

Behind the Gap: Exploring Determinants of the SES gap in Early Childcare Enrolment in France through Qualitative Insights

Laudine Carbuccia, doctoral student at the Center for Research on Social Inequalities (Sciences Po) & the Department of Cognitive Studies (ENS), Paris.

ABSTRACT

Despite early childcare structures (ECS) effectively combating inequality, access to these structures remains unequal for low socio-economic status (SES) populations in most countries. It is particularly the case in France, where this article explores the range of factors that could account for the observed difference in ECS participation according to SES. The study is based on 129 semi-structured interviews with key actors in the early childhood education and care sector and parents in the Paris region. The results reveal that, while affordability and accessibility are important factors affecting ECS participation, other factors may also play a significant role in this access gap. Our findings suggest that low-SES parents are most of the time interested in using ECS, but successfully securing a place requires substantial resources, such as mental space and information, that may be harder for them to find. Moreover, low-SES parents sometimes have specific needs, such as less intensive or later care that do not always align with the current system. Thus, while solving the problem of lack of space or cost is essential, it may not be sufficient to fully address these inequities everything else being equal.

Introduction

Early childcare structures¹ (ECS), such as daycare centers (*crèches*) and private childminders (*assistantes maternelles*), have been shown to effectively combat inequality and prevent its reproduction. Indeed, children from low socioeconomic backgrounds² benefit the most from attending ECS, especially when the quality of the structures is high (Berger et al., 2020; Carbuccia et al., 2020; Melhuish, 2004; Van Huizen & Plantenga, 2013). ECS can thus mitigate the socioeconomic gradient in children's development from the early years, and thereby the social and educational inequalities observed later in life (Grobon, 2018; OECD, 2001). Additionally, the use of ECS can reduce gender and income inequalities by promoting maternal employment, especially when ECS is low-cost and readily available (d'Albis et al., 2017; Waldfogel, 2002).

Despite the benefits of ECS, strong inequalities in access to these structures exist in the vast majority of Western countries. In Europe, France stands out for a unique paradox: it has one of the highest participation rates in ECS but also one of the most marked inequalities in access (Collombet, 2018; OECD, 2016). Nearly 80% of families below the poverty line do not use these structures (Zaouche Gaudron et al., 2021). As a result, access to ECS for low socio-economic status (SES) populations is currently at the heart of debates on early childhood policies in France, but the supply-side policies implemented so far failed to effectively close the SES gap in ECS enrolment. For example, the issue occupied an important place in the poverty strategy of the government in 2018, and both in the 1000 Days report and in the

¹ Refers to all care for children less than three years old supervised or controlled by a structure, whether public or private. By "early childcare structures", we mean mainly the group of certified private childminders (*assistantes maternelles*) and the collective childcare structures (e.g. *crèches*), but also nannies, drop-in childcare centers (*halte-garderies*), etc.

² The term here refers primarily to the education level of mothers, although this measure is often highly correlated with other measures, such as household income or occupation.

Premiers Pas³ seminar in 2020 (Commission 1000 jours, 2020; Ministère des Solidarités et de la Santé, 2018; Premiers Pas, 2021). However, the SES gap in ECS enrolment still persists despite several policies, such as the creation of a bonus for social mixity (*bonus mixité sociale*) at the end of 2018, or the efforts to create additional ECS places (ONAPE, 2021).

From a scientific perspective, it is therefore a priority to better understand the plurality of mechanisms underlying the SES gap in ECS enrolment. From a policy perspective, it is necessary to identify the range of interventions needed to eliminate the obstacles to ECS participation for low-SES families who wish to use these structures. Indeed, far from forcing low-SES communities to use ECS, public services should ensure that ECS access is equitable, that is that additional barriers do not impede the decision-making process and access to these services for low-SES families who wish to use them (Oliver, 2004).

