsidies and tax credits. Many of these benefits are not targeted at low-income mothers but extend to households with median or higher incomes. A distinctive feature compared with other familialistic countries such as Italy is that this expansion has occurred across regions regardless of GDP per capita. While falling birth rates previously eased demand, demographic projections suggest stabilisation or renewed growth from 2025, especially driven by immigration, which will increase pressure on governments in urban areas.

Despite enrolment growth, unmet demand remains acute in both very small and very large municipalities, with more than half of applicants rejected each year in Madrid and Barcelona. Rising female labour market participation has further increased demand for ECEC, as well as households' willingness and need to pay for it. However, many women continue to work in feminised sectors with precarious conditions, which limits their capacity to afford high childcare costs. The result is that when fees are high, this can push households into financial strain or discourage women from taking up full-time employment.

Costs for both public and private ECEC have declined due to fee elimination in public centres and subsidies in some private centres. To assess redistributive effects, the entire policy mix must be considered: fee waivers, scholarships, price reductions for low-income households, and tax credits. While these measures advance universalisation, inequalities in access persist, largely shaped by maternal income, education, and nationality. If access inequalities remain while fees are eliminated, universalisation risks exacerbating divides between richer and poorer households.

Many ACs and municipalities have introduced access criteria benefiting low-income mothers, but many also prioritise working mothers regardless of income, reinforcing the role of ECEC as a work–life balance tool. Given the diversity across ACs and municipalities, it is difficult to generalise Spain's social investment trajectory. Still, considering access rules, fees, and tax credits, it is clear that selective universalism aimed at equalising children's educational opportunities is weak and, in some cases, overshadowed by the prioritisation of working mothers irrespective of their income. This runs the risk of making ECEC a work–life balance policy detached from a rights-based approach aimed at equalising children's opportunities, irrespective of the mother's employment status.

Quality is also central to understanding ECEC's redistributive impact. However, the evidence in this paper indicates that expansion of the first stage of ECEC has often relied on cost-containment strategies. Ratios have improved but remain above European recommendations, especially for 1-year-olds. Further, they are negatively correlated with regional GDP per capita, limiting effectiveness for disadvantaged households. Real wages for teachers have declined since 2010 under austerity, and private-sector workers earn close to the minimum wage. Regional variation is substantial across these two dimensions, with some administrations offering stronger investment and pay.

Recent legislative reforms have highlighted the educational role of the first stage, improving worker qualifications and curricula. Since 2020, national laws have upgraded qualification requirements, but fewer than half of ACs have fully implemented them. Oversight gaps persist, and private centres—where many children are enrolled—remain less regulated and monitored. Subsidies for private providers appear driven more by expansion and cost-containment than by quality. To sum up, cross-regional differences on ECEC quality call for the need to promote harmonisation to ensure adequate and equal children development in all ACs.

Spain's decentralised system grants municipalities autonomy in centre networks, access criteria, and fee policies. Financing, however, has been unstable. As a result, public spending per child has stagnated over the last two decades due to austerity. This is partly due to the discretionary support of the central government, expanding places at times of fiscal expansion but without a stable long-term commitment. The Next Generation EU Funds demonstrated potential to boost enrolments and reduce costs, but uptake has been limited, with many regions reluctant to create new centres given the lack of guaranteed operating-cost funding. Fiscal restrictions on municipalities with deficits have further constrained construction. However, some regions have also shifted costs onto municipalities during austerity, overburdening local budgets, particularly in segregated areas with rising social needs but weak fiscal capacity.

In conclusion, even though Spain is expanding childcare services quickly, it still faces major challenges in achieving universalisation of the first ECEC stage. Reducing access inequalities, lowering household costs, raising quality standards, and stabilising financing across levels of government remain as priority areas for policy action. While progress has been made, the weaknesses of the second stage highlight that universalisation alone is insufficient without investment in quality, monitoring, staffing, and working conditions. Private centres remain central in the first stage, yet as public supply grows, they may face declining demand, financial difficulties, and closures, creating risks of unmet demand and teacher job losses. The present and future priorities of administrations in ECEC policy design will determine whether ECEC serves as a tool for reducing household and child inequalities, which is highly relevant in the Spanish context of high child poverty and unmet care needs.

References

Abrassart, A. and Bonoli, G. (2015) Availability, Cost or Culture?:Obstacles to Childcare Services for Low-Income Families. *Journal of Social Policy*, 44 (4), 787-806. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0047279415000288

Alvariño, M. (2025). Care at the Crossroads: How Policy Feedback Shaped Competing Feminist Advocacy for Parental Leave Reform in Spain. *Politics & Policy*, 53(1), e70005. https://doi.org/10.1111/polp.70005

Airef (2023) *Proyecciones demográficas 2022-2070. Documento técnico 1/23*. Available at: https://www.airef.es/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/OPINI%C3%93N-SOSTENIBILIDAD/230324.-DT.1.23ProyeccionesDemogra%CC%81ficas-2022-2070.pdf

Blanco, I. (2024) Segregació urbana, desigualtats educatives i polítiques de resposta. In *L'estat de l'educació a Catalunya. Anuari 2024* (pp. 496-526). Barcelona: Fundació Jaume Bofill. Available at: https://fundaciobofill.cat/uploads/docs/p/0/i/dsr-04anuari2024segregacio-urbana111224.pdf

CCOO (2023) *Enmiendas de la Plataforma Reivindicativa XIII CONVENIO COLECTIVO DE ÁMBITO ESTATAL DE CENTROS DE ASISTENCIA Y EDUCACIÓN INFANTIL (Código de Convenio nº 99005615011990)*. Comisiones Obreras.

