SOCIAL INNOVATION AND WELFARE STATE RETRENCHMENT

A Comparative Analysis of Early Childhood Education and Care in Europe and Beyond

Edited by

RAQUEL GALLEGO
SHEILA GONZÁLEZ MOTOS
LARA MAESTRIPIERI

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EDITED BY

RAQUEL GALLEGO

Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, Spain

SHEILA GONZÁLEZ MOTOS

University of Barcelona, Spain

AND

LARA MAESTRIPIERI

Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, Spain

United Kingdom – North America – Japan – India – Malaysia – China

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About the Editors

Raquel Gallego holds a PhD in Government and an MSc in Public Administration and Public Policy from the London School of Economics and Political Science. She is a Full Professor of Political Science and Public Administration at the Department of Political Science and Public Law and Senior Researcher at the Institute of Government and Public Policy (IGOP) at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona. She has been the Director of IGOP (2016–2019), where she currently is a member of the Research Group i-GOP: Innovation, Governance and Public Policies. She has been the Coordinator of the Master in Public Management (2001–2016, 2020–2023) jointly organised by UAB, Universitat de Barcelona and Universitat Pompeu Fabra. Her research interests are public policy, public administration and management, multilevel governance, the Welfare State, social policies and state decentralisation.

Sheila González Motos holds a PhD in Public Policy and Social Transformation at the UAB. She is currently a Lecturer at the Department of Political Science at the University of Barcelona. She has been a Postdoctoral Researcher at the Autonomous University of Barcelona and a Visiting Researcher at Hochschule Bremen (Germany), Instituto de Ciencias Sociales (UNAM, Mexico) and Departamento de Investigaciones Educativas (CINVESTAV-Mexico). She is a member of the Institute of Government and Public Policy (IGOP) and *Globalisation, Education and Social Policies (GEPS)*. Her research interests include public policy analysis and social inequalities, with a special focus on education and migration. She has conducted several research projects in this field and *has* experience in policy analysis and policy evaluation. She has also published her work in national and international journals and specialised books.

Lara Maestripieri holds a PhD in Sociology and Social Research, granted by the University of Trento (2011). She is a 'Ramon y Cajal' Distinguished Researcher at the Department of Political Science and Public Law at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona. She is a member of the IGOP Research Institute (Institute of Government and Public Policy). She is the Vice President of ISA RC52 'Sociology of Professional Groups' board and a member of the academic commission of the PhD programme in Political Science, Public Policies and International Relations (PPIR). Her research interests concern social change in post-industrial society and, in particular, public policies and intersectionality, economic insecurity in Southern European countries, social innovation and emerging professions.

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About the Contributors

Netta Avnoon is a Postdoctoral Associate at Western Ontario University, the Department of Sociology, London, Canada. She is a sociologist of professions and expertise and is interested in the changes of the 'expert' habitus in various fields as well as its related institutional transformations. After completing her PhD at the Department of Sociology, the University of Haifa, Israel in 2019, she was a Postdoctoral Fellow at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Israel (2020–2021), Tel Aviv University, Israel (2022–2023), and a Visiting Scholar at Columbia University, NYC (2023). She is the winner of the Faculty of Social Science Western Ontario University award for 2024–2025; Clalit Health Services Innovation Centre grant for 2022–2023; the Shapiro Foundation of the Sociology and Anthropology Department, Tel Aviv University award for 2021–2022; and the Hebrew University Faculty of Social Science award for 2020.

Maurizio Busacca is an Assistant Professor of Economic Sociology and Social Policy at Ca' Foscari University – Department of Philosophy and Cultural Heritage (Italy). His research work focuses on social innovation, which he explores from the three intertwined perspectives of labour transformation, the local welfare state and local governance processes. He has participated in and coordinated a number of national and regional research projects on, among other topics, university public engagement, collaborative spaces, the balance between care, unpaid work and paid work, and the relationship between the transformation of the welfare state, social work and third sector organisations.

