Socioeconomics, care alternatives and parenting values in access to the 0-3 stage of early childhood education

Condicionantes socioeconómicos, alternativas de cuidado y valores de crianza en el acceso a la etapa 0-3

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Abstract

In recent decades, most European educational systems have undergone reforms aimed at increasing early schooling. However, enrollment in the first cycle of early childhood education (i.e., preschool from age 0 to 3 years old) continues to be unequal among the different social groups, thereby reducing its efficiency in promoting educational and social equality. Consequently, the personal and institutional conditioning factors that influence access to early childhood education must be uncovered in order to guide public policies. Most of the previous research uses data prior to March 2020, mainly includes socioeconomic variables and limits its analysis to schooling at this stage. This article addresses the effect of variables related to parenting values and other childcare alternatives and analyzes the fit between the actual age and the ideal age for accessing these services, as well as the reasons parents give for not enrolling

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their children in this early stage of preschool. Descriptive analyses and binary logistic regression models were carried out using data from an online survey conducted in 2021 among 3112 parents with children between 0 and 6 years of age. Among other variables, non-enrollment or enrollment later than desired is found to relate to the employment situation of both members of the couple, the belief that the child is too young, the availability of childcare alternatives and the price. Moreover, being a woman increases the probability of considering that they have accessed this service too late. Although the socioeconomic situation and how the supply is designed are determining factors in access to this stage, both the parenting values and the availability of childcare alternatives emerge as key elements in the decision-making process.

Keywords: early childhood education, preschool, childcare, right to education, inequality, public policy.

Resumen

En las últimas décadas se han sucedido reformas en la mayoría de los sistemas educativos europeos encaminadas a aumentar la escolarización temprana. Sin embargo, la escolarización en el primer ciclo de Educación Infantil sigue siendo desigual entre diferentes grupos sociales, lo que reduce su eficiencia en la promoción de la equidad educativa y social. Por ello, se hace necesario conocer los condicionantes personales e institucionales que influyen en el acceso, a fin de orientar las políticas públicas. La mayoría de las investigaciones previas utilizan datos anteriores a marzo de 2020, incluyen fundamentalmente variables de tipo socioeconómico y limitan su análisis a la escolarización en esta etapa. Este artículo aborda el efecto de variables relativas al modelo y las alternativas de crianza, incluyendo un análisis del ajuste entre la edad real y la edad ideal de acceso a estos servicios, así como las razones identificadas por los progenitores para no escolarizar en esta etapa. Se realizan análisis descriptivos y modelos de regresión logística binaria a partir de datos de una encuesta online realizada en 2021 a 3.112 madres y padres con hijos/as entre 0 y 6 años. Entre otras variables, la no escolarización o la escolarización más tarde de lo deseado encuentra una relación positiva con la situación respecto al empleo de ambos miembros de la pareja, la creencia en que el/la hijo/a es demasiado pequeño, la disponibilidad de alternativas de cuidado y el precio; ser mujer aumenta la probabilidad de considerar que se ha accedido a estos servicios demasiado tarde. Aunque la situación socioeconómica y el diseño de la oferta son determinantes en el acceso a esta etapa, tanto los valores en torno a la crianza como la disponibilidad de alternativas de cuidado emergen como elementos clave en el proceso de toma de decisiones.

Palabras clave: educación infantil, cuidados infantiles, derecho a la educación, desigualdad, políticas públicas.

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Introduction

Recent decades have seen a considerable increase interest in developing models of early child education and childcare as well as policy reforms designed to increase enrollment at this stage (European Commission, 2020). This trend responds to evidence on early schooling in terms of both individual development and compensation for inequalities in the mid and long term (European Commission, 2022). Thus, enrollment in early childhood education programs has been linked to stimulation of cognitive capacities such as reading and achievement in later stages (Cebolla-Boado et al., 2017) as well as non-cognitive ones such as creativity, work capacity, socialization, personal autonomy, motivation, perseverance, and self-confidence (Mancebón et al., 2018), with relevant effects in the short term as well as in the mid- and long term (Heckman, 2017). The literature has highlighted that early childhood education benefits all students, although especially those who come from more unfavorable socioeconomic backgrounds, given its capability for compensating and for enhancing social inclusion (OCDE, 2017) and equality (Espinosa Bayal, 2018).