CECE (2024, February 20) *Las patronales informan sobre la situación de bloqueo en la negociación colectiva del XIII convenio colectivo de ámbito estatal de centros de asistencia y educación infantil*. Actualidad Docente. Available at: https://actualidaddocente.cece.es/actualidad/noticias/las-patronales-informan-sobre-la-situacion-de-bloqueo-en-la-negociacion-colectiva-del-xiii-convenio-colectivo-de-ambito-estatal-de-centros-de-asistencia-y-educacion-infantil/

Cobano-Delgado Palma, V. C., Llorent-Bedmar, V., & Navarro-Granados, M. (2020) La formación inicial de los profesionales de la Educación Infantil en Inglaterra, Francia y España. *Profesorado, Revista De Currículum Y Formación Del Profesorado*, *24*(2), 436–460. https://doi.org/10.30827/profesorado.v24i2.14091

CSIF (2024, June 21) *CSIF denuncia que las plazas son insuficientes para cumplir el objetivo del 8 por ciento de interinidad: hay un déficit de plantilla de casi 44.000 docentes*. CSIF. Available at: https://www.csif.es/es/articulo/cataluna/ensenanza/54034

Dancausa Millán, M. G., Millán Vázquez de la Torre, M. G., Hernandez Rojas, R., & Jimber del Rio, J. A. (2021). The Spanish labor market: a gender approach. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, *18*(5), 2742.

El País (2023, October 31) *Crisis en la educación infantil en Madrid: huelga por salarios bajos en la privada y cursos con retrasos en la pública*. El País. Available at: https://elpais.com/espana/madrid/2023-10-31/crisis-en-la-educacion-infantil-en-madrid-huelga-por-salarios-bajos-en-la-privada-y-cursos-con-retrasos-en-la-publica.html

ElDiario.es (2023, October 18) *Educación infantil, a la huelga contra su eterna precariedad: "Estoy sola con 14 niños de 1 y 2 años y cobro el salario mínimo"*. eldiario.es. Available at: https://www.eldiario.es/sociedad/educacion-infantil-huelga-eterna-precariedad-sola-14-ninos-1-2-anos-cobro-salario-minimo110608319.html

ElDiario.es (2024, February 6) *La falta de personal sigue castigando a las escuelas infantiles: el bienestar social no recibe a los niños y se cierran aulas*. eldiario.es. Available at: https://www.eldiario.es/canariasahora/sociedad/falta-personal-sigue-castigando-escuelas-infantiles-bienestar-social-no-recibir-hijos-cierre-aulas-folias111218972.html

ElDiario.es (2024, November 28) *Educación infantil: huelga eterna y precariedad, con solo 14 niños por educador y sueldo mínimo*. eldiario.es. Available at: https://www.eldiario.es/sociedad/educacion-infantil-huelga-eterna-precariedad-sola-14-ninos-1-2-anos-cobro-salario-minimo110608319.html

Esping-andersen, G. (2009) *Incomplete revolution: Adapting welfare states to women's new roles*. Polity Press.

Europa Press (2024, September 25) *PSOE Palma advierte de la falta de gestión de recursos en educación infantil*. Europa Press. https://www.europapress.es/illes-balears/noticia-psoe-palma-advierte-falta-gestion-recursos-educacion-infantil-20240925102743.html

European Comission (1996) *Quality targets in services for young children. European Commission Network on Childcare and Other Measures to Reconcile the Employment and Family Responsibilities of Men and Women.* Luxembourg: European Commission. Available at: https://childcarecanada.org/sites/default/files/Qualitypaperthree.pdf

European Commission / EACEA / Eurydice (2023) *Structural indicators for monitoring education and training systems in Europe 2023*. EU Publications. Available at: https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2797/670097

Eurycide España (2023) *Ratio alumno/profesor en el primer ciclo de Educación Infantil*. Eurydice España. https://www.educacionfpydeportes.gob.es/dam/jcr:889c0725-04ac-43bf-865c-bf6605614211/2-4-2-4-1-1-ratio-alumno-profesor-primer-ciclo-ei-ca-b02-28022019.pdf

Gorjón and Lizarraga (2024) *Family friendly policies and employment equality. An analysis of maternity and paternity leave equalization in Spain*. ISEAK. Available at: https://iseak.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/family-friendly-policies-and-employment-equality-an-analysis-of-maternity-and-paternity-leave-equalization-in-spain-2024-02-08-family-friendly-policies-and-employment-equality-an-analysis-of-maternity.pdf

https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/faa62d85-932d-11ee-8aa6-01aa75ed71a1/language-en

https://www.ine.es/jaxiT3/Datos.htm?t=10879#tabs-grafico

Ibáñez, Z., León, M., Soler, Ll., Alvarino, M. (2021) Fostering work-life balance for precarious workers: culture and social protection systems in comparative perspective. *Euroship Working Paper* No. 5. Available at: https://euroship-research.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/EUROSHIP-Working-Paper-5.pdf

ILO (2023) Spain. Featured indicators. ILO. Available at: https://genderdata.worldbank.org/en/economies/spain

INE (2022) Proyecciones de población. 2022 – 2072. INE. Available at: https://www.ine.es/prensa/pp20222072.pdf

INE (2023) Decil de salarios del empleo principal. Encuesta de Población Activa (EPA). https://www.ine.es/dyngs/Prensa/dsEPA2023.htm

INE (2024) Tasa de empleo y brecha de género según grupos de edad y period. Available at: https://www.ine.es/jaxiT3/Tabla.htm?t=10879

INE (2024) ECV Modulo https://www.ine.es/jaxi/Datos.htm?tpx=74784

IVÀLUA (2020) Procés d'admissió de l'alumnat a la ciutat de Barcelona. Avaluació del disseny i implementación. Available at https://ivalua.cat/sites/default/files/2021-05/

Informe_Assignacio_Escolar_Marc2021.pdf

León, M., Palomera, D., Ibáñez, Z., Martínez-Virto, L. and Gabaldón-Estevan, D. (2022) Between equal opportunities and work-life balance: balancing institutional design in early years education in Spain. *Papers,* 107 (3), e3084. https://doi.org/10.5565/rev/papers.3084