Barbara Da Roit is a Full Professor of Sociology at Ca' Foscari University of Venice (Italy). After obtaining a PhD in Sociology (Science-Po Paris) and in Urban European Studies (University of Milano-Bicocca), she worked as a post-doc at the University of Milano-Bicocca (2005–2007) and subsequently as an Assistant Professor at Utrecht University (2007–2013) and the University of Amsterdam (2013–2016), and as an Associate Professor at Ca' Foscari University of Venice (2016–2020). Her research, embedded in comparative welfare studies, focuses on the relationship between changes in social policies and in social practices, with a specific interest in the interaction between care, employment, and migration regimes. She has coordinated and participated in collaborative research projects that look at changing care regimes across European countries. She is the coordinator of the Horizon Europe 'LeTs-Care – Learning from Long-term Care practices for the European Care Strategy' (2024–2027) project. She regularly publishes in top international journals in sociology and social policy.

Nikki Fairchild is an Associate Professor in Creative Methodologies and Education at the School of Education, Languages and Linguistics at the University of Portsmouth. Her research is theoretically informed by critical feminist materialist, post-humanist and agential realist theory. She employs creative methodologies to disturb knowledge production and relationality by entangling materiality, gender, place-spaces, time, temporality and (early) childhoods. She is an Associate Editor for the *Journal of Posthumanism* and on the Editorial Boards of Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood and Gender and Education.

Laurent Fraisse is a Sociologist and an Associate Researcher at the Laboratoire Interdisciplinaire pour la Sociologie Économique (LISE/CNAM, Paris, France). He is also a member of the EMES International Research Network. His main research fields are the social and solidarity economy, social enterprises, social innovation, the third sector, the governance of welfare policies and social care services, in particular, childcare services. He has coordinated and participated in several national and European research projects on childcare and social innovations. In particular, he has investigated comparisons between local childcare systems, considered as complementary to the study of national welfare regimes.

Daniel Gabaldón-Estevan is a Sociologist specialised in sociology of education, sociology of time and environmental sociology and has extensive research experience. Since 2018, he has been a Senior Lecturer in Sociology at the University of Valencia where he has recently been elected as the Head of the Sociology and Social Anthropology Department. He is also the Head of the Research Group on School Health and Wellbeing and a member of the Research Group of Schools for Health Europe (SHE), a member of the European Sleep Research Society (ESRS), a member of the International Association for Time Use Research (IATUR), a member of different research committees at the International Sociological Association (ISA), the European Sociological Association (ESA) and the Spanish Sociological Association (FES) and he has also been a Scientific Advisor to the Study Commission on the Uses of Time at the Valencian Regional Parliament. He is currently at Tallinn University (Estonia) on a Requalification of Teaching and Research Staff opportunity.

Revital Weil Gottshalk is a PhD candidate at the School of Cultural Studies, Tel Aviv University, Israel. Her main interest is emotional patterns as cultural competences embedded in identity work. In her doctoral study, she examines the emotional repertoire of educators as a function of their professional identity.

Kumiko Hagiwara has an MA from the Graduate School of Social Sciences, Hitotsubashi University and has completed a doctoral course there. She is currently a Professor at the Department of Sociology at St Andrew's University (Momoyama Gakuin Daigaku) in Japan. She has been an Assistant Professor at the Institute of Social Science, University of Tokyo (Japan), a Visiting Scholar at UC Berkeley and a Professor at Shimonoseki City University (Japan). Her research interests are the sociology of work and social policy analysis, with a special focus on care work, the work–family interface, the labour movement and gender aspects in human resource management.

Zyab Ibáñez is a Researcher at the Institute of Government and Public Policy (IGOP) at the Autonomous University of Barcelona. His research combines transnational analysis and case studies to explore how different institutional regimes shape public policies in the areas of employment, working hours and migration. His work has been published in journals such as the *Journal of European Social Policy*, *Journal of Youth Studies* or *Time & Society*, as well as in books (Palgrave, Ashgate Macmillan).