This makes it essential to take precise and accurate stock of the factors relating to access to formal early childhood education services. Despite a significant increase in research into this field recently, especially in Spain, there are still a great deal of relevant gaps. For example, most of the quantitative studies carried out used data from prior to March 2020 and only analyzed socioeconomic variables. Therefore, they fail to consider the parenting values and to delve deeper into the reasons the parents themselves give for not availing of these services. Similarly, no research was found that explores not only whether or not these services are accessed but also when that access occurs in relation to the parent's preferences.

This paper aims to contribute to fill in these gaps. It does so by analyzing data from a questionnaire carried out in 2021 on a broad sample of parents of children aged 0 to 3. The survey was specifically designed to capture how the families organize the care and education of their children. The objectives of this paper are therefore the following: (1) analyze the factors regarding schooling and enrollment in the first cycle of early childhood education in Spain (i.e., preschool for ages 0-3 years old); (2) analyze the factors regarding access to these services being

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later than the parents deemed suitable; (3) identify the reasons given by the parents for not using the first cycle of early childhood education. Among these reasons, differences are found between the ones related to the institutional design of the service offered, as well as the ones related to their preferences regarding parenting and other childcare alternatives.

In the case of Spain, there are major differences in access to the first cycle of early childhood education depending on family characteristics (Velaz-Medrano et al., 2020). These differences are related to the nature of such preschooling: the first cycle, which covers ages 0 to 3, is voluntary and not free of charge. Therefore, the education authorities are not obliged to ensure that each child has a place. This limited public supply leads to having educational services and early childhood attention be taken up largely by the private sector, whose presence is indeed greater at this stage than at stages later on (León et al., 2022). Insufficient public investment means that families have to bear greater costs, which generates significant inequalities in access (Navarro-Vara y León, 2023). Thus, a great deal of literature confirms the positive relation between the parents' use of these services and their socioeconomic situation (Save the Children, 2021) as measured, among others, through the educational background of the mother (Palomera, 2022), the parents' national origin (Sola-Espinosa et al., 2023), the parents' employment status (Romero-Balsas et al., 2022), and their income (Navarro-Varas, 2022).

In addition to the socioeconomic factor, enrollment in 0-3 preschool is also conditioned by other types of elements (Romero-Balsas et al., 2022): (1) elements regarding the parents' level of need for childcare, (2) their preferences with respect to parenting, and (3) their accessibility to the different childcare options. The literature has highlighted the existence of greater needs for care services according to the child's age (Kulic et al., 2017), the number of children (Legazpe y Davia, 2017), the condition of a single-parent household (Sola-Espinosa et al., 2023), the parents' job intensity (Romero-Balsas et al., 2022) and their work schedule (Río et al., 2022). Enrollment in 0-3 preschools is also condition by the parents' own values and preferences regarding care (Inglehart et al., 2014) and the gender roles of the couple (Lowe and Weisner, 2004). In that regard, it has been observed that certain ethnic groups or migrants with a strong family-oriented culture consider that the community and family are the main socializing agents for children (González-Motos and Saurí, 2022). However, different researchers have questioned the scope of cultural

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factors in the lower enrollment in early childhood education services (Pavolini and Lanker, 2018; León et al., 2022). Family preferences are themselves conditioned by the availability of the services, such that a smaller supply in the area, a greater incompatibility of the schedules, and a lack of accessibility would all lead to less consideration in making use of childcare services (Lancker, 2018).

Lastly, the decision whether to use these services depends greatly on how accessible they are for the family and what other childcare alternatives are available. Families in which the mother does not work are less inclined to turn to formal service (Palomera, 2022). This effect is also consistent when comparing unemployed vs. inactive mothers (Sola-Espinosa et al., 2023) and mothers with vs. without leave from work (Romero-Balsas et al., 2022). Similarly, the presence of grandparents in the household correlates negatively with enrollment in 0-3 preschools (Moreno-Mínguez, 2007). From the perspective of the supply, the shortage of openings at nearby schools (Save the Children, 2021), overly restrictive placement criteria (León et al., 2022), timetables (Río et al., 2022)—especially for families in atypical job situations (Palomera, 2022), and a lack of information on the enrollment process and bureaucratic formalities (Abrassart and Bonoli, 2015) all constitute relevant barriers to accessing this stage of education.

