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# Parental socio-economic status and childcare quality: Early inequalities in educational opportunity?

Juliane F. Stahl<sup>a,b</sup>, Pia S. Schober<sup>a,c,\*</sup>, C. Katharina Spiess<sup>a,d</sup>

<sup>a</sup> German Institute for Economic Research (DIW Berlin), Mohrenstraße 58, 10117 Berlin, Germany

<sup>b</sup> International Max Planck Research School on the Life Course, Max Planck Institute for Human Development, Lentzeallee 94, 14195 Berlin, Germany

<sup>c</sup> University of Tübingen, Geschwister-Scholl-Platz, 72074, Tübingen, Germany

<sup>d</sup> Freie Universität Berlin, Boltzmannstraße 20, 14195 Berlin, Germany

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### ABSTRACT

This study examines whether children from potentially disadvantaged families attend early childhood education and care (ECEC) centers of lower quality compared to more advantaged children in the universal and strongly state-subsidized ECEC system in Germany. We combine the representative German Socio-Economic Panel (SOEP) with the 2014 K<sup>2</sup>ID- SOEP extension study on ECEC quality. We run linear and logistic regression models of 32 quality indicators based on 818 children who attend 749 ECEC groups in 647 centers. The findings provide evidence that migrant children and in particular children of low-educated parents experience moderately lower quality levels on some structural and orientation quality characteristics. Children from income poor or single parent households receive lower quality on few, hardly observable characteristics. In conclusion, financial resources may be less critical for families' use of high-quality ECEC than knowledge, preferences, or networks which are stratified by educational qualifications and culture.

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## 1. Introduction

In recent years, the percentage of children attending early childhood education and care (ECEC) institutions has risen substantially in many industrialized countries. Studies about the impact of ECEC attendance tend to indicate positive effects on children's development, especially in the domain of cognitive competencies (for literature reviews, see e.g., Burger, 2010; Gormley, Phillips, & Gayer, 2008). An increasing body of research has shown, however, that the effect of ECEC attendance depends on the quality of the interactions and learning environment in these institutions (Anders et al., 2012; Dearing et al., 2009; Keys et al., 2013). It is well established that the use of ECEC institutions correlates positively with family socio-economic status (SES) in most countries, especially at younger ages (Bainbridge, Meyers, Tanaka, & Waldfogel, 2005; Liang, Fuller, & Singer, 2000; Schober & Spiess, 2013; Stahl & Schober, 2017). Much

less is known about parental choices of ECEC centers with certain characteristics that can contribute to children's development.

In this study, we explore whether children from potentially disadvantaged families attend ECEC centers of lower quality compared to more advantaged children. We concentrate on four potentially disadvantaged groups, which overlap only partially in the data: (1) children with a low-educated parent, (2) children with migration background, (3) children from income poor households, and (4) children who live with a single parent. This approach could give a hint at possible underlying mechanisms. In the German context, the term migration background is commonly used to describe children with at least one parent born abroad. Most of the children themselves have been born in Germany. The most frequent countries of origin of the parents are Turkey, member states of the former Soviet Union as well as former Yugoslavia, Italy and Greece.

We analyze a large set of indicators of structural and orientation quality as well as networking with families, which have been shown to relate to process quality and child development. The paper's objective is to provide exploratory evidence about parental choices of ECEC on the one hand, and about whether children face unequal starting conditions at the beginning of their educational career on the other hand. We discuss how links between socio-economic status and ECEC quality might come about theoretically

\* Corresponding author at: University of Tübingen, Geschwister-Scholl-Platz, 72074 Tübingen, Germany.

E-mail addresses: [jstahl@diw.de](mailto:jstahl@diw.de) (J.F. Stahl), [pia.schober@uni-tuebingen.de](mailto:pia.schober@uni-tuebingen.de) (P.S. Schober), [kspiess@diw.de](mailto:kspiess@diw.de) (C.K. Spiess).

and test empirically whether the degree of accessible information on ECEC quality moderates these associations.

Our analyses are based on a novel, nationally representative German dataset. Due to near universal ECEC attendance among children aged three years and over, Germany represents an interesting case, where the question of whether or not to attend an ECEC center has been replaced by the question at which age to enter and which ECEC institution to choose. The latter question is particularly relevant, as considerable variations in the quality (Tietze et al., 2013) and composition (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2013) of German ECEC centers have been found, while there is no systematic information on the quality of particular centers for the public. There are no Quality Rating and Improvement Systems as they exist or are currently being developed in virtually all US states (e.g.; Goffin & Barnett, 2015). At the same time, compared to other countries the ECEC system in Germany has been rather homogeneous in terms of access and costs due to universal state-subsidized provision and fairly low, often income-adjusted fees for parents. This provides us with the opportunity to test whether 'parental choices' of ECEC institutions of varying quality differ systematically by socio-economic background characteristics even in a strongly state-subsidized ECEC system. It should be noted that the analyses cannot examine parental choices directly. The observed patterns may be the result of parents' choices, (possibly discriminatory) admission practices of ECEC centers, different opportunities in families' local environment, or an interplay between these factors. This study also allows for contextual comparisons to the childcare market in the United States, which most previous evidence on associations between family characteristics and ECEC quality has been based on. Before reviewing the existing literature, the next section will first elaborate on the different components and measures of ECEC quality, and how these relate to child development.