Margarita León (BA Sociology, University of Alicante [Spain], MA Sociological Research, University of Essex [UK], PhD London School of Economics [UK, 2000]) is a Full Professor of Political Science at the Universitat Autònoma Barcelona (UAB). Between 2010 and 2015, she was a 'Ramón y Cajal' Senior Research Fellow at the Institute of Government and Public Policy (IGOP) of the UAB. From 2003 until 2010, she was a Lecturer in European Social Policy at the School of Social Policy, Sociology and Social Research, University of Kent. From 2001 to 2003, she held a Marie Curie postdoctoral fellowship at the Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies, European University Institute in Florence, Italy. She was also a Fulbright Visiting Scholar at the University of Berkeley, California (2018). Her main areas of research are comparative public policy and welfare state reform. She has published in numerous international peer-reviewed scientific journals. With Ana M. Guillén, she co-edited *The Spanish Welfare State in European Context* (2011, Ashgate) and edited *The Transformation of Care in European Societies* (2014, Palgrave). She is the co-Chair of the Spanish Social Policy Research Network (REPS). In 2018, she was awarded a five-year ICREA ACADEMIA distinction for excellence in research (https://www.icrea.cat/es/icrea-academia).

Lucía Martínez Virto is an Associate Professor of Social Work and Social Services at the Public University of Navarra. Her lines of research focus on poverty studies, inclusion policies and social services. She has participated in more than 30 research projects and contracts, in 12 of them as the main researcher. She is the author or co-author of 69 scientific publications and has participated as a speaker in 17 international workshops. She has also participated as an expert in several regional social investment strategies, such as the Basque Family Strategy (2012). Since 2020, she has been a member of the High Commissioner's expert committee on the Fight Against Child Poverty. Since 2019, she has been the Director of the Social Action and Equality area of the Public University of Navarra.

Éva Mikuska came to live in the United Kingdom in 1992, at the beginning of the Yugoslavian war. She is a Senior Lecturer at the School of Education, Languages and Linguistics at the University of Portsmouth. Her work seeks to broaden current views on early childhood education and care (ECEC) nationally and internationally, with the aim of producing a more generative, ethical and political way to enact ECEC. Her research interests focus on exploring the role of emotion in multicultural and professional practices, social injustice, gender discourses in the ECEC field and minority rights. She is an executive member of the Early Childhood Studies Degrees Network (ECSDN) with responsibility for the Research and Knowledge Exchange portfolio and where she shares the position of Vice-Chair.

Trine Monica Myrvold is a Political Scientist and a Senior Researcher at the Institute for Urban and Regional Research (NIBR). Myrvold has particularly focused on municipal organisation, municipal services and instruments in the multi-level governance between the state and municipality. She has led numerous evaluations of major state programmes aimed at municipal sector services. She collaborates with researchers at the Faculty of Education on research related to ECEC and schools. Myrvold is proficient in both quantitative and qualitative research methods, with experience of designing surveys and linking survey data and registry data.

Ellen Os has a PhD in Education and is an Associate Professor at Oslo Metropolitan University, Norway. She is a Lecturer and a Researcher at the Faculty of Education and International Studies at the Department of Early Childhood Education. Her research interests are quality in ECEC with a focus on toddlers. She has participated in several research projects concerning quality in everyday life for children in ECEC, their peer relations and play, interactions between staff and children, group compositions, ECEC quality during the COVID-19 pandemic and ECEC providers' responsibilities for quality. Os has been certified for the use of several tools for researching quality in ECEC.

David Palomera holds a PhD in Public Policy from the Institute of Government and Public Policy, Autonomous University of Barcelona. He has published various research articles on the organisation and provision of childcare and public long-term care services. He holds a BSc in Economics from Pompeu Fabra University and a double MSc degree in Economics from Warwick University and Lund University. He has worked as an Independent Consultant on long-term care and community action for various public bodies and non-profit organisations. He also participates in different Spanish associations that analyse and develop progressive economic and social care policies.

Pamela Pasian is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow at Ca' Foscari University of Venice (Italy). She obtained a PhD in Social Sciences from the University of Padua in 2017. In 2019, she joined Ca' Foscari University to collaborate on the INTERREG Central Europe 'SIforREF – Integrating refugees in society and labour market through social innovation' project. Later, she was involved in the Horizon 2020 'VULNER – Vulnerabilities Under the Global Protection Regime' project and she is currently working on the INTERREG Central Europe 'GEt-CoheSive- Governance Enhancement for Cohesive Societies' project. Her work focuses mainly on care, gender and international migration. She has published articles in national and international journals and has written a book investigating the emergence of doulas in Italy as care professionals (Routledge, 2022). She has taken part in several national and international research projects on violence against women, international migration and on reproductive and oncological health.