Maestripieri, L., Palomera, D., and Rizza, R. (2023) Bridging gaps: how investment in public childcare affects women's employment in Italy and Spain*. South European Society and Politics*, 28(4), 439–468. https://doi.org/10.1080/13608746.2024.2369467

Melhuish, E., Quinn, L., Sylva, K., Sammons, P., Siraj-Blatchford, I., & Taggart, B. (2013) Preschool affects longer term literacy and numeracy: results from a general population longitudinal study in Northern Ireland. *School Effectiveness and School Improvement*, *24*(2), 234-250. https://doi.org/10.1080/09243453.2012.749796

Ministry of Education (2024a*) F2. Expenditure in Education per Student, 2018*. Retrieved at: https://www.educacionfpydeportes.gob.es/inee/dam/jcr:f22278d1-f2d4-4544-ab48-ebdb8d99fe53/2018-f2.pdf

Ministry of Education (2024b) *F2. Expenditure* in Education per Student, 2024. Retrieved at: https://www.educacionfpydeportes.gob.es/inee/dam/jcr:a0f37a61-94fb-4a6a-86a4-ccb46f04383b/f2.pdf

Ministry of Social Rights and Educo (2024) Financiación para la Educación de la primera infancia. Available at: https://educowebmedia.blob.core.windows.net/educowebmedia/educospain/media/docs/publicaciones/2023/financiacion_educare.pdf

Millán Vázquez de la Torre, M., Santos Pita, M. D. P., and Pérez Naranjo, L. M. (2015). Análisis del mercado laboral femenino en España: evolución y factores socioeconómicos determinantes del empleo. *Papeles de población*, *21*(84), 197-225. http://www.scielo.org.mx/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S1405-74252015000200008&lng=es&tlng=es

Navarro-Varas, L., and León, M. (2024) ¿Quién gana y quién pierde? el acceso desigual a los recursos de educación y cuidado en la temprana infancia. *Revista Española De Investigaciones Sociológicas*, (182), 81–96. https://doi.org/10.5477/cis/reis.182.81

Navarro-Varas, L., and Mayordomo, E. (2024) L'escola bressol a Catalunya, entre la universalitat i la gratuïtat. Fundació Bofill. Available at: https://fundaciobofill.cat/publicacions/escolabressol-catalunya-gratuitat

Navarro-Varas, L. and Porcel, S. (2024) Infàncies desiguals a la ciutat de Barcelona. Condicions de vida de la població infantil més enllà de la pandèmia. Institut Metròpoli, Cerdanyola del Vallès, 2024. Available at: https://embed.siis.net/ver.php?id=es&Ncodigo=598054&Ntipo=

OECD (2023) *International Migration Outlook 2023*. Paris: OECD Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1787/b0f40584-en

Otero-Mayer, A., Vélaz-de-Medrano, C., & Expósito-Casas, E. (2021) Evaluación de la calidad educativa en el ciclo 0-3: estado de la cuestión Evaluation of the educational quality in cycle 0-3: state of the question. *Revista de Educación*, *394*, 215-240.

Palomera, D. (2022*)* A welfare state for all? An analysis of social inequalities in applications for and use of public childcare services, and the role of social policy in alleviating them. *Papers,* 107 (3), e3068*. https://doi.org/10.5565/rev/papers.3068*

Palomera, D., León, M., Ibáñez, Z. Martínez-Virto, L. and Gabaldón-Estevan, D. (2024) The Institutional Design of Early Childhood Education and Care in Spain and Its Impact on Equal Opportunities. In Gallego, R., González-Motos, S. and Maestripieri, L. (eds), Social Innovation and Welfare Retrenchment, pp. 43-59. Emerald.

Pavolini, E., & Van Lancker, W. (2018) The Matthew effect in childcare use: a matter of policies or preferences? *Journal of European Public Policy*, *25*(6), 878–893. https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2017.1401108

PSPV-PSOE. (2020, July 20) *El PSPV-PSOE demana impulsar un pla de formació específica, coordinada i actualitzada per a educadors i educadores d'infantil i que puguen disposar dels recursos dels Cefire*. PSPV-PSOE. Available at: https://www.pspvpsoe.es/el-pspv-psoe-demana-impulsar-un-pla-de-formacio-especifica-coordinada-i-actualitzada-per-a-educadors-i-educadores-dinfantil-i-que-puguen-disposar-dels-recursos-dels-cefire/

RTVE. (2022, February 1) *El Gobierno aprueba el decreto de educación infantil*. RTVE. https://www.rtve.es/noticias/20220201/gobierno-aprueba-decreto-educacion-infantil/2277103.shtml

Sandstrom, H. (2012) The characteristics and quality of pre-school education in Spain. *International Journal of Early Years Education*, 20(2), 130-158.

Torns, T., and Cáceres, C. R. (2012). Desigualdades de género en el mercado de trabajo: entre la continuidad y la transformación. *Revista de economía crítica*, 14, 178-202. https://revistaeconomiacritica.org/index.php/rec/article/view/509

UGT (2023) *Retribuciones docentes en la Enseñanza Pública, 2023*. UGT. https://ugt-sp.es/wp-content/uploads/boletin-retribuciones-docentes-2023.pdf

UGT. (2024, February 14) *Reunión de la comisión negociadora del XIII convenio de centros privados de educación infantil*. UGT. https://ugt-sp.es/reunion-de-la-comision-negociadora-del-xiii-convenio-de-centros-privados-de-educacion-infantil/

UGT. (2024, March 14) *UGT cifra el seguimiento de la huelga de la educación infantil en un 85% en la gestión indirecta y en un 50% en las privadas*. UGT. https://ugt-sp.es/ugt-sp-cifra-el-seguimiento-de-la-huelga-de-la-educacion-infantil-en-un-85-en-la-gestion-indirecta-y-en-un-50-en-las-privadas/

UNICEF. (2018) *Garantía del derecho a la educación en la primera infancia (0-3 años)* https://www.unicef.es/sites/unicef.es/files/comunicacion/Garantiaderechoeducacion03anos.pdf