## 2. Conceptualization of qualitative characteristics of ECEC environments

It is well-established that ECEC quality can be divided into different components, namely structural quality, process quality, orientation quality and networking with families (e.g., Klucznik & Roßbach, 2014; NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, 2002; Tietze et al., 2013). Following the structure-process model of quality, while each component may impact children and their families separately, process quality mediates or moderates the influences of all other components (Klucznik & Roßbach, 2014). Process quality in ECEC institutions includes the entirety of pedagogical interactions and children's experiences with the social and material environment, which has been found to affect children's development although the effect sizes vary (Anders et al., 2012; Belsky et al., 2007; Dearing, McCartney, & Taylor, 2009; Keys et al., 2013).

The present study directs attention to the remaining quality components. Structural quality is usually defined as comprising quantifiable and regulable features of the ECEC context. Whereas many studies find that lower child-staff ratios and higher or more specific teacher qualifications are associated with higher process quality, findings for other structural characteristics such as group size, space per child, availability of materials, and further training or accreditation procedures are more mixed (for a review, see Kuger, Klucznik, Kaplan, & Rossbach, 2016). Regarding group composition, several studies document that a higher average level of peer abilities in an ECEC center is positively associated with children's cognitive and language skills (Henry & Rickman, 2007; Justice, Petscher, Schatschneider, & Mashburn, 2011; Mashburn, Justice, Downer, & Pianta, 2009). Children learn from each other in the daily interactions and play activities in ECEC centers. A large proportion of children with non-German family language in ECEC centers

has been shown to be negatively associated with German language acquisition of children with a non-German family language (Klein & Becker, 2017; Niklas, Schmiedeler, Pröstler, & Schneider, 2011). In addition, the composition of children may have indirect effects, e.g. by altering the frequency of disruptions in the class or the motivation and expectancies of teachers but to-date little empirical evidence is available on these mechanisms (Henry & Rickman, 2007).

Orientation quality comprises the education- and care-related expectations, attitudes, norms and values of all teachers in ECEC settings. How centers organize their work and assure quality (e.g., pedagogical concept) also falls into this category (Tietze et al., 2013). Orientation quality, in particular perceived responsibility, teacher enthusiasm, and joy and interest in teaching specific activities have been found to correlate with higher instructional quality (Anders & Rossbach, 2015; Klucznik, Anders, & Ebert, 2011) and may thus influence child development.

Networking with families mainly refers to the cooperation between educators and parents (Anders & Rossbach, 2015; Klucznik et al., 2011). Several studies have found positive associations of parent involvement in ECEC institutions with children's development (Fantuzzo, McWayne, Perry, & Childs, 2004; OECD, 2006; Zygmunt-Fillwalk, 2011). However, to-date the evidence base is stronger for characteristics of structural quality as compared to orientation quality and networking with families.

## 3. Previous studies on parental choice of qualitative characteristics of ECEC environments

The few existing studies on ECEC quality choices have mainly focused on overall process quality and have been mostly based on regionally restricted subsamples from the United States and in a few cases from Germany. The overall evidence is mixed, the results depend on how ECEC quality and socio-economic status are measured and which country context is considered (e.g., Beckh, Mayer, Berkic, & Becker-Stoll, 2014; Gambaro, Stewart, & Waldfogel, 2015; Karoly & Gonzalez, 2011; Lehl, Kuger, & Anders, 2014; Mathers et al., 2007; NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, 1997; Tietze et al., 2013). In the US, some scholars observed a U-shaped relationship between family income and some quality indicators (NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, 1997), so that the "nearly poor" group was worst off. However, children from high-income families still received the highest quality of education overall (Dowsett, Huston, Imes, & Gennetian, 2008; Phillips, Vorum, Kisker, Howes, & Whitebook, 1994).

Fewer analyses have considered aspects of structural quality and composition. Using data from three US states, Bolger and Scarr (1995) detected a significant positive association of parents' years of education and ECEC quality, measured by combining structural features and process characteristics into one factor. Parents' occupational prestige and family income did not show an additional significant effect. Using preschool data from California, Karoly, Ghosh-Dastidar, Zellman, Perlman, and Fernyhough (2008) did not find any significant association between the mother's education and different indicators of structural and process characteristics of the ECEC center attended by their child. Using data on pre-K and Head Start enrollment in the US, Reid, Kagan, Hilton and Potter (2015) reported that most children attend preschools that are segregated by SES and often also by ethnicity, which may be regarded as a less beneficial learning environment. This results in an association between SES and one ECEC quality characteristic, namely group composition.

In the UK in the early 2000s, children from poorer families were more likely to access provision in state-maintained schools staffed by teachers (Mathers et al., 2007). A more recent study similarly found that children from poorer families attended more often

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