Hitherto, there is little international works documenting the determinants of access to ECS, even less so in the French context (Carbuccia et al., 2022). In this article, we therefore qualitatively explore the range of mechanisms that could account for the observed difference in ECS participation according to the socio-economic background of families living in Paris region (Paris, Val de Marne, Seine Saint Denis). We build on 129 semi-structured interviews conducted with several key actors of the early childhood education and care sector and parents. The manuscript proceeds as follows. After reviewing the existing international literature existing on the topic and presenting our theoretical framework, we firstly present the methods and the sample used in this article. Then, we start by presenting the French context and the supply-side dynamics. We then turn to the demand-side dynamics, that is parents' side. The last section of the manuscript concludes.

While accessibility and affordability factors were primarily cited to explain these differences in participation, demand-side factors may also play a role

Two supply-side factors are mainly put forward in the international literature to explain this SES gap in ECS enrolment: affordability factors (*affordability*), that is the direct and indirect costs of ECS, and accessibility factors (*accessibility*) (Immervoll & Barber, 2006; Marshall et al., 2013; OECD, 2018; Vandenbroeck & Lazzari, 2014; Workman & Jessen-Howard, 2018). *Accessibility factors* refer to three main phenomena. Firstly, the lack of places often leads to the implementation of *selection criteria* in existing structures to allocate the available slots (Archambault et al., 2019; Vandenbroeck, 2013; Vandenbroeck & Lazzari, 2014). Yet, these criteria can sometimes implicitly disadvantage low-SES households, such as the criterion of bi-activity (AMF, 2018; Heim & Combe, 2020). Second, since ECS are most often concentrated in the most affluent areas, *inequalities in geographic coverage* are also at work, and this is compounded by the fact that low-SES populations are often less mobile (David, 1999; Van Lancker & Ghysels, 2016). Finally, the *functioning* of ECS may *not be adapted* to the needs of low-SES families (e.g., the facilities often have office hours, not adapted to atypical hours) (Archambault et al., 2019; Gingras, 2012; Zaouche Gaudron et al., 2021).

Yet, SES-based differences in ECS enrolment persist, even in countries with accessible, low-cost provision (OECD, 2016). On the demand-side, one explanation put forward is that family *preferences* differ based on socioeconomic status (Leseman, 2002). For example, the so-called traditional model (*male-as-breadwinner and mother-as-caregiver*), where the father works and the mother stays at home to take care of children, is often seen as more prevalent in low-SES communities (Galland & Lemel, 2010; Pape, 2009). However, differences in participation according to SES are also present among working single-parent families (ONAPE, 2021). Besides, the non-take-up of other services, such as healthcare, has been

³ Organized jointly by the Caisse nationale des allocations familiales (Cnaf), France Stratégie and the Haut Conseil de la famille, de l'enfance et de l'âge (HCFEA).

shown to go beyond simple differences in preferences (Oliver, 2004; Perreira et al., 2012; Warin, 2017). Despite these findings, little is known about the factors that influence ECS decision-making among low-SES parents in France. This study aims to address this gap in the literature by conducting a qualitative investigation of these determinants for parents living in Paris region while also considering supply-side dynamics.

Methods and socio-demographic characteristics of the sample

To gain understanding on the determinants of the SES gap in ECS enrolment, we conducted 129 semi-structured interviews in Île de France (Paris region) between October 2021 and May 2022. In a first phase, 59 privileged observers were initially interviewed to better understand the supply-side constraints to which future and new parents may be exposed. They were elected officials from the early childhood sector, members of bodies such as the Cnaf (national benefits office), directors and employees of formal childcare facilities, staff from the Protection Maternelle et Infantile (PMI, free care services for mothers and young children), heads of associations, social workers and maternity hospital staff.