UNICEF (2023) *Pobreza infantil*. Available at: https://www.unicef.es/causas/pobreza-infantil

APPENDIX

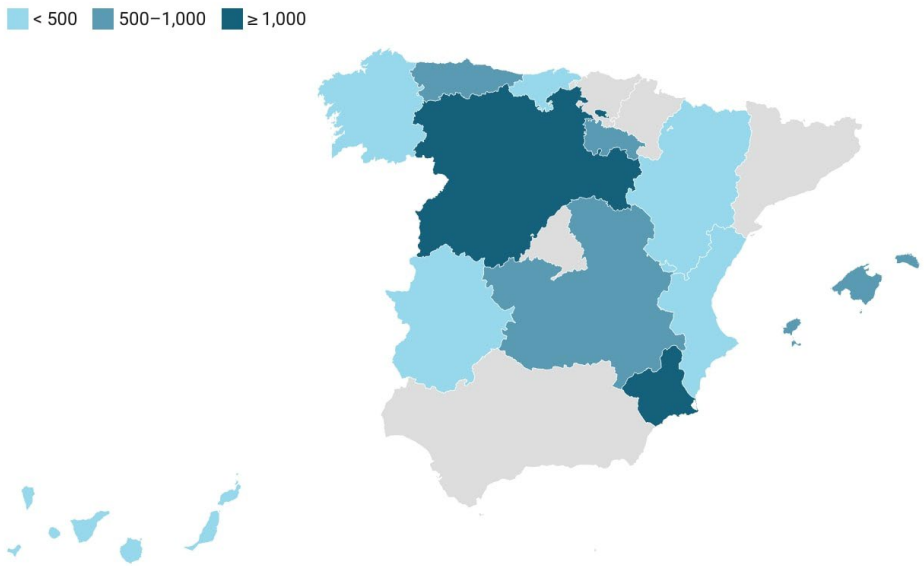
Table A1. Summary of ACs tax credits for ECEC costs in 2023

Region	Proportion costs covered (%)	Max. ECEC tax credit	Maximum income - Individual return	Average taxable income (2022)	Ratio maximum income over average taxable income
Average	**27**	**559**	**27.815**	**22.563**	**1,2**
Castilla y León	100	1.320	18.900	22.214	0,9
Murcia	20	1.000	30.000	20.986	1,4
Balearic Islands*	40	660	33.000	27.329	1,2
La Rioja	20	600	18.030	23.504	0,8
Asturias*	15	500	26.000	24.662	1,1
Castilla-La Mancha	30	500	27.000	20.172	1,3
Canary Islands	18	480	42.900	21.594	2,0
Extremadura*	10	400	28.000	17.762	1,6
Galicia*	30	400	22.000	22.150	1,0
Cantabria	15	300	22.946	23.892	1,0
Valencia	15	297	30.000	22.752	1,3
Aragón	15	250	35.000	23.743	1,5
Andalusia	None				
Catalonia	None				
Madrid	None				
Navarra	None				
Euskadi	None				

Source: own elaboration using the 2022 tax statistics of the Tax Agency of Spain.

* In Asturias quantities double in municipalities under depopulation risk. In the Balearic Islands, quantities increase in the case of single mothers and parents below 36 years old or with a certain degree of disability. In Extremadura, the maximum tax credit is for all children included. In Galicia, the maximum tax credit increases to 600 euros in cases of two or more children under 3 years old under custody.

Image A1. Maximum tax credits for ECEC costs in each Autonomous Community in 2023 (annual and per child)*



Source: own elaboration with administrative data. * In Extremadura, the maximum tax credit is for the household, not each child

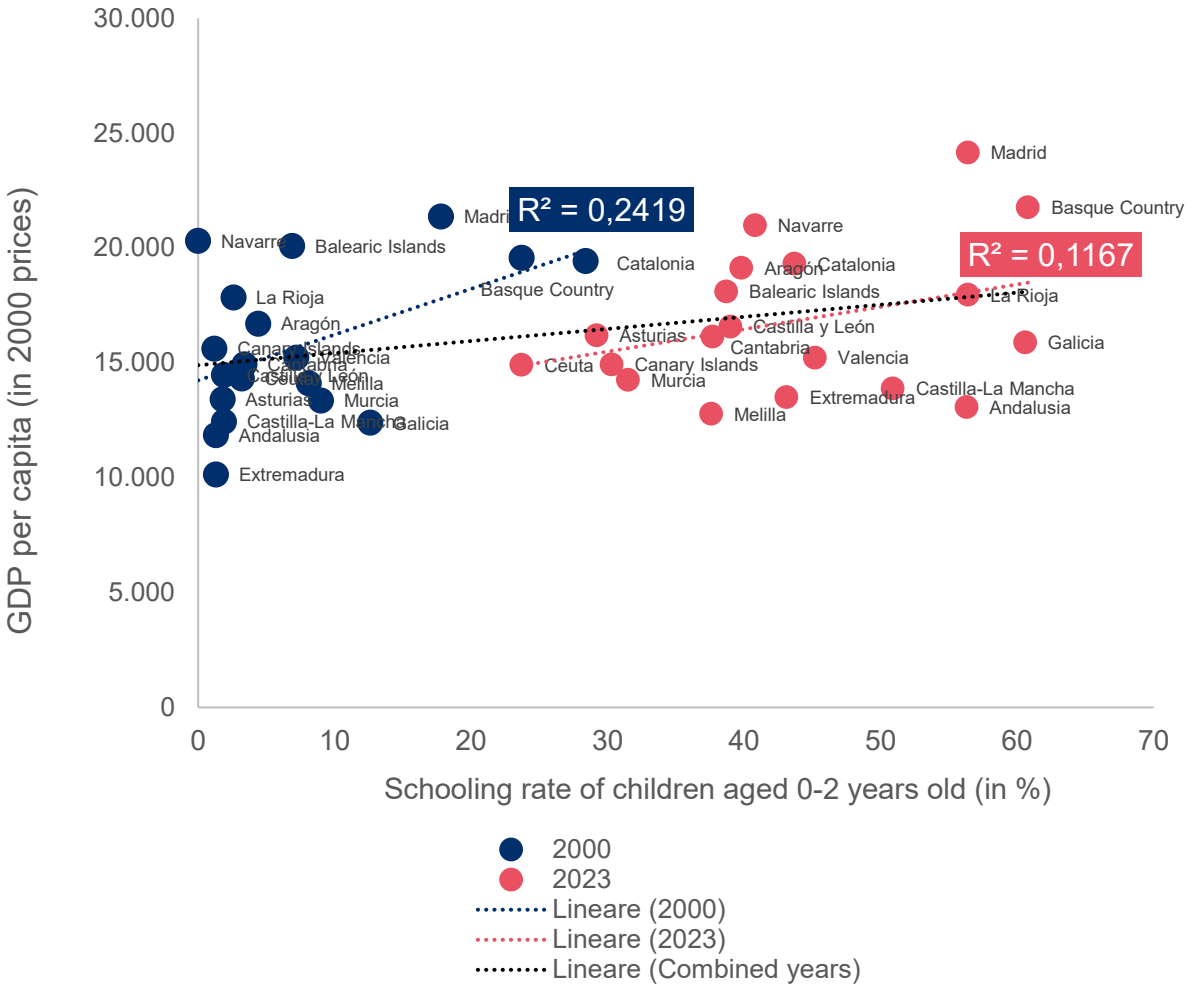
Table A2. Enrolment rates 0-2 years old by Region