Method

This study is based on the *Quidan Survey* given online to 3100 parents with children under the age of 7 residing in Spain. Recent research (Schumann and Lück, 2023) has shown that the use of self-administered online surveys is more reliable than face-to-face surveys for studying family relations, among other elements. The fieldwork was carried out in May and part of June 2021. Samples were evenly distributed by sex and age of the child, and proportionally to the level of education and place of residence. The data were weighted to counter the demographic oversampling of parents of children between 0 and 1 years old to ensure statistical representativity.

The dependent variables considered, whose distribution can be seen in Table I, refer specifically to the interviewee's youngest child. For the variable "attends preschool", an answer was deemed to be affirmative if

they responded that their child *attends preschool (for ages 0-3)* (38.6% of the sample) or *attends nursery school, or similar* (3% of the sample). They were considered as not attending this type of service when they stated they did not (56.5%) or that they were cared for at "daycare" (0.9%). The variable "ideal age to start preschool" was drawn from the question *At what age do you think children should start preschool (or school)?* The reasons for not enrolling their child in preschool come from the answers to the question *What are the main reasons why you do not take your youngest child to preschool?,* which were the following (multiple choice): *There aren't any openings nearby, The price, The timetable doesn't fit our schedule, Preschool doesn't fit in with our way of parenting, They don't seem safe because of COVID-19, The child's grandparents or some other family member can take care of them, We can afford to hire someone to look after them,* and *My child is too young*.

The independent variables considered, whose categories are featured in Tables II, III, and IV, were as follows:

- *Sociodemographic and socioeconomic variables* (some of these variables also reflect accessibility to forms of childcare other that preschool): sex and age of the interviewee, highest level of education of each parent, employment situation of each parent, financial hardship, size of the town, national origin of each parent, and time it takes for the nearest grandparents to reach the home.
- *Variables on the family's degree of need for childcare*: the age of the youngest child, presence of siblings, and the interviewee's taking care of another dependent family member.
- Variables on values, preferences, and practices in parenting: difference in the daily amount of caregiving time in the couple (measured by means of a diary where the interviewee was asked to indicate who was taking care of each child, in 15-minute intervals, during the last workday between 7:00 a.m. and 11:00 p.m., the extent to which they agree with the statement "fathers should spend just as much time taking care of the children as mothers", extent to which they agree with the statement "if I could go back and start again, I wouldn't have children", and the interviewee's religious beliefs.

The methodological strategy consisted of designing several different models of binary logistic regression regarding the three types of variables described below:

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TABLE I. Distribution of dependent variables and sample size

	% / average (standard deviation)	N (un-weighted)
Attends 0-3 preschool (youngest child 5-31 months old) (%)	42.6	529
Enrolled child before parent deemed suitable (%)	43.9	866
Enrolled child when parent deemed right (%)	20.9	413
Enrolled child later than when parent deemed suitable (%)	35.2	695
Age when child started 0-3 preschool (months)	17.3 (11.6)	2035
Ideal age to begin school (months)	19.6 (15.9)	2747
Parents who think the ideal age to begin school is after 36 months (%)	28.7	2747
Difference between age of beginning school – ideal age (months)	-2.0 (15.4)	1850
Reasons for not enrolling the child in 0-3 preschool (multiple choice)		
No openings in nearby schools (%)	4.3	36
Price (%)	14.6	106
Scheduling conflict (%)	1.9	20
Nursery school does not fit in with our parenting style (%)	8.4	53
They don't seem safe because of covid-19 (%)	18	127
The grandparents or some other family member can take care of the child (%)	23.1	193
We could afford to hire someone to take care of our child (%)	1.4	17
Our child is too young (%)	56.7	452
Other reasons (%)	22.6	164
Reasons concerning the supply (%)	18.5	143
Reasons concerning parenting style and alternative ways of caretaking (%)	75.1	608

Source: Compiled by the authors.