In a second phase, 70 parents and future parents from various socioeconomic backgrounds were interviewed. Participants were recruited either from maternity hospitals in Paris (15^{ème}, 12^{ème} and 18^{ème}) (N = 41) or from PMI centers in the Val de Marne (N = 22). 7 new parents outside the Île de France were also interviewed. At the time of the study, 46 households were expecting a child, and 24 were new parents (i.e., parents of a child aged 1 to 18 months, with a 6.5 months median). Because of the recruitment method, participants were mainly women who came alone to the appointments: of the 70 households, only 13 fathers were also present. Among the participants, 41 mothers had less than a bachelor's degree (referred to as "low SES" in the article), and 37 were not born in France (including 34 from Sub-Saharan Africa).

Results

Supply-side dynamics in France: a complex system...

The French early childcare system has several distinct features in its provision of ECS places (Collombet, 2018). While there is a relatively large supply of places available compared to other OECD countries, a significant proportion of the need for ECS is not met for parents with children under 3 years of age, generating many disparities (Le Bouteillec et al., 2014; OECD, 2017; ONAPE, 2021). Generally, ECS are primarily concentrated in affluent areas, with substantial variations in coverage between regions. For instance, while Paris has the highest daycare centers (*crèches*) coverage rate in France, the Seine Saint Denis, which is also the poorest department in France, has the lowest. Val de Marne stands out rather in the middle. Besides, daycare centers are primarily present in urban areas while private childminders (*assistantes maternelles*) are over-represented in rural (often poorer) contexts. Besides, there are substantial inequalities in access based on socio-economic status as previously mentioned.

One other significant distinctive feature is that, at the national level, the majority of the supply is not provided by daycare centers, but by private childminders (*assistantes maternelles*). The prevalence of private childminders is crucial in relation to these disparities. Due to the different subsidy systems compared to daycare centers, the out-of-pocket fees for parents with low incomes are often higher than the ones for daycare centers⁴, while private childminders can sometimes be less expensive than daycare centers for more affluent households (IGAS, 2017). Additionally, subsidies for daycare centers are paid directly to the centers without any input

⁴ Up to 380 euros difference before tax deduction for a family of 4 children with a minimum monthly income (754,16 €) and 50 hours of weekly care.

from parents, who simply pay the remaining amount. This is not the case for private childminders, as it is up to the parents to apply for subsidies and pay the costs upfront. Furthermore, like nannies, this type of ECS puts parents in the position of being employers, which can be a symbolic and administrative burden, particularly for low-SES parents.

However, the daycare centers offer is not always adapted to the demand of families. Indeed, while historically day care centers received subsidies from the benefits office (Caf) per half day, the subsidies reform implemented in 2014 (*réforme de la PSU*) changed the system to a subsidy per effective hour. While this reform was supposed to create a childcare service as close as possible to the needs of the parents, it seems that this has sometimes led some daycare centers to create packages of 9, 10 or 11 hours of childcare and not accept requests for lower volumes. Therefore, some parents end up paying more hours that they would actually need.

Besides, because of the lack of places, allocation criteria exist to allocate existing places in most of municipal and departmental daycare centers. These allocation criteria are left to the discretion of the latter and may or may not be accessible to parents (Laithier, 2018). Similarly, the allocation of places may or may not be anonymized. Since historically, ECS were primarily a means of reconciling family and professional life, the fact that both parents must work has long been a criterion applied. While this is no longer supposed to be the case, some of our interviews revealed that it still is in some places, where parents cannot be allocated a slot if they do not work. Conversely, in some municipalities, parents in precarious situations (single-parent families, substandard or too small housing, disability, low income, etc.) are sometimes prioritized.

In this context of limited availability, parents should apply as early as during pregnancy since structures often have long waiting lists and because the age of the application is sometimes taken into account. Furthermore, the allocation of places in daycare centers follows a precise calendar that aligns with the school year. Since daycare centers operate on the school model with groups by age, most places are allocated around June for households with a baby under one year old to start care in September. It is much less likely to obtain a place for a child over one year old, or during the year, unless parents request a place in ECS that only accepts children over the age of one. This system is already known to create additional inequalities in access to ECS based on the month of birth (Le Bouteillec et al., 2014).