Francesca Petrella is a Professor in economics at Aix-Marseille Université and a researcher at the Laboratoire d'économie et de sociologie du travail (LEST – CNRS). She co-directs the Master's degree in the management of social and

solidarity economy at Aix-Marseille Université. Her work focuses on social economy organisations, their governance, the quality of their work, social innovation and new forms of governance of social welfare services, with a particular focus on childcare services and home care services for the elderly. She is the President of the EMES International Research network on social enterprises. She has participated in several national and European research projects, including the TSI project (Third Sector Impact) and the INTERREG Med + Resilient project on social innovation clusters.

Enric Saurí Saula holds a PhD in Sociology from the Autonomous University of Barcelona. He is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Sociology at the Autonomous University of Barcelona and a Collaborating Professor in the Humanities Studies at the Open University of Catalonia. He is a member of the Identity Studies Group, a Consultant in public policies and a Consultant for the Provincial Council of Barcelona's Education Services. He has also been a Collaborating Researcher at the Barcelona Institute of Childhood and Adolescence. His research fields are education, culture, immigration, language and identities. Among other works he has published are: School Appropriations. Uses and meanings of compulsory education in adolescence (2003), Catalan and immigration (2004), Language as a factor of empowerment in migratory trajectories. A story that repeats itself (2010) or Diversity and integration in Catalan cultural associationism (2015). He is also a co-author of articles on different aspects related to education.

Rakefet Sela-Sheffy is an Associate Professor of Culture Research at Tel Aviv University, Israel, and formerly the Head of the TAU Unit of Culture Research, where she taught culture and identity theories and sociocultural discourse analysis. Her recent studies and publications deal with identity emotional work as related to status threats in the context of bottom-up social activism in various settings, focusing on semi-professional fields and processes of counter-professionalisation (cases: translators, childcare workers, educators) as well as immigrant communities and rising local environmental activism.

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The idea to write this book has its origin on a research project on this topic that focused on the case of Barcelona. Chapters 4, 5 and 6 of the book were developed as part of that research. The project was entitled 'Models of education for the under-threes and participation in the labour market: A study of social innovation in the city of Barcelona' (2017ACUP04). It was carried out from 2018 to 2021 and was funded by the RecerCaixa programme, jointly organised by the private 'la Caixa' foundation and the Catalan Association of Public Universities (ACUP). The project website is: https://webs.uab.cat/primerainfancia/.

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Introduction

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Chapter 1

Introduction: Social and Policy Innovation in Early Childhood Education and Care: A Comparative Perspective

Raquel Gallego[a], *Lara Maestripieri*[a] *and Sheila González Motos*[b]

[a]Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, Spain
[b]University of Barcelona, Spain

Abstract

In this introduction we present early childhood education and care (ECEC) as the topic of this book and how we position it in relation to the wider theoretical and conceptual debate on social innovation. We carry out an extensive review of the main concepts on which this book is based (social innovation, policy learning and institutionalisation), and we present the conceptual model that lies behind the instrumental case of Barcelona that connects these three concepts. This chapter will also introduce the content of this book, presenting Part I and Part II, and their role in this book's argument.

Keywords: Early childhood education and care; social innovation; institutionalisation; policy learning; welfare state

Introduction: The Rationale of This Book

The role of social innovation (SI) in the provision of services has become increasingly relevant in the context of welfare state retrenchment and recalibration. Since the early 2000s, socially innovative schemes have used various discourses to justify their existence and have given fruit to different forms of interventions. Although most are citizen-led initiatives, some institution-led SI has emerged, usually as a result of policy learning and different institutionalisation processes. This makes it crucial to analyse not only how social innovation has developed but also its implications for equality and welfare. These implications

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are particularly relevant in sectors where the welfare state has not managed to consolidate universal coverage, and where social investment is considered to be crucial for equal opportunities. Early childhood education and care (ECEC) is a case in point, even more because of its intersectional influences across different dimensions of (in)equality, such as education and gender-related issues.