TABLE II. Logistic regression model on enrollment in 0-3 preschool at age 0-3 years

	Sig.	Exp(B)
Gender (ref: Male)	0.347	1.203
Interviewee's age	0.319	0.981
Couple's highest level of education (ref: neither with university studies)	0.084	
One with university studies	0.019	1.731
Both with university studies	0.101	1.473
Not applicable or no answer	0.222	3.518
Difficulty making ends meet (ref: difficult or very difficult)	0.304	
Some	0.168	0.654
Little or none	0.143	0.663
Population of town/city (ref: fewer than 20,000 people)	0.823	
20,001-100,000	0.843	1.049
More than 100,000	0.548	1.146
Couple's employment situation (ref: both have a job)	0.000	
One works, the other does not	0.000	0.268
Both are unemployed or other status	0.001	0.183
Not applicable or no answer	0.032	0.084
National origin of each partner (ref: both from Spain)	0.898	0.962
Age of youngest child, in months	0.000	1.153
Has siblings (ref: No)	0.211	1.262
Time it takes to get to grandparent's home (ref: Less than 15 minutes)	0.018	
15-40 minutes	0.776	1.065
Longer than 40 minutes	0.003	2.812
Not applicable or no answer	0.158	1.490
Daily or weekly caregiving (ref: No)	0.350	0.699
Difference in time partners spend on caregiving (ref: same amount of time)	0.021	
Difference between 1 minute and 5 hours	0.069	1.584
More than 5 hours of difference	0.465	0.839
Not applicable or no answer	0.155	1.703
Agreement that fathers should spend the same amount of time taking care of the children as the mothers (ref: Neither agree or disagree, disagree or strongly disagree)	0.001	2.211
If I could go back and start again, I wouldn't have kids (ref: Disagree or strongly disagree)	0.038	1.793

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TABLE II. Logistic regression model on enrollment in 0-3 preschool at age 0-3 years (Continued)

	Sig.	Exp(B)
Religious belief (ref: Agnostic, atheist, or indifferent)	0.490	
Catholic or believer in another religion.	0.243	0.803
No answer	0.952	1.031
Idea age to start school (ref: 12 months or less)	0.000	
Between 13 and 24 months	0.000	0.409
Between 25 and 36 months	0.000	0.131
37 months or more	0.000	0.137
No answer	0.395	1.316
Constant	0.008	0.110
Nagelkerke's R squared		*0.423*
Sig. Hosmer and Lemeshow test		*0.465*
N		*789*

Source: Compiled by the authors.

TABLE III. Logistic regression model on access to preschool (age 0-3) later than deemed suitable

	Sig.	Exp(B)
Gender (ref: Male)	0.010	1.473
Interviewee's age	0.253	1.017
Couple's highest level of education (ref: neither with university studies)	0.345	
One with university studies	0.719	0.938
Both with university studies	0.278	1.217
Not applicable or no answer	0.323	2.805
Difficulty making ends meet (ref: difficult or very difficult)	0.055	
Some	0.287	0.760
Little or none	0.018	0.562
Not applicable or no answer	0.131	0.441
Population of town/city (ref: fewer than 20,000 people)	0.510	
20,001-100,000	0.494	1.141

(Continued)

TABLE III. Logistic regression model on access to preschool (age 0-3) later than deemed suitable (Continued)

	Sig.	Exp(B)
More than 100,000	0.246	1.219
Couple's employment situation (ref: both have a job)	0.002	
One works, the other does not	0.888	1.026
Both are unemployed or other status	0.001	5.605
Not applicable or no answer	0.144	0.230
National origin of each partner (ref: both from Spain)	0.593	0.875
Age of youngest child, in months	0.133	0.994
Has siblings (ref: No)	0.039	0.741
Time it takes to get to grandparent's home (ref: Less than 15 minutes)	0.143	
15-40 minutes	0.333	0.849
Longer than 40 minutes	0.892	0.967
Not applicable or no answer	0.023	0.620
Daily or weekly caregiving (ref: No)	0.008	2.453
Difference in time partners spend on caregiving (ref: same amount of time)	0.045	
Difference between 1 minute and 5 hours	0.943	0.987
More than 5 hours of difference	0.340	0.839
Not applicable or no answer	0.006	0.355
Agreement that fathers should spend the same amount of time taking care of the children as the mothers (ref: Neither agree or disagree, disagree or strongly disagree)	0.139	0.761
If I could go back and start again, I wouldn't have kids (ref: Disagree or strongly disagree)	0.543	0.894
Religious belief (ref: Agnostic, atheist, or indifferent)	0.665	
Catholic or believer in another religion.	0.397	0.887
No answer	0.659	0.805
Constant	0.194	2.416
Nagelkerke's R squared		*0.083*
Sig. Hosmer and Lemeshow test		*0.439*
N		*995*

Source: Compiled by the authors.

