



# Managing access to full-time public daycare and preschool services in Romania: Planfulness, cream-skimming and 'interventions'



Borbála Kovács

Central European University, Hungary

## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 12 June 2014

Accepted 10 September 2014

Available online 15 November 2014

### Keywords:

Daycare

Early childhood education and care

Informal practices

Preschool

Romania

Welfare state

## ABSTRACT

This article engages with differently qualified parents' experiences of and success in accessing public full-time early childhood education and care (ECEC) services in a Romanian urban context to illustrate the ways in which post-socialist welfare states are transformed not only from above, through formal rules, but also from below, through informal practices. Through the exploration of the narratives of both parents and managers, the article finds that parental planfulness, qualification-based differences in demand for full-time places and formal rules of access are insufficient to explain clear-cut qualification- and income-based differences in access. The article describes the crucial importance of hidden, informal cream-skimming strategies that daycare and preschool managers employ in the pre-enrolment phase and of the informal tactics of relying on 'interventions' with which unsuccessful parents respond to managers' refusals to enrol. In the context of full-time place shortages, managerial autonomy in enrolment and insufficient institutional budgets, public ECEC institutions engage in hidden processes of redistribution through selective access, favouring well-educated, high-income parents and their children.

Copyright © 2014, Asia-Pacific Research Center, Hanyang University. Production and hosting by Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

## 1. Introduction

Research focussing on childcare choices and variations in young children's care arrangements has found that better educated parents are more likely to make use of formal full-time educational care settings<sup>1</sup> than their less educated peers across the board (Debacker, 2008; Fram & Kim, 2008; Vandebroek, De Visscher, Van Nuffel, & Ferla, 2008;

Vincent, Braun, & Ball, 2008). A number of studies, zooming in on the interactions between structural factors such as local mixed economies of childcare, work-family reconciliation policies and labour market structure on the one hand and personal norms, preferences and non-maternal care resources on the other, have put forth competing explanations for this qualification-based difference. Some of these explanations have focused on demand-side factors, in particular parental (usually maternal) preferences for formal, group-based childcare services and parental (usually maternal) needs for childcare alternatives, usually to enable employment, training, education, etc. (Debacker, 2008; Ellingsaeter & Gulbrandsen, 2007). Other explanations have centred on supply-side factors, notably the cost or affordability, availability and quality of formal childcare services and formal conditions of access (Vandebroek

E-mail address: [kovacs@ceu.hu](mailto:kovacs@ceu.hu).

Peer review under responsibility of Asia-Pacific Research Center, Hanyang University.

<sup>1</sup> In the UK, this is true especially for children older than three. In the 0–3 age group, lower income and working class parents tend to more frequently rely on formal solutions than their middle class, higher income peers (Vincent & Ball, 2006).

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.euras.2014.09.001>

1879-3665/Copyright © 2014, Asia-Pacific Research Center, Hanyang University. Production and hosting by Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

et al., 2008). Considering that this qualification-based difference in take-up is evident across childcare policy regimes and countries with different care ideals in policy and practice (Kremer, 2007), this phenomenon is likely to be rooted in more context-specific interplays of both demand-side as well as supply-side factors.

