

Thematic Panel 8 – Childcare, equality and wellbeing for all: Is it possible?

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Convenor and Discussant:

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Childcare policy has been a political priority across OECD countries for some years now, heralding the promise to deliver multiple positive outcomes: combined with early education it can contribute to children's equal opportunities; it can reduce socio-economic inequalities, support parental employment and gender equality; and buffer aging societies against economic pressures. There is much research evidence and scholarly debate supporting such policy orientations. And yet, not everyone seems to benefit equally from the existing childcare and early education (ECEC) policies: high quality ECEC is not equally available to all children, and not all children thrive in the childcare arrangements they find themselves in; parents often struggle with logistical challenges around work and family reconciliation, frequently suffering from health and financial strains, as do carers in the formal and informal childcare sector due to work conditions and constraints. These issues are not unique to countries with less developed ECEC systems, but can be found everywhere, with varying intensity. With other words, expanding ECEC policy also carries the risk of deepening socio-economic cleavages – between groups of children, groups of women, different types of families and so on.

This panel invites papers to critically discuss current ECEC policies in their international and national contexts and with respect to the potentially unequal outcomes for different groups and members of society: who benefits from what kind of ECEC policy, and who doesn't? Do current ECEC policies intentionally prioritise certain groups in society? What are the potential trade-offs and conflicts in different types of childcare arrangements with respect to the well-being and equality of the protagonists of the 'childcare drama'; for example between children and parents, or between parents and other carers? What could childcare

arrangements look like that support the wellbeing of all involved, while also furthering social equality?