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TABLE IV. Logistic regression models on reasons for not enrolling in 0-3 preschool

	Model 1. Alleges reasons regarding the supply / does not allege these reasons		**Model 2. Alleges reasons on style of parenting or other childcare alternatives / does not allege these reasons**	
	Sig.	Exp(B)	Sig.	Exp(B)
Gender (ref: Male)	0.909	1.032	0.521	0.848
Interviewee's age	0.900	0.997	0.691	0.990
Couple's highest level of education (ref: neither with university studies)	0.782		0.190	
One with university studies	0.804	0.921	0.124	0.636
Both with university studies	0.633	1.177	0.870	1.056
Difficulty making ends meet (ref: difficult or very difficult)	0.001		0.507	
Some	0.067	0.495	0.135	1.809
Little or none	0.000	0.230	0.292	1.455
Not applicable or no answer	0.503	0.427	0.561	2.153
Population of town/city (ref: fewer than 20,000 people)	0.390		0.332	
20,001-100,000	0.242	1.507	0.278	0.710
More than 100,000	0.946	1.023	0.795	1.083
Couple's employment situation (ref: both have a job)	0.019	1.979	0.017	0.528
National origin of each partner (ref: both from Spain)	0.547	1.262	0.306	1.504
Age of youngest child, in months	0.005	1.036	0.002	0.965
Has siblings (ref: No)	0.652	1.126	0.278	0.767
Time it takes to get to grandparent's home (ref: Less than 15 minutes)	0.668		0.155	
15-40 minutes	0.286	1.391	0.033	0.536
Longer than 40 minutes	0.788	0.846	0.881	1.091
Not applicable or no answer	0.819	0.914	0.257	0.670
Daily or weekly caregiving (ref: No)	0.277	1.819	0.034	0.356
Difference in time partners spend on caregiving (ref: same amount of time)	0.084		0.289	

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TABLE IV. Logistic regression models on reasons for not enrolling in 0-3 preschool (Continued)

	Model 1. Alleges reasons regarding the supply / does not allege these reasons		**Model 2. Alleges reasons on style of parenting or other childcare alternatives / does not allege these reasons**	
Difference between 1 minute and 5 hours	0.541	0.789	0.135	1.835
More than 5 hours of difference	0.027	0.510	0.880	1.043
Agreement that fathers should spend the same amount of time taking care of the children as the mothers (ref: Neither agree or disagree, disagree or strongly disagree)	0.173	1.683	0.610	1.174
If I could go back and start again, I wouldn't have kids (ref: Disagree or strongly disagree)	0.803	1.101	0.669	0.857
Religiousness (ref: Agnostic, atheist, or indifferent)	0.355		0.741	
Catholic or believer in another religion.	0.150	0.674	0.648	0.892
No answer	0.901	0.905	0.578	1.655
Constant	0.222	0.240	0.024	11.929
Nagelkerke's R squared		*0.166*		*0.159*
Sig**.** Hosmer and Lemeshow test		*0.720*		*0.390*
N		*428*		*428*

Source: Compiled by the authors.

- A model with the dependent variable "attends/does not attend the first cycle of early childhood education" to which the independent variables described above were added. This model was applied to parents who, as of the date of the survey, had at least one child of proper age for the first cycle of early ahildhood education.
- A model with the dependent variable "enrolled their child at the time they deemed suitable/enrolled their child later". Those who expressed the opinion that the ideal age for enrollment was 36 months or more were excluded from the analysis because they presumably had no intention of enrolling their child in the first cycle of early childhood education. This model included parents

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with a children between 0 and 6 years old who were currently attending the first cycle or had attended it previously.

- Two models on the reasons given for why their child does not attend the first cycle of early childhood education. Both analyses exclude those who chose the statement "Schools don't seem safe to us because of COVID-19" (67 cases) from all the possible options, since in the context of the pandemic, this option implied that other reasons were not given due thought:
  - Model 1: the dependent variable bundles together those who gave "reasons related to the supply" (insufficient vacancies available nearby, problems with the price or incompatible schedules) in contrast to those who gave other reasons.
  - Model 2: the dependent variable bundles together those who gave "reasons related to their model of parenting or other childcare alternatives" (the nursery school did not fit in with their model of parenting, they have the child's grandparents or some other family member to care for the child, they have hired a babysitter, or they do not wish to send them to school so young) in contrast to those who gave other reasons.