The bottom-up approach and the local, communitarian practices that characterise most SI initiatives have opened up processes of co-production and responsibility-sharing in the provision of services, in which citizens can have a greater say in issues that concern them and advocate for their own well-being in an active way. However, the evidence demonstrates a socioeconomic bias in who participates in these initiatives, with highly skilled (although not necessarily affluent) middle-class citizens opting more for social innovation compared to more disadvantaged individuals.

This evidence, therefore, questions the capacity of SI initiatives to tackle social inequalities, especially when it comes to ECEC schemes. In fact, in recent years, one of the public policies that has received most political attention from international organisations and most investment at the national and local levels has been preschool education for the under-threes. This has been in response both to the increasing pressure caused by the progressive integration of women into the labour market, and also to the shift towards the social investment state, where ECEC and other social policies are justified as long as they ensure productivity and the economic growth of the knowledge society. However, the expansion of public ECEC provision has not been sufficient to fulfil demand, and in some pioneering cases (such as in France) the universalisation of the service has been achieved, thanks to the progressive integration of socially innovative schemes within public provision. In other cases (such as in Spain), these initiatives do not come under any specific regulation, and struggle to survive in a context of institutionalised public and private services that do not cover existing demand.

The concept of institutionalisation (social innovation becoming part of the public provision or the subsidised or regulated private provision) is central for policymakers to effectively pursue the universalisation of this service. But how does the interplay between public policies and social innovation affect the capacity of ECEC to reduce inequalities and favour the more equal participation of women and children in society? How does policy learning from social innovation take place in ECEC? The capacity of the public sector to learn from SI can produce positive benefits for local public policy, which can be transformed in order to intercept and respond to the ever-diversifying needs of citizens in general, or the requirements of specific target groups. Therefore, SI is a potential win-win option, but only if those that make public policy learn from SI rather than shirking their responsibilities by delegating those obligations. What are the preconditions for successful institutionalisation of social innovation to take place?

In this book, we aim to answer these research questions. We will use the relevant case of Barcelona to show how bottom-up social innovation practices are able to draw attention to needs that neither the market nor the state are currently able to meet. At the same time, however, the case of Barcelona is instrumental in order to show how public bodies can innovate ECEC policies by learning from these experiences and consequently become more capable of tackling the

diversification of needs among citizens. In fact, Barcelona is at the forefront of the transformation of ECEC services in Spain. Although it is positioned in a national context that lags behind more innovative systems, such as France or the Scandinavian countries, the local government in Barcelona, inspired by 'new municipalism', developed public policies between 2015 and 2019 that are still in place, and which are inspired by the idea of democratising public services promoted through SI. Barcelona offers an excellent opportunity to study a case in which some institutionalisation of SI is currently taking place but where the process of integration of SI within public provision has yet to be consolidated. As a notable and pioneering case in Spain, it will be compared with other relevant cases across Europe and beyond, allowing us to discuss the potential of institutionalisation as a source for policy learning in ECEC.

What Is Social Innovation?

The concept of social innovation has steadily gained momentum over the last few decades in academic and policy-making discourse: after the turn of the century, there was a rise in the use of the concept in academic literature (Ayob et al., 2016). The changes that the welfare state has been subjected to in advanced capitalist countries – mostly in the direction of the retrenchment and rescaling of some social policies towards local provision (Kazepov, 2008, 2010) – have favoured the success of grassroots-based initiatives that are active at local levels, and that provide services to citizens beyond the market and the state. All these initiatives pertain to the conceptual domain of social innovation. However, this concept has been used in many different contexts, resulting in an increasing number of diverse definitions that make the boundaries of what is termed as social innovation unclear.