There is some research suggesting that this qualification-based difference in the take-up of full-time ECEC services is also present in some Central and Eastern European (CEE) welfare states (UNESCO, 2006: 143), including in the Romanian case (Lokshin & Fong, 2006; Kovács, in press). Romania, like many other CEE welfare states, has improved comparatively high coverage rates in public preschool education owing to its service-heavy socialist legacy after a dip in enrolment during the early 1990s (Bilț et al., 2010: 12; Szelewa & Polakowski, 2008: 124; UNESCO, 2006: 134–137). Much of this expansion has meant additional part-time places, with full-time tuition constituting a minority in public preschool education, particularly in Romania. At the same time, public daycare service provision dwindled during the first decade of post-socialist transition especially and has recovered little since (Lokshin & Fong, 2006; Ulrich, 2009; UNICEF, 1999). Reform legislation was passed in the latter half of the 2000s,<sup>2</sup> enacting substantive changes in the nature and scope of services offered. These reforms reflect a shift away from the medicalisation of early years childcare, a socialist-time legacy, to a commitment to supporting children's cognitive development and learning regardless of age, indicative of attempts to move towards what has been seen as the rise of the social investment state in Europe (Jenson, 2006; van Kersbergen & Hemerijck, 2012). Despite these policy changes, the Romanian legislation pertaining to care and education services for the 0–6 age group retains evident long-standing policy legacies, e.g. the absence of children's right to early years education (and care). In addition, new legal guidelines have been slow to show in the further expansion of public (full-time) service provision. In the absence of public authorities' legal obligation to secure a place in a formal care and educational setting as a matter of right, as is the case in most Scandinavian welfare states (Ellingsaeter & Gulbrandsen, 2007) and, more recently, Germany (Fleckenstein, 2011), local authorities maintain what is nominally a demand-based supply of places, but in practice insufficient public provision constrained by financial, regulatory and bureaucratic barriers. Moreover, despite the introduction of a regulatory framework for the accreditation of private institutions,<sup>3</sup> the mixed economy of Romanian ECEC services – as in other post-socialist nations – is still dominated by public financing and provision (UNESCO, 2006: 132). As a result, demand for full-time places (far) exceeds supply.

This article explores what appear to be divergent experiences of negotiating and attaining access to full-time public daycare and preschool places in a Romanian urban context

among two groups of parents: highly educated, higher income parents on the one hand and less educated, lower income parents on the other. Through the exploration of parental narratives and of formal and informal discussions with daycare and preschool managers in city T, a medium-sized municipality in central Romania, this article demonstrates that the differentiated success in accessing full-time public daycare and preschool services between these two groups of parents was strongly mediated by a range of informal practices – both of parents and of managers. With little difference in the degree of 'planfulness' (Gordon & Högnäs, 2006) among highly skilled and less educated parents, respectively, what seemed to work more in the favour of the former – often unbeknownst to them – was a number of selective practices managers engaged in to ensure the enrolment of highly qualified, better educated parents' children. In contrast, less educated, lower income parents encountered less favourable treatment, which often led to parents' inability to enrol their children for a full-time place. Narratives of parental legwork in preparation of daycare or preschool selection, of the sign-up process and of different strategies adopted to ensure enrolment in an institution of choice reveal the fact that access was directly linked to what seems to be a tacit and unstated income-based affinity of managers towards higher dual-income, better educated parents.

The argument put forth is that the display by parents and interpretation by managers of what may be seen as income-related class signifiers become constitutive of an unstated income-based affinity which, in turn, acts as an effective enabling structure for enrolment: it compensates for the defects of vertical and horizontal structures (e.g. place shortages) into an advantage for those perceived as network members (Ledeneva, 2004: 8). Managers derive a range of financial and symbolic resources (e.g. 'sponsorship' and institutional prestige among higher income parent networks) that make their institution appealing and their managerial positions more secure. Parents gain access to what is perceived as high quality and heavily subsidised childcare and education, often seen as an essential stepping stone for children's admission into competitive primary schools. The boundaries of what is deemed acceptable membership, and therefore having an enabling potential, remains fuzzy, 'ambiguous' (Ledeneva, 2004: 7). As with any informal practice, daycare and preschool managers' reliance on this unstated strategy of preselecting particular parents through a number of informal practices while discouraging others by being 'hostile' (Ledeneva, 2004: 4) is also fuzzy, ambiguous. It is for this reason that reliance on 'interventions' or 'network capital' (Ledeneva, 2004: 4–5) – the key component of parents' repertoire of practices for negotiating access to childcare institutions of choice – can undo a refusal to enrol among less educated, lower income parents, but formal application or demonstrated need cannot. To put it another way, this article exemplifies how informal practices – expressions of parents' and managers' adaptation to perennially underfunded social welfare services of good quality, but in shortage – come to form informal parallel structures of opportunity for a select some, adding to 'shadow processes of redistribution' (Cook, 2007) that further exacerbate social inequalities in the Romanian welfare state (Polese, Morris, & Kovács, 2015).

<sup>2</sup> Especially law no. 236/2007 and law no. 272/2009.

<sup>3</sup> Especially emergency ordinance no. 75/2005, approved with modification through law no. 87/2006, and Cabinet decisions no. 21/2007 and no. 22/2007.

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/1127230>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/1127230>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)