In order to maintain the representativity of the sample and ensure the consistency of the results, the category "No answer" was added to variables large enough to meet the statistical requirements (Garson, 2016).

Results

As our results show, 42.6% of the children between the ages of 5 months and 3 years attended the first cycle of early childhood education (Table 1), a figure very similar to the enrollment rate published by the Ministry of Education and Vocational Training (MEFP, 2023). The average age of access to 0-3 preschool is 17.3 months, while the age deemed to be the most suitable for that access is 19.6 months. Some 43.9% of the sample stated that they had enrolled their child earlier than they deemed suitable, 20.9% at just the right time, and 35.2% later than suitable. Roughly 28.7% of the parents think that the ideal age for enrollment is later than the age for starting the first cycle of preschool (36 months or more). Regarding the reasons for not enrolling their child in 0-3 preschool (multiple

choice), 56.7% stated that the child is too young, 23.1% that the child's grandparents or other family members can take care of the child, 18% said that schools did not seem safe due to covid-19, 14.6% mention the price, 8.4% because it does not fit in with their style of parenting, 4.3% because there were no openings at nearby schools, 1.9% because of scheduling conflicts, and 1.4% because they could afford to hire someone; 22.6% answered "other reasons". Furthermore, 18.5% mentioned at least one reason concerning the supply and 75.1% gave a reason concerning the style of parenting or other childcare alternatives (Table I).

Table II features the model that explores the factors relating to enrollment in this cycle and shows the significance of the three types of variables described above. The likelihood of enrollment goes down by roughly 73% when one member of the couple is unemployed and goes down even further when both members are unemployed (82%), in comparison with families in which both members are working. When one member of the couple has university studies and the other does not, they are 73% more likely to enroll their child in 0-3 preschool than couples in which neither member has university studies. This likelihood is 2.8 times greater for those who live more than 40 minutes from the child's nearest grandparents, with respect to those who have a grandparent less than 15 minutes away.

The child's age is a particularly significant variable: for each month the child gets older, the likelihood of being sent to 0-3 preschool increases by 15%. Thus, in comparison with parents who think children should start school at 12 months or younger, those who set the ideal age to start school between 12 and 24 months are 59% less likely to send their child to 0-3 preschool. In contrast, when the ideal age is higher, the likelihood goes down by 86%. Parents who express more egalitarian roles in caregiving are more than twice as likely to enroll their child in the first cycle of early childhood education. Finally, children of parents who admit to regretting having children are 79% more likely to attend this first cycle of preschool.

Table III shows the model that analyzes the likelihood of enrolling their child later than the parent(s) interviewed deemed suitable. The interviewees in a couple where both partners are unemployed are 5 times more likely to enroll their child later than they would have liked, in comparison with couples in which both partners work. Those with little or no trouble making ends meet are 44% less likely to enroll their child after their idea age, compared to parents that have some or great difficulty making ends meet. Daily or weekly caregiving to other family

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members increases the likelihood of stating that they sent their child to school later than they would have liked by nearly two and a half times. Lastly, women are 47% more likely than men to think that they sent their child to school later than the age they deem optimum.

Table IV shows the models on the variables relating to both types of reasons. With respect to the factors regarding not enrolling the child in preschool because of the supply (model 1), the interviewees in couples in which one partner is unemployed were twice as likely to allege these reasons than couples in which both partners are employed. In comparison with the families who find it "difficult or very difficult" to make ends meet at the end of the month, the families with "little or no difficulty" were 77% less likely to allege problems in the supply. Moreover, couples with less evenly shared child caregiving (5 or more hours of difference daily) are 49% less likely to allege problems in the supply. Finally, for every month more in the child's age, the likelihood of alleging this type of reason increases by 4%.

Model 2 (Table IV) shows the factors regarding not enrolling the child due to reasons one the style of parenting or other childcare alternatives. Survey-takers in couples in which at least one partner is unemployed are 47% less likely to give this type of reason, in comparison with dual-income couples. The likelihood of stating reasons related to the style of parenting or other childcare alternatives is 46% lower in families who have a grandparent between 15 and 40 minutes away, in comparison to those with a grandparent less than 15 minutes away. With respect to the child's age, each additional month lowers the likelihood of giving this type of reason by 4%. Last, those who habitually take care of other family members are 64% less likely to give reasons regarding the style of parenting or other childcare alternatives.