Region	2000	2008	2016	2020	2023
Spain	**10,7**	**16,6**	**32,8**	**36,0**	**48,2**
Andalusia	1,3	2,8	36,7	43,1	56,3
Aragón	4,4	28,8	32,7	31,3	39,8
Asturias	1,8	7,3	18,5	23,8	29,2
Balearic Islands	6,9	9,0	22,6	24,3	38,7
Canary Islands	1,2	0,0	7,2	23,7	30,3
Cantabria	3,4	11,7	25,2	29,6	37,7
Castilla-La Mancha	1,9	2,7	31,0	26,1	50,9
Castilla y León	1,9	11,9	20,0	18,5	39,0
Catalonia	28,4	31,3	35,6	34,1	43,7
Valencia	7,2	10,2	27,4	35,3	45,2
Extremadura	1,3	2,2	16,8	27,2	43,1
Galicia	12,6	16,2	39,4	42,9	60,6
La Rioja	2,6	4,3	32,7	41,3	56,4
Madrid	17,8	28,6	42,8	45,9	56,4
Murcia	9,0	13,7	16,8	17,8	31,5
Navarre	0,0	22,3	24,3	26,2	40,8

Euskadi	23,7	46,2	52,0	50,3	60,8

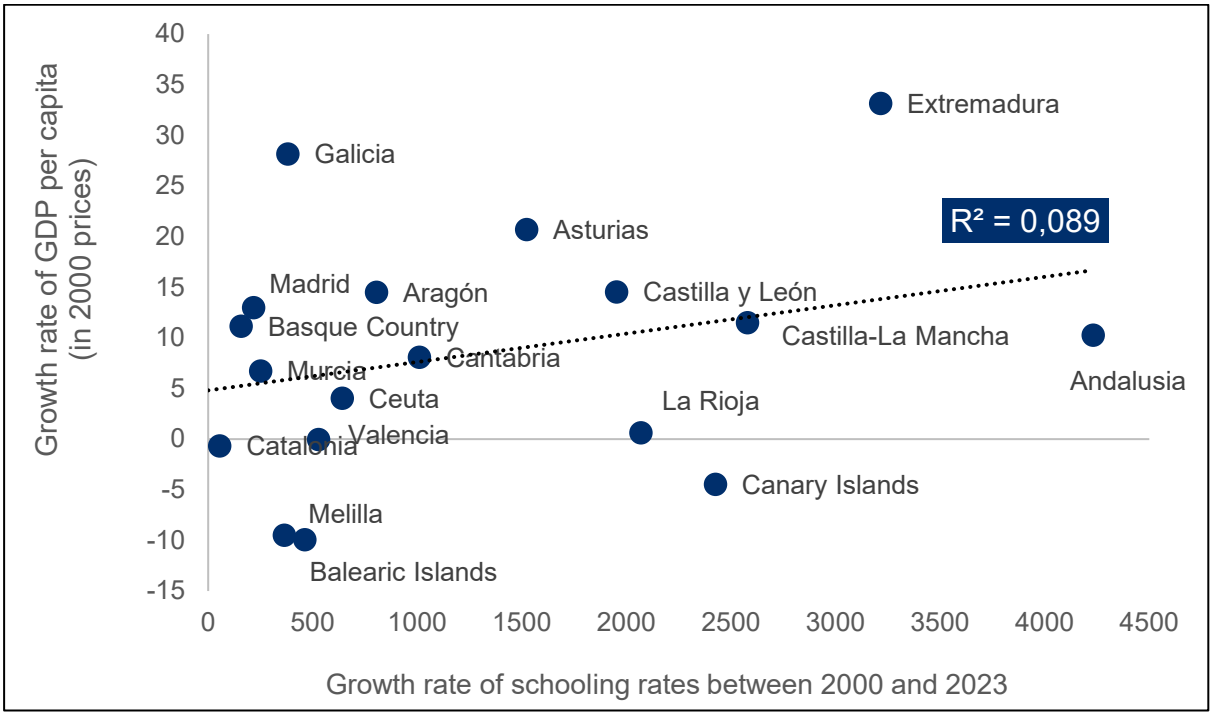
Source: own elaboration with data from the Ministry of Education of Spain

Figure A1. Relationship between ACs' real GDP per capita (in 2000 prices) and schooling rates in 2000 and 2023



Source: own elaboration with data from the Spanish Ministry of Education and the National Institute of Statistics.