The concept of social innovation has been used from the late 1970s onwards to analyse and interpret the grassroots initiatives promoted by the new social and urban movements (Melucci, 1980). These initiatives have caught the interest of local welfare scholars because they have proved to be successful and effective in meeting unsatisfied welfare needs at the local level. They have also offered emancipatory practices that have sprung up in opposition to public social services and the increasing pervasiveness of market-based solutions (Häikiö et al., 2017). Moulaert et al. (2013: 1) have put forward the idea that the term 'refers broadly to innovation in meeting social needs of, or delivering social benefit to, communities – the creation of new products, services, organisational structures, and activities that are "better" or "more effective" than the traditional public sector, philanthropic or market-reliant approaches in responding to social exclusion.' More broadly, Pol and Ville (2008, p. 4) define social innovations as all innovations that have 'the potential to improve either the quality or the quantity of life.' In this sense, social innovations are not driven 'by the profit motive nor by marketability, but characterised by social objectives that activate and accelerate the innovative potential of society (Rehfeld et al., 2015, p. 4)'.

What these definitions have in common is that they highlight the participatory nature of social innovation, but they differ in whether they promise the empowerment of the social groups and individuals involved. Following Ayob et al. (2016), it is possible to identify two traditions in the academic debate on social innovation: a weak tradition (represented by Pol and Ville 2008; see above), which considers that social innovations are all new or alternative practices that achieve increased personal utility by generating social value; and a stronger tradition (the above cited Moulaert et al., 2013), which considers social innovations as all initiatives that involve collaborative co-productions that have an impact on existing power relations (Ayob et al., 2016). In this second perspective, social innovation arises from the direct participation of citizens in the decision-making process, which contributes to the co-production of welfare services. As such, the relational and community dimension of social innovation unleashes an empowerment process that is capable of restructuring current social relations, highlighting the important relational resources found in local communities (Häikiö et al., 2017). As a natural consequence, mobilisation-participation processes improve social relations and collective empowerment, and foster a change in governance structures (Moulaert et al., 2013).

Scholars from this tradition correctly highlight the failures of conventional service delivery to meet welfare demands, which are becoming ever more diverse. Applying the analytical frame of social innovation to empirical cases thus underlines the involvement of multiple actors, citizens included, in redefining the welfare services agenda. These scholars argue that social innovation disrupts the traditionally top-down nature of public provision by stimulating a bottom-up process where citizens actively co-produce the services they need. Citizens participate directly as active beneficiaries and indirectly through civil society organisations, generally associations that promote culture or social initiatives as third-sector operators. The stated advantage of social innovation is that citizens can regain a voice, empower themselves, exercise autonomy, and actively shape how the welfare system provides the services they need.

Independently of which side of the debate we consider (the weak tradition or the strong one), the basic elements of social innovation are *the social* and *the novel*: schemes that are identifiable as social innovation should foster a change in social relations to tackle social needs that are unmet by pre-existing solutions. Social innovation aims to address social needs that are not pre-determined but contextually defined (Oosterlynck et al., 2013). To be socially innovative 'in their ends and their means' (BEPA, 2010) implies two axes of analysis. First, social innovation should be explicitly aimed at enhancing the living conditions of those involved in its processes. Secondly, they should operate locally and rely on community mobilisation to obtain this goal (Cruz et al., 2017). Thus, public actors assume the role of an enabler rather than a provider. This regulatory approach favours the mobilisation of 'hidden resources' in civil society and enhances its capacity to represent the diversity and powers of the local context in which the welfare innovation is located. The association between social innovation and local welfare is explicitly promoted by the European Union policy

agenda (2010), in which the local dimension is one of the key features identified with social innovation.

Conversely, because of their participatory and local nature, solutions proposed in the social innovation framework are said to be more effective and equitable than conventional solutions that rely on market or public intervention or on philanthropic initiatives (Moulaert et al., 2013). Social innovation has the potential to include people who are excluded from pre-existing solutions in two ways: on the one hand, social innovations foster the participation of those involved in its processes; on the other, the process aims to tackle socioeconomic dynamics at the level where they occur – the local one (Cruz et al., 2017; von Jacobi et al., 2017). However, assuming that the social dynamics fostered by social innovation also benefit the most underprivileged strata of the population has been a non-demonstrated corollary of fostering social innovation, and has been refuted by the empirical evidence collected so far on the matter. Numerous studies have demonstrated that social innovation might instead create new inequalities (Arampatzi, 2022; Avelino et al., 2019; Cruz et al., 2017; Eizaguirre & Parés, 2019; Maestripieri, 2017; Martinelli, 2012).