Discussion

The statistical analyses performed confirm some of the findings from previous research and shed new light on the access to the first cycle of early childhood education. In keeping with the earlier literature, differences are found in the socioeconomic profile of the pupils who access this stage. The differences are particularly consistent with the employment situation of the child's parents. The conception of early

childhood education as a tool to support employment and conciliation, together with the shortage of enough public openings on offer (the supply), make it such that those who are unemployed have greater obstacles to using these services (Lancker and Ghysels, 2014).

Regarding financial resources, the model that analyzes access (Table I) does not identify economic hardship (affordability) as being significant, as has also been shown in recent research (Sola-Espinosa et al., 2023). This may be due to the fact that the couple's job situation also contains information about the amount of time available and about the family's economic situation, which may annul the effect of the variable "difficulty making ends meet".

The presence of alternative childcare givers other than 0-3 preschool (father, mother, or someone outside the couple, such as grandparents or hired caregivers) intensely conditions the parents' decision of whether or not to have their child start school. This is also in keeping with recent research on the context in Spain (Romero-Balsas et al., 2022). In particular, the results here confirm that not having any grandparents living nearby plays a relevant role in increasing the rate of early schooling (Moreno-Mínguez, 2007).

As regards the style of parenting, the fact that the variable "regret having had children" and enrollment in 0-3 preschool have a positive correlation, which also came up in previous research (Meil et al., 2021), might reflect that enrollment increases (a) when there is less emotion bonding with the child, and/or (b) when there is a situation of family stress that lowers the interviewee's well-being (for example, for job or financial reasons). In these cases, sending the child to the first cycle of early childhood education may act as a buffering mechanism from the demands of parenting and its negative effects on the individual's quality of life as perceived by the person interviewed. This may be reflecting new ways of understanding maternity and paternity, even in contexts that are favorable for parenting (Bodin, 2022).

Along the line of a shift in values toward greater co-responsibility in childcare, our results indicate that those who express more egalitarian values are significantly more likely to make use of formal childcare services. These services therefore seem to be perceived as tools that can help make a fairer distribution of childcare duties (Meil et al., 2021). Lastly, and in that same vein, women are more likely to think that they enrolled their child in school later than the most suitable age. This seems

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to reflect their wish not to delay returning to work to avoid the high costs of motherhood and thereby strike a balance between work and family life (Goldscheider et al., 2015).

The analysis of the gap between the ideal age and the real age of schooling offers new, complementary information that can give a more accurate picture of the effect different factors have on accessing formal childcare services. The results of this analysis show that economic hardship significantly increases the likelihood that a parent will enroll their child in school later than they would like. These results indicate that economic resources are key to fitting the timing of these services in with the mother and father's parenting preferences and career timeline, as well as showing the relevance of the associated costs on decision-making (Río Ruiz et al., 2022). Moreover, joblessness is found to affect not only the likelihood of early schooling but also of fitting it in at the desired time. Having alternative caregivers other than preschool also seems to facilitate that fit.

Although most prior researchers highlight the role cultural factors can play in enrollment in early childhood education, they usually assume that what determines access to schooling at this stage are the structural elements (availability, accessibility, and affordability of the service, mainly) (León et al., 2022; Palomera, 2022). However, the results of our research suggest that most families who have not sent their children to this stage of school are also driven by motives not directly related to the supply. In fact, most people surveyed mention parenting values and childcare alternatives much more often than price, schedule, or availability of vacancies nearby. In particular, the belief that the child is still too young seems to have a strong effect on the likelihood of not enrolling in the first cycle of early childhood education. These findings are in line with previous qualitative results that indicate that some parents consider that formal childcare services are more suitable as of a certain age (Jurado et al., 2012) and fit in with a view of early childhood education as somewhere children attend rather than somewhere they go to learn (Espinosa-Bayal, 2018). These ideas therefore emerge as a key element to understanding why children are not enrolled in the first cycle of early childhood education.

