

## **A double matthew effect? Territorial and income inequalities in 0-2 ecec uptake: italy and sweden compared**

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0-2 Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) has been increasingly portrayed in the comparative welfare state as an instrument to counter income and social inequalities both from an ex-post and ex-ante perspective (e.g., Esping-Andersen, 1999; 2009; Häusermann, 2012; Garritzmann et al., 2022). Ex-post, childcare services de-familialize caring tasks, thus increasing the female employment rate and easing the shift from the single-earner to the dual-earner household model (e.g., Leitner, 2003; Saraceno, 2022). As demonstrated by the comparative literature, dual-earner households have a lower probability of being at risk of social disadvantage than households where only one parent is employed (Ponthieux, 2018; Van Lancker & Horemans, 2018). On the other hand, ECEC acts as a social investment (SI) instrument that triggers ex-ante prevention (Häusermann, 2010; Morel et al., 2012). Given the high intergenerational transmission of poverty, access to an education system from the earliest months of life allows children from the most economically disadvantaged social classes – and with lower economic and social capital – to reach an egalitarian development of knowledge (Morgan, 2012; 2022).

However, empirical studies have demonstrated that in advanced economies, the 0-2- ECEC uptake is structurally unequal since it is characterized by income and territorial disparities. On the one hand, high-income households are more likely to use these services than low-income ones – the so-called Matthew effect (e.g., Van Lancker & Ghysels, 2012; Abrassart & Bonoli, 2015; Pavolini & Van Lancker, 2018; Wood et al., 2023). On the other hand, the availability of ECEC varies in the national territory, with households living in non-urban areas being disadvantaged compared to those living in the urban ones – what is known as the territorial Matthew effect (Sabatinelli, 2016; Carlin et al., 2019; Bucaite-Vilke, 2021; Arlotti & Sabatinelli, 2022).

In this regard, Italy and Sweden are two very different case studies regarding childcare policies for children aged 0-2 years. Italy is known as an adverse case, characterized by a low ECEC uptake at the national level – well below the Barcelona target – which harbors significant territorial differences (Blome, 2017; Kazepov & Ranci, 2017; Saraceno, 2020). While some de-familiaizing reforms have been implemented in the last few years, the single-earner family model – mostly in its male breadwinner modality – is still widespread (Giuliani and De Luigi, 2023). On the contrary, Sweden can be considered the forerunner of the ECEC. Since the 1960s, the Nordic country has promoted universalistic 0-2

childcare: the uptake of these services has always been very high, contributing to the consolidation of the dual-earner family model, where both parents are fully employed (Morgan, 2006; Lundqvist and Roman, 2008; Duvander & Ferrarini, 2013). Despite these remarkable differences, both countries share some similarities. First of all, several studies have displayed an income divide in the ECEC uptake in Italy and Sweden – in this latter such a divide overlaps with a race divide, with children from a foreign background being less likely to be enrolled in a childcare facility (Colambarolli et al., 2024; Garvis & Lunneblad, 2018). Second, though to a different extent, Italy and Sweden are characterized by an urban/non-urban cleavage in the availability of childcare (e.g., Fargion, 2000; Saraceno 2020; Sabatinelli, 2016; Italian Department of Family Policy 2022; Lunneblad et al., 2017 Garvis & Lunneblad, 2018;). Nevertheless, it is still unclear how these two income and territorial disadvantages combine and affect households' probability of using 0-2 ECEC services.

Drawing on 2011-2021 data from the EU-SILC survey, the present study wants to answer three interlinked research questions:

1. How does income affect the 0-2 childcare uptake in the two countries? If a Matthew effect is identified, will its intensity be higher, lower, or similar between the de-familistic/universalistic Swedish welfare state and the familistic/particularistic Italian welfare state?
2. How does territory influence the 0-2 childcare uptake in the two countries? If a territorial Matthew effect (urban vs. non-urban) is detected, will its intensity vary between the two countries, or can a similar trend be identified?
3. How do these two penalizations combine, giving rise to a double Matthew effect? Can we observe a double penalty in both countries, and what kind of differences/similarities can we identify? More specifically, do low-income households living in non-urban areas in Sweden have a greater, lesser, or equal disadvantage than their counterparts in Italy? In other words, is the double Matthew effect stronger, weaker, or equal in Sweden than in Italy?

The contribution of the article is twofold.

First, by analyzing the combined effect of two phenomena that are usually studied separately, the research allows us to assess in a comprehensive way the effectiveness of childcare policies in addressing inequalities in two very different countries. If we identify a double penalty, it means that there are structural shortcomings in the policy design that hinder the role of 0-2 ECEC as an ex-ante and ex-post instrument for countering social disadvantages. Second, the study speaks to the literature on welfare regimes, especially those investigating the Nordic regime. While the Mediterranean countries have been commonly portrayed as the least-like cases for expanding 0-2 childcare policies, the Scandinavian model is widely considered the forerunner of reconciliation policies. Nevertheless, recent research has

increasingly pointed to a gradual but constant destabilization of the universalistic feature underpinning the Nordic welfare state (e.g., Greve et al., 2021; Greve and Kvist, 2021; de la Porte & Lundqvist, 2022; Greve, 2022). Identifying a double Matthew effect in the 0-2 childcare uptake in Sweden and assessing its intensity compared to that observed in Italy would allow us to evaluate the extent of this destabilization.