Figure A2. Relationship between ACs' real GDP per capita growth (in 2000 prices) and schooling rates changes bewteen 2000 and 2023



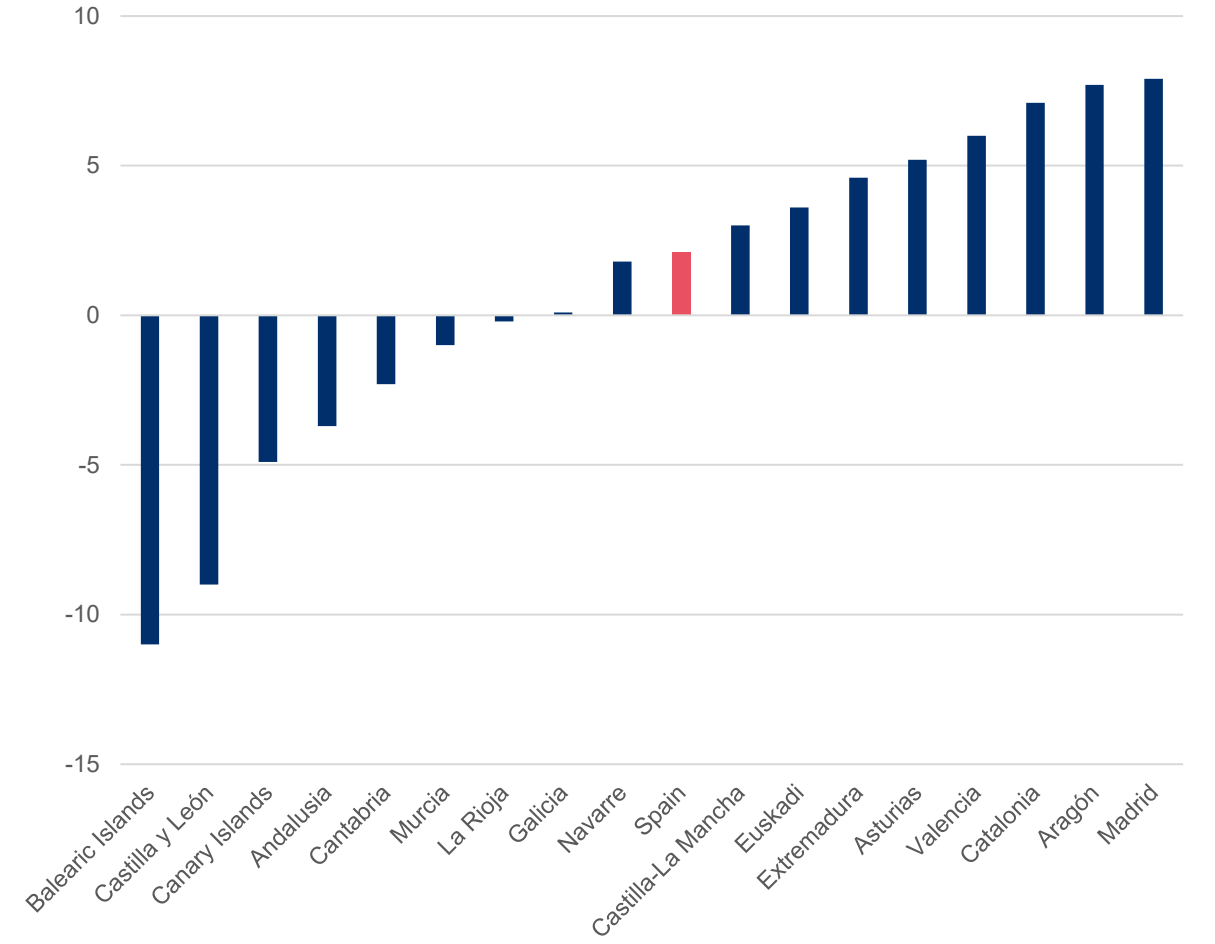
Source: own elaboration with data from the Spanish Ministry of Education and the National Institute of Statistics.

Table A3. Share of children 0-2 enrolled in public ECEC over total ECEC in Spain.

Region	2008	2016	2019	2023	Difference 2016-2023
Andalusia	2,1	39,5	41,5	35,8	-3,7
Aragón	36,8	55,5	54,8	63,2	7,7
Asturias	70,1	85,2	86,8	90,4	5,2
Balearic Islands	44,9	69,8	77,4	58,8	-11
Canary Islands	0	56,1	31,3	51,2	-4,9
Cantabria	56,2	79	79,3	76,7	-2,3
Castilla-La Mancha	24,9	64,9	64,2	67,9	3
Castilla y León	44,9	63,1	67,3	54,1	-9
Catalonia	44,4	62,9	62,8	70,0	7,1
Valencia	36,8	40	39,9	46,0	6
Extremadura	20,8	80,7	90,1	85,3	4,6
Galicia	73,9	54,4	56,3	54,5	0,1
La Rioja	0	49,7	51,9	49,5	-0,2
Madrid	33,9	45,1	43,6	53,0	7,9
Murcia	60,1	51,8	49,9	50,8	-1
Navarre	100	84,1	79,4	85,9	1,8
Euskadi	52,5	53,2	50,3	56,8	3,6
Spain	**43,2**	**51,6**	**51,5**	**53,7**	**2,1**