In addition to complying with the application calendar, parents should also apply to multiple ECS since there are various types of structures available, each with its own characteristics. For daycare centers for instance, departmental daycare centers, associative daycare centers, private daycare centers, and private “micro-crèches” are all available alongside municipal structures. While the prices and funding for associative and departmental daycare centers are similar to those of municipal daycare centers, private daycare centers may or may not be priced the same and require a partnership with parents' employers to secure a place in the long run. Micro-crèches operate on the same subsidy scale as private childminders and are generally much more expensive for parents than other daycare centers. Applications to these different structures must be made separately and can be done on-site or online, and sometimes parents have to apply both on-site and online.

However, there is no central website or institutional actor that consolidates all the information on the various types of ECS, their relative costs based on parents' income and household composition, and their application procedures. Social workers are often not trained in these issues either. In general, city halls provide information on municipal daycare centers and sometimes associative daycare centers, while *relais petite enfance* typically provide information on private childminders and can also sometimes provide information on nannies.

... that creates information inequalities on the demand-side

In this complex landscape and in the absence of a body gathering all the information needed, navigating and acquiring information about the complex French ECS landscape is an "obstacle course" for all parents. Indeed, all parents struggle to understand the differences in characteristics and subtleties of the different types, particularly with their first child. In this context, informal networks of friends and family appear to be an important information resource for parents. For example, some parents who are the first in their family to have children presented this in our interviews as a factor that works against them in their search, regardless of their socio-economic backgrounds.

However, since ECS is less used in low-SES communities, low-SES parents' informal networks appear to be less rich in information, which makes it even more difficult to find them objectively. Besides, low-SES parents appeared to rely less on the internet to gather this kind of information. For instance, low-SES parents from our sample were less aware of the information meetings advertised on cities website and organized by most of the town halls in our areas. As a result, low-SES parents are more likely to receive the information they need from social actors such as hospital social workers, that only possess partial information, or PMI centers. For example, the PMI centers seem to be well-identified by people living in social housing as resource for these issues, but these services has less and less time to devote to ECS related question due to budget constraints. One piece of information that most parents lack is the cost (called the "reste-à-charge", i.e. the cost of a place for parents after subsidies and aids have been deducted) of the different types of childcare. Especially when welcoming their first-time child, parents have very little idea of what they will be asked to pay for in ECS, despite the various simulators available on the Internet.

This lack of knowledge of the cost of a place - the exact amount of which is only known by families once the contract is signed - appears to have asymmetrical consequences on parents' behavior. While this does not seem to deter high-SES parents from more affluent backgrounds, who tend to report that they will "manage" whatever the cost ("*On fera avec*"), this lack of knowledge about costs seems to be a real obstacle for low-SES families, who sometimes reported being more reluctant to apply for these reasons. Moreover, the only low-SES mother interviewed who had access to a private childminder (*assistantes maternelles*) in our sample had to stop after a few months. This was because the high remaining costs of this type of care for low-income families, added to the complex administrative procedures related to the status of parent-employer, made this type of care untenable for the family. Thanks to the PMI, she was finally able to obtain a place in a municipal crèche for her twins.

Similarly, many non-working low-SES families thought ECS are reserved for households where both parents work, whereas this is (theoretically) not the case. They are also unaware that social criteria are also considered in most municipal and departmental daycare (*crèches*) allocation commissions. As a result, when they are in such situations, they do not systematically mention it when they apply. Many low-SES mothers who did not apply or who gave up after an initial refusal also report that they think that these facilities "are not for them" or attribute their refusal to the fact that they are "not French". These mothers therefore tend

to become discouraged quickly after an initial refusal, since they are quicker to attribute this refusal to their social and economic condition and not to a lack of available supply at the time of application.

The increasingly dematerialization of procedures is an additional element that complicates the application process for populations from low-SES backgrounds. For example, with the Covid-19 pandemic, the Val de Marne department completely dematerialize the application process for departmental daycare centers, as well as for municipal daycare centers for 23 municipalities. However, while the website does not have a version adapted for smartphones, low-SES households most of the time do not have a computer. The site also requires an email address, yet several low-SES families interviewed did not use one. As a result, many low-SES families start the registration process, but did not finish because of the lack of digital support available in their environment, of an institutional contact to accompany them, and of time to devote to this additional research.