Several dynamics challenge the positive rhetoric associated with social innovation. Firstly, the solutions proposed by social innovations are tailored to the needs of the citizens who actively promote and manage them. According to the literature, the citizens who participate in socially innovative initiatives are more active and have higher socioeconomic status than the average population in their communities (Eizaguirre & Parés, 2019). Thus, their actions may work against redistributive policy aims. This socioeconomic bias of socially innovative projects and citizen demands for participation in local welfare policy introduces tensions in the competition for scarce public resources (Avelino et al., 2019) and poses a challenge to policymakers. Even if the capacity of social innovation to tackle diverse needs is sound and empirically proven (Gallego & Maestripieri, 2022), at the same time, fostering social innovation also implies triggering Matthew effects that might increase inequalities instead of reducing them.

Secondly, public support in terms of investing in and acknowledging social innovation has encouraged a pro-profit turn in a sector that deals with the fundamental needs of citizens (Maier et al., 2016). Direct cuts to public investment in traditional welfare solutions have usually accompanied municipalities' support for innovative welfare provision projects over the last few years. Supporters of social innovation emphasise that the reduced role of the state is compensated for by civil society and the private sector. Still, more welfare actors do not necessarily imply more homogenous support becoming available to all citizens. The most innovative and disruptive social innovations can only help a small number of participants. This seriously calls into question the capacity of socially innovative solutions to scale up and meet the needs of the wider population (Häikiö et al., 2017). When welfare funding is cut, requirements to access public services become extremely stringent, targeting only populations with multiple problems and leaving out others in need. Thus, the reduction or absence of public provision may reinforce inequalities if market failings are only compensated for by social innovations (Arampatzi, 2022; Martinelli, 2012). As a

result, the attempts at empowerment involved in social innovations may have unintended counter-effects, in that policies designed to empower citizens often require people to already be sufficiently empowered to take up the challenge to respond to a new policy (Avelino et al., 2019). The absence of public policies that reinforce redistribution may lead to the systematic exclusion of populations who lack the skills and agency necessary to participate in social innovations and risk reducing the capacity of local welfare systems to cope with increasing demand.

The rhetoric of social innovation has been forceful in promising the democratisation of welfare, brought about by the increased activation and participation of recipients. Still, it has also been applied instrumentally in the context of welfare retrenchments to cover the progressive withdrawal of public actors from the provision of goods and services (Oosterlynck et al., 2013). However, social innovation schemes often arise out of unmet needs, with dynamics that are explicitly different from those of public interventions, and which might better address the diversity of needs of contemporary welfare users. As they develop, it is necessary to examine to what extent they maintain the typical characteristics of community and social initiatives or acquire elements that are typical of for-profit initiatives. But it is also necessary to explore to what extent public actors can learn from social innovation to innovate current public policies.

Social Innovation in Current Welfare State Trends: The Case of Early Childhood Education and Care

The emergence of social innovation in general and in ECEC in particular needs to be understood within the context of current welfare state trends. The decades of neoliberalism of the 1990s and early 2000s resulted in the progressive retrenchment of European welfare states by cutting investments and resources for the provision of services (Korpi, 2003; Pierson, 1996). Retrenchment favoured rescaling welfare provision towards the local level (Andreotti & Mingione, 2016), but in a context where resources invested in the system had been progressively reduced (Kazepov, 2008, 2010). This step was taken back by public bodies as service providers opened up new spaces not only for market-driven solutions but also for civil society to step in (Eizaguirre & Parés, 2019). The initial success of social innovation took place in this context, since it offered a potential solution to deal with the most severe cuts at the local level by reshaping market relations in favour of new actors whose main aim was to create social value rather than profit (Jenson, 2015). In policy discourse, social action is often considered a resource for promoting cost-effective strategies to restructure local welfare services (Avelino et al., 2019). Thus, social innovation has even been interpreted as one of the ways through which the European Union has consolidated the neoliberal discourse that has characterised its political project since the beginning of this century (Fougère et al., 2017).

However, beginning in the 2010s, triggered by the 2008 financial crisis, the political economy has undergone changes; these are acknowledged under the umbrella of the social investment turn (Emmenegger et al., 2012). Social investment does not prescribe the reduction of investment in public policies but reshapes the type