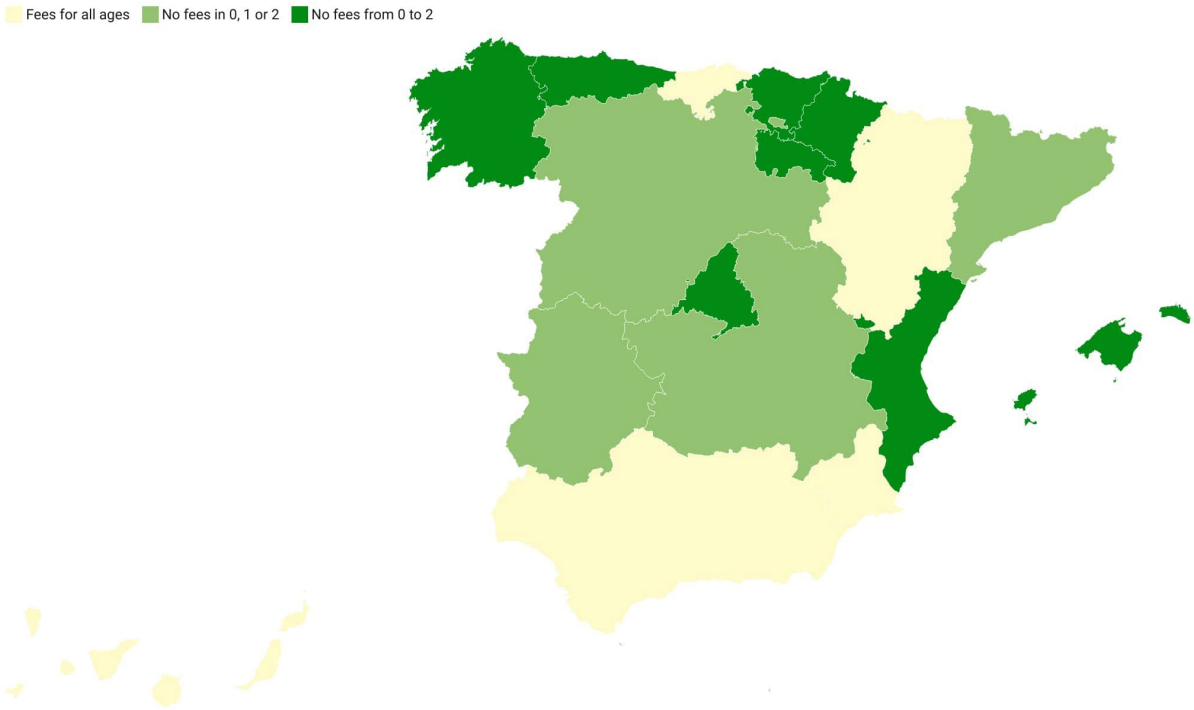
Source: own elaboration with Education Ministry data

Figure A3. Change in percentage of enrolment in public ECEC 0-2 year-olds between 2016 and 2023 (in percentage points)



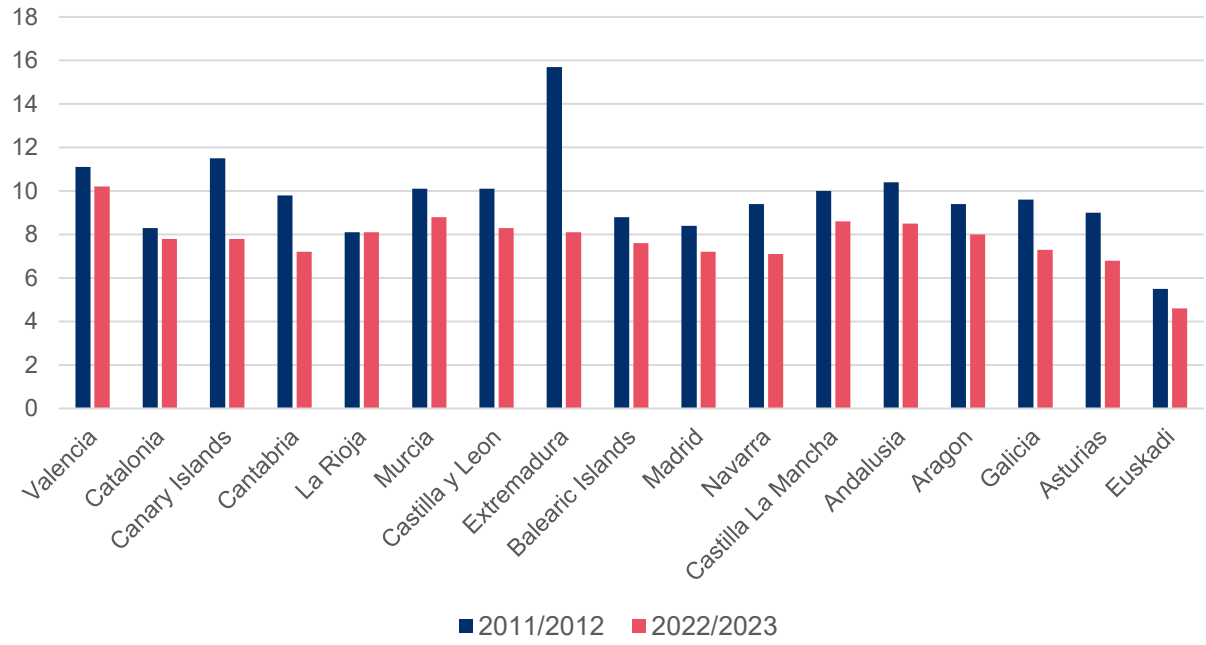
Source: own elaboration with Education Ministry data