Finally, mothers from low socio-economic backgrounds tended to want less intensive care than their more affluent counterparts. They were more likely to be willing to use occasional or part-time care, especially if they were unemployed. However, while daycare centers (*crèches*) are often the only type of childcare low-SES parents have identified, these structures only often offer contracts of 9, 10 or 11 hours a day and care for 4 or 5 days a week, as previously mentioned. Other facilities, such as drop-in centers (*halte-garderies*), are specific facilities for occasional or half-day care. But most of the mothers interviewed were not familiar with these facilities. In addition, the way in which they apply - directly at the level of the structure - differs from the *crèches* - mainly at the level of the town hall in the case of municipal *crèches* - and is therefore not known to the families.

Thus, one major result of our fieldwork is that most of low-SES mothers are also interested in using ECS, even if unemployed mothers sometimes want to use it less intensively. Indeed, more than half of the low-SES inactive mothers expressed a strong desire for accessing ECS and valued it highly, despite the fact that it represented a much larger proportion of their family budget. These mothers cited three main reasons for their interest: the need for time to complete administrative procedures (e.g., residence permit, job search), the opportunity to work and support their family, and the need for time to take care of themselves, allowing them then to be more available for their child.

The traditional family model seems to fail in describing the reality of the majority of the mothers interviewed, for whom non-activity is more of a burden than a choice. When the normative power of this model was present, it was more prevalent in the discourse of lower-middle-class mothers, for whom supporting their family needs appears less crucial, consistent with some literature (Sear, 2021). For mothers from lower socio-economic backgrounds, obtaining a place in ECS is essential, especially for those who are socially isolated. They view ECS as the *sine-qua-non* condition for being able to look for and maintain a job. Unfortunately, some of these mothers reported having been already refused a place in ECS or even to submit their application because they were not currently employed. As previously mentioned, this is consistent with the interviews with stakeholders, even though being unemployed is not supposed to be an exclusion criterion anymore.

Socially marked horizons create asymmetrical consequences, despite common concerns

Furthermore, when it comes to childcare arrangements, all social classes seem to share common concerns, but the divergent environmental context creates completely different outputs. We will explore two main common concerns in this part: the timing of ECS application, and the well-being of the child.

While both low-SES and high-SES parents' express a strong interest in ECS from pregnancy and feared not to find a place, the daily realities and priorities of their lives lead to differences in the timing and strategies employed when searching for ECS. Firstly, even though applying early to ECS is crucial, interviews suggest that low-SES parents often have to compose with other top priority issues while expecting their child, making it difficult to prioritize anything that seems more distant in time. Indeed, they often face urgent and vital problems during pregnancy such as stabilizing housing -especially for mothers living in social hotels-, relocating due to unsuitable living conditions, stabilizing their administrative situation (e.g., obtaining a residence permit), or dealing with the increased financial issues necessary to welcome a child. In this context, looking for a place in a daycare center is perceived as more distant in time. Thus, many low-SES parents interviewed began looking for a place in an ECS significantly later in their pregnancy, or even after the birth of their child. In contrast, high-SES parents tend to prioritize obtaining a daycare place early on in their pregnancy, as this is seen as a top concern from the outset.

In addition to searching and applying to ECS later, the interviews also revealed that low-SES families are less likely to apply to multiple ECS simultaneously. In a context of little 'mental space' available and few different types of ECS known, this can indeed be a complex and burdensome process, particularly for those with weaker French language or administrative skills. However, as aforementioned, applying to multiple centers can be a successful strategy for maximizing the chances of securing a spot, and this is a practice more commonly used by high-SES families. Surprisingly, our interviews also suggest that low-SES parents apply to fewer ECS centers and later in the process due to a greater confidence in the system's ability to provide for their childcare needs. Unlike their more affluent counterparts, low-SES parents do not view obtaining a place in ECS as a complex and time-consuming process that requires early planning. This may be due to the fact that they have fewer examples of people around them who have experienced difficulties in obtaining childcare, unlike their more privileged counterparts who report pressure from family and friends to apply early due to the well-known lack of available spaces.