Our results show that the reasons parents give for not making use of formal childcare services are not distributed randomly, but rather, they are affected significantly by the financial situation and employment status: families with more financial resources and in which both partners

hold a job place less importance on supply-related factors. These families run into fewer barriers to participating in the early childhood education because of their greater ability to afford its expenses (Sola-Espinosa et al., 2023) and to accessing a public-school vacancy, given that admissions criteria often give priority to families in which both partners are working (León et al., 2022). In contrast, in the case of families with greater economic hardship and less access to employment, the motives involving the style of parenting take back seat, since they are more constrained by the availability and price of these services.

That said, despite the innovation and relevance of our study, it does have a few limitations. First, some of the terms used as synonyms in fact allude to realities that contain some differences, such as early childhood education, formal childcare, and preschool, and nursery school services. The reason for this is basically that in Spain there are few formal alternatives to childcare other than schooling, so in our context they become much alike (Meil et al., 2021). Secondly, the responses analyzed are from people from different regions of Spain, with considerably different admissions systems, levels of supply, and coverage rates. This matter limits the reach of any specific public policies. Thirdly, the survey fieldwork was carried out at the end of the COVID-19 pandemic, which affected the families' situation and behavior. The fact that many parents found themselves unemployed or laid off, more uncertain about the future, or afraid of contagion from the virus had a negative impact on early enrollment rates in early childhood education (Turienzo et al., 2023) and may have affected their beliefs about schooling and thus their answers on the survey. Finally, in fourth place, in the variables on reasons mentioned for not sending their child to formal childcare services, there may be some bias due to social desirability, since individual preferences regarding parenting are in turn conditioned by the families' socioeconomic conditions and their access to other childcare resources (for example, someone unable to afford daycare may allege other reasons for not using it in order to hide their financial constraints).

Conclusions

This article presents new, relevant results on access to the first cycle of early childhood education in Spain. First, in addition to the habitual

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variables, our analysis includes factors on the parents' access to alternative childcare resources and on their values and practices of parenting that are customarily missing in the research in this field but are key factors in the decision-making process. Second, this is the first study to analyze the difference between the real age and the ideal age to start school, understanding that the circumstances and values of the family and those of these services may influence the decision not only of whether the child should start school but also when the right time is to do so. Third, this paper includes a pioneer analysis on the reasons the parents give for not enrolling their child in this first cycle.

Our data confirms that social and labor dynamics and the spread of certain values are related to the increase in demand for early schooling. This is the case of phenomena such as geographic mobility, which increases the distance away from older generations, and the generalization of dual-income couples, reflected in our analysis in the statistical significance of distance from grandparents and the couple's job status. Moreover, the relevance of the idea of gender equality and individualist values is made manifest in our results in that more women perceive that they send their child to school later than suitable and in that those who show some degree of regret of having children tend to make more use of formal childcare services. Furthermore, the greater demand for these services makes the barriers to accessing them more visible. Thus, our analysis reflects that the decision on schooling does not depend only on socioeconomic variables--which are still determinant--but also on factors regarding the availability of childcare alternatives, the ideal model of parenting, the couple's ideas on gender roles, and the design of the supply.

The data as a whole reveals the need to progress on several types of policy. On one hand, the fact that some differences in access, and the possibility of matching the real time of access with the ideal time, are associated with the family's socioeconomic situation suggests the need to implement measures that ensure the accessibility and affordability of this stage of schooling. Especially relevant here is the cost of the service, which remains as one of the reasons parents give for not enrolling their child in early childhood education at this stage. Establishing price rates and discounts seems to be one of the main solutions to reduce bias that favors the wealthiest groups (Palomera, 2022), although the results so far are modest (Sola-Espinosa et al., 2023). Making early childhood

education totally or partially free is a feasible alternative in terms of the public budget (Castellano and Perondi, 2022), but if it is combined with insufficient supply it may become quite regressive. In a context of insufficient vacancies, it may be very relevant to design admissions policies under the conception based on improving the rights of the child that favor underrepresented groups such as pupils at risk of social exclusion.

Lastly, some parents are found who not only do not send their child to these services but also consider it unsuitable to send a child to school in the first cycle of early childhood education. From the public policy perspective, it would be advisable to check the extent to which some families' rejection leads to processes of self-exclusion that aggravate the child's own vulnerability. One possible approach to take in this regard is to make the benefits of early schooling more apparent. In this regard, evidence indicates that, unless accompanied with tools to promote schooling of the most disadvantaged groups--currently underrepresented, policies focused exclusively on increasing the number of openings may make investing in this stage even more regressive.

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