Image A2. Gratuity of ECEC fees in each Autonomous Community in 2024/2025



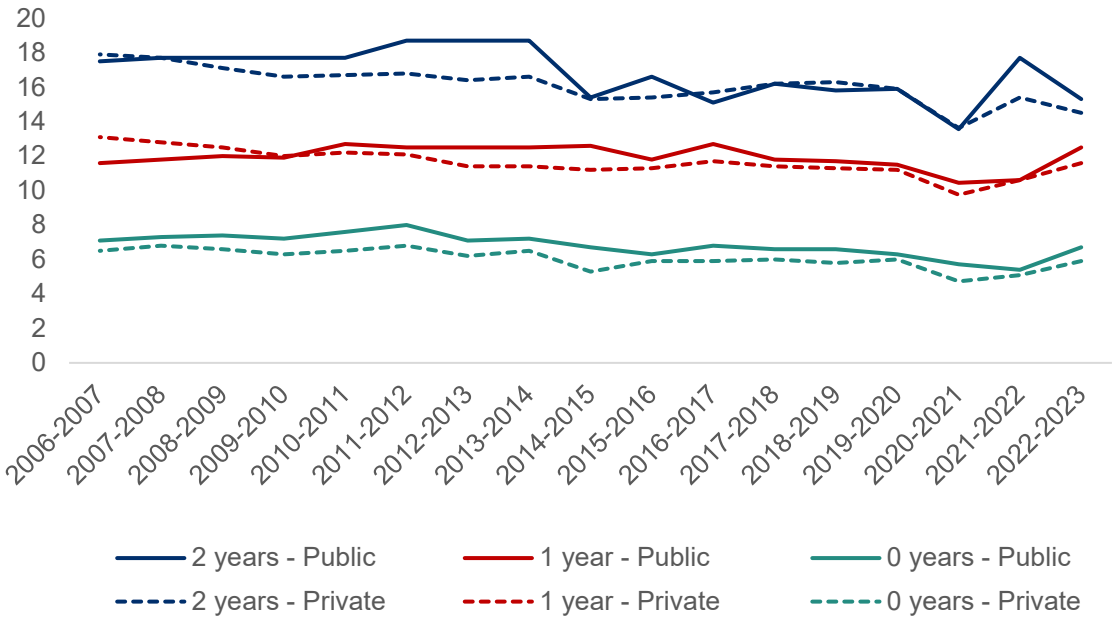
Source: own elaboration with administrative data.

Figure A4. Number of students for full-time equivalent teachers in public ECEC (0 - 6 years), by region in 2011 and 2022



Source: own elaboration with data from the Ministry of Education of Spain. Data on the Euskadi doesn't include data on municipal ECEC.

Figure A5. Student per unit ratios in Catalonia, by type of provider between 2006 - 2022



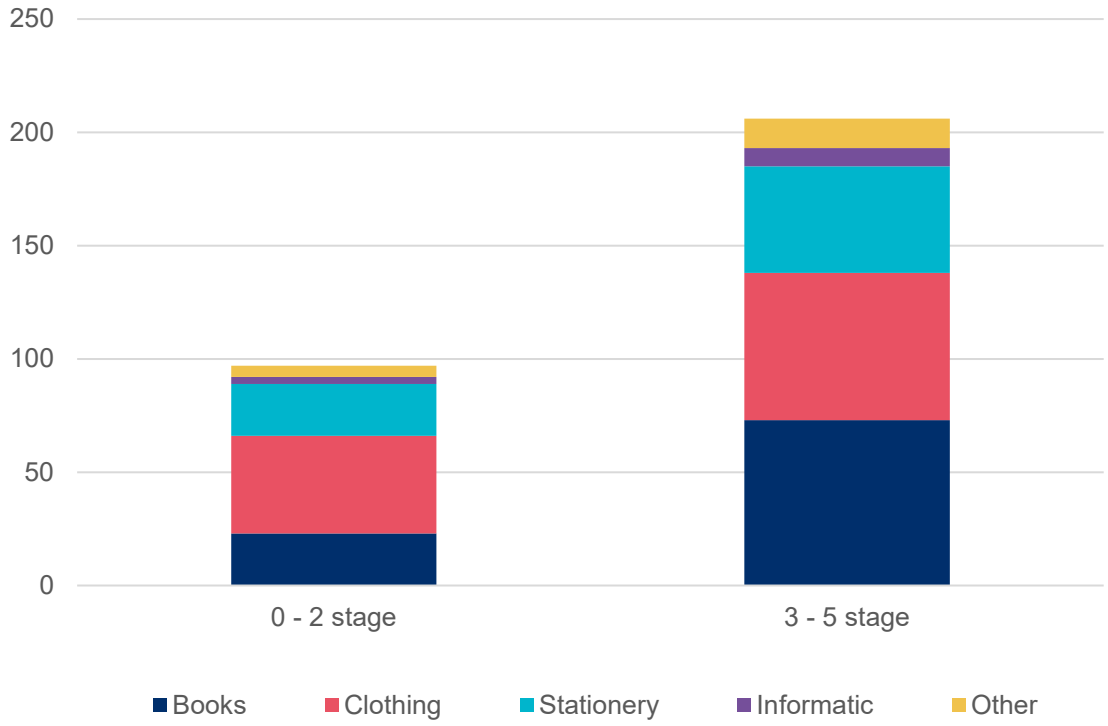
Source: own elaboration from the Education Department and IDESCAT data. Ratios are calculated by dividing students by education units. Mixed first-cycle units are added to the higher-level units. Mixed first and second-cycle units of early childhood are counted with the second-cycle units.

Table A4. Inclusion of specific training for 0-3 ECEC professionals in Spanish regions, 2024

Region	Specific Mention 0-3 *Yes: 1 / No: 0*	ECEC type target Public / Public - subsidised
Andalusia	0	-
Aragon	1	Public - subsidised
Asturias	0	-
Balearic Islands	1	Public - subsidised
Euskadi	1	Public - subsidised
Cantabria	0	-
Castilla y Leon	0	-
Castilla-La Mancha	0	-
Catalonia	1	Public
Valencia	1	Public
Extremadura	1	Public - subsidised
Galicia	0	-
Madrid	0	-
Murcia	1	Public
Navarra	0	-
La Rioja	0	-

Source: own elaboration with administrative data

Figure A6. Average yearly household expenditure by type of good and for each ECEC stage, 2019-2020



Source: own elaboration with data from the Household Expenditure in Education Survey of the National Institute of Statistics

Fondazione Agnelli
ZERO SEI

This paper is part of the Fondazione Agnelli Zero Sei series on early childhood education services, edited by Francesca Bastagli.

fondazioneagnelli.it