The well-being of the child also appeared to be a central concern for all social classes. However, this well-being seems crystallized in different ways according to SES: while for the more privileged populations these considerations will lead them to put their child in daycare as soon as three months after birth, low-SES population will tend to prefer a later intake. Indeed, although many families aspire to stay with their child in the first months of life, more privileged families will be more likely to have a long-termist vision of the child's well-being. For these mothers, going to daycare early and during the first three years will allow their child to develop and flourish better than if he or she stayed at home or was looked after by a relative. Low-SES populations, on the other hand, will tend to emphasize the priority of a child being in a secure parental setting during the first year of life. Even though they seem to value ECS just as much as high-SES families, these structures would come for them in a second time, when the child can walk and socialize with others. As a result, the mothers interviewed are more likely to plan to leave their jobs for a while or to remain in a more precarious situation for "a few more months" in order to be able to take care of their child themselves during the first year.

The decision-making process of mothers from more privileged backgrounds is also marked to a larger extent by the problems of reconciling family and professional life, with higher opportunity costs for them if they take care of their child themselves. Thus, even though some parents (including fathers) would like to be able to spend time with their child during the first few months, these parents (mainly mothers) are also driven by a need "not to do just that", and to achieve fulfillment in the professional sphere. For populations from lower socio-economic backgrounds, work is more conceptualized as a monetary and food activity.

These divergent aspirations and behaviors during pregnancy and the first year of a child's life may not be without consequences for the following years. In fact, firstly, as aforementioned, applying early during pregnancy, and to multiple centers can be a successful strategy for maximizing the chances of securing a spot. However, low-SES parents appear to do to a lesser extent due to both less mental space to devote to these tasks and a greater confidence in public services to meet their childcare need. Besides, as we said, daycare centers most often operate on the same type of calendar as the school calendar. The "toddler" group (1 year to 2 years) is mostly made up of the "babies" (2.5 months to 1 year) from the previous year, and very few new children are welcomed into the daycare centers later on. Therefore, by wishing for a place after the first year of the child's life (the child is then old enough to enter the "toddler" group or above), low-SES families arrive "too late" and have a high probability of not finding a place. Very often, the only way for these families to find a place is to find a daycare center that only welcomes children from the age of one, but the vast majority of the families interviewed were not aware of the existence of these subtleties.

Discussion

This manuscript aimed at exploring from a qualitative perspective the determinants of the SES gap in ECS enrolment that is particularly marked in the French context. We provide one of the first insights into parents' decision making in Paris region and the structural constraints they face. A first major result of this fieldwork is that low-SES and high-SES parents both express interest in ECS from early during the pregnancy. However, their different socio-economic context tends to create diverging path in the process of looking for and obtaining a place in ECS. Low-SES families appeared to start their search for a place in ECS substantially later, and to apply to fewer ECS centers, while these two practices generally greatly increase the chances of getting a place. These behavioral patterns seem to be due to several factors, including information barriers, urgent and vital issues that need to be solved upstream, greater confidence in the system's ability to provide for their childcare needs, and a preference for a secure parental setting for their child during the first year of life. In contrast, high-SES families prioritize obtaining a daycare place early on in their pregnancy, applying to multiple centers simultaneously, and want their child to be socialized from two and a half months of age.

The demand for ECS and its timing appears not solely determined by personal preferences but also requires two crucial resources for parents - time and mental space - to anticipate and address concerns during pregnancy. Along with the financial and social/cultural resources needed to complete the process, the lack of mental space to devote to these issues may be more prevalent in low-SES populations due to material deprivation, particularly in a context where the enrollment procedures can be demanding (Mullainathan & Shafir, 2013). Consequently, these resources represent an additional significant obstacle to a successful search for ECS among the low-SES families interviewed, even if many plan to use them. While structural constraints heavily affect all families, our study thus reveals specific and sometimes unique challenges that compound the situation for the low-SES families interviewed, potentially widening the SES gap in ECS enrollment.

As it stands, the ECS system appears to be difficult to reconcile with the constraints faced by low-SES populations. Until now, public authorities have focused on two essential supply-side factors to reduce inequalities in participation in ECS, namely the *affordability* and *accessibility* factors mentioned in the introduction. For example, in the French context, direct or indirect subsidies reduce the costs of ECS for families. Examples of public actions around accessibility issues are, for example, the creation of places (e.g., the 3.4 billion euros invested in collective childcare in 2017 by the Cnaf) or the reflections and experiments on a reform of the system for allocating available places (AMF, 2018; Cnaf, 2018; Heim & Combe, 2020).

While providing equitable access to ECS in terms of costs and the allocation of places is essential, our work suggests that these policies might not be sufficient to mitigate the SES gap in ECS enrolment. If the results are confirmed by further research, any public policy seeking to act on this gap could benefit from ensuring upstream that the application process does not also imply a significant amount of non-monetary resources - for example, in time, energy, information or social resources - that are too great for the target public. Otherwise, investments made further downstream, on costs and the allocation of places for example, might only have limited impacts.

Of course, universal ECS provision, that is nowadays under discussion in France, may strongly mitigate the inequalities mentioned. However, our work suggests that the specificity of implementing this service matters to a great extent, especially for low-SES populations. An additional question that is not much mentioned in this article is to make sure that the ECS offer is acceptable for the target public. And ensuring that the offer is not only accessible but acceptable goes beyond addressing the issue of costs. For instance, in France, most of the supply is provided by private childminders. However, across socio-economic backgrounds, we found that the search for a place is not so much for a place in ECS in general but for a place in daycare, in line with what has already been noted in the literature (Cartier et al., 2017). Certainly, part of this is because *crèche* is the most known ECS type. But most parents wanted to have a place in a collective *crèche* because they found these structures more reassuring than individual care, with more numerous and more trained professionals. Individual childminders were often only included later in the decision-making process of the more privileged urban populations, often after pregnancy, if and only if parents failed to secure a place in daycare centers. Developing an accessible and acceptable offer for both supply and demand will therefore require a detailed but nonetheless global vision of the dynamics on both sides for the public authorities.

Our study has several limitations, and more research is needed to confirm these preliminary qualitative findings. Due to the nature of the methodology and despite efforts to avoid it, it is difficult to eliminate a potential social desirability bias, especially for participants from low-SES backgrounds. Moreover, while France has great territorial variations in terms of supply, our study was restricted to a very small number of geographical areas and was conducted almost exclusively in urban areas (David, 1999). However, as discussed, daycare centers and other collective ECS appear to be concentrated in urban areas, whereas private childminders are the most common form of childcare in less urbanized areas (Carbuccia et al., 2020). This is all the truer given that the one of the main target areas, Paris, has one of the highest coverage rates for ECS in France. The results of our study tend to reflect only the experience of the families interviewed, and thus cannot be generalized. In addition, our study reflects the daily life and experiences of mothers from various socio-economic backgrounds rather than those of the entire household, since only 13 fathers were interviewed. By whom and how the final childcare decision is made within the household unit remains an open question. Finally, the differences in the pathways according to migratory origin is a theme that would require specific attention. Indeed, the foreign-born mothers in our sample are essentially coming from sub-Saharan Africa. Although this is the majority origin of French immigration at the time of the study, our work therefore lacks representation of, for example, populations of European or Asian origin, which are nonetheless an important part of French immigration (INSEE, 2022). For this reason, analyses specific to migratory origin seemed inappropriate for our dataset.

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