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**Innovative initiatives for better access of young child of vulnerable working lone parent to
childcare facilities: reframing local childcare system or encouraging additional private solutions?**

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Introduction

Improving access of children in single-parent families to childcare facilities has become an increasing political concern in several intellectual and political forums and arenas at the European, national and local levels. With the goal either of preventing early learning inequalities or facilitating labour market participation for mothers with young children, various political recommendations, incentive programmes and funding mechanisms have encouraged local childcare systems to experiment with new care solutions. Weak care capacity and care-work balance arrangements for low-income single parents with young children is considered to be one of the “new social risks” (Ranci, Brandsen and Sabatinelli, 2014) challenging traditional welfare policies at the local level.

Despite significant efforts by local governments to increase the number and the diversity of childcare facilities in cities, families still encounter difficulties in accessing adequate care solutions. Even vulnerable families (such as single-parent families), who generally have priority access to public facilities, often face difficult work-family reconciliation pathways in the face of fragmented and complex systems of childcare provision.

Childcare service provision is a policy field where local authorities may well benefit from a greater degree of influence in tackling vulnerable households’ specific childcare needs (Fraisse, Escubedo 2014). Supporting local initiatives that promote better work and care reconciliation for single-parent families illustrates cities’ potential ability to complement national welfare benefits and traditional childcare facilities or compensate for their lack. In several European cities, diverse types of cooperation and partnerships between employment offices and local childcare services have been initiated in order to facilitate the reintegration of single parents into the labour market (Fraisse, Escubedo 2014, p.122-123). The creation of flexible and emergency services devoted to single parents who get temporary jobs or attend vocational training, the regular presence at the local Family Allowance Office of a consultant from the job centre for counselling mothers who want to return to work after parental leave, and annual review meetings focused entirely on gaining employment that takes place with a single-parent adviser in a job centre are some of the examples of bridge-building between local childcare and employment service professionals at the city level.

This communication is based on the comparison of two local innovative strategies for improving work and care arrangements of lone mothers with young children in France. Both illustrate diverse types

of combination between professional integration programs or supports and local childcare services in order to facilitate the reintegration of single parents into the labor market.

The first one implemented in Nantes city consists in a better cooperation between social workers, childcare professionals, vocational and job counselors at the neighborhood level through early childhood coordination center. The second case study is a standardized new childcare service, so-called “crèche d’insertion”, promoted and implemented by a non-for profit organization in several cities of the North of Paris Metropolitan area.

The interest in comparing these two local childcare innovations aiming at improving work and care arrangements for lone parent families is the differentiated strategies adopted to integrate employment issues within local childcare policies. To what extent do these local childcare experiments reframe existing local childcare supply by better coordination of municipal and non-municipal provision at the neighbourhood level, or develop additional private care provision targeting single parents with dependent children? How can these kinds of social innovations develop up-scaling dynamics through social entrepreneurship or limit diffusion to other neighbourhoods at the city level by consolidating local partnerships between local authorities? In both cases, this paper explores the changes in institutional settings of local childcare systems and policies as well as the impact and dilemmas of social and policy innovation in care services.

Governance and social innovation: concepts and perspectives

This paper draws on the concepts of governance and social innovation for analyzing the implementation of global support experiments for low-income single parents combining better access to childcare facilities with specific professional integration assistance.

We define the notion of governance as the whole range of interactions between public and private stakeholders and institutions within the decision-making process and the implementation of public policies (Le Galès, 1998; Kooiman, 2003; Enjolras, 2010). Using the governance concept for analyzing local childcare systems in France is appropriate for at least three reasons. Childcare responsibilities are shared between family and society for the 0 to 3 age group; the progression of formal care and defamiliarization remains a fragile trend. Secondly, contrary to the quasi-universal pre-school system, which is under the entire responsibility of the Ministry of Education, childcare provision is funded and regulated in France by at least three institutions (the Family Allowance Office, municipalities and departmental councils) within a complex multi-governance process. Finally, the coexistence of a plurality of providers (municipal, for-profit and not-for-profit) as well as types of services (individual and collective care, full-time and part-time, etc.) requires a better understanding of horizontal governance of diversification. The main consequence of the mixed but fragmented local governance of childcare in France is the difficulty of setting a cross-cutting local childcare policy. Governance is even more complex in the two case studies presented, where different types of cooperation and partnerships between employment offices and local childcare services have to be incorporated in the analysis.

Social innovation is, in addition, a broad and non-stabilized concept. In this paper, we do not take into consideration the debate between the mainstream and radical approaches of social innovations. The mainstream approach mainly identified in the EU policy agenda (BEPA 2010, European

Commission 2013) focuses on the development and implementation of “new ideas (products, services and models) to meet socially recognized needs and create new social relationships or collaborations” (Mulgan 2012, p. 22). The more radical view refers to Moulaert’s definition of social innovation (Moulaert et al. 2013; also see Klein et al. 2014) as grassroots initiatives that develop to satisfy unmet basic human needs, empower excluded social groups and communities to access social and citizenship rights, change power relations and transform governance practices. In practice, the above-mentioned differences are not always that sharp (Haïkko, Fraisse and al., 2017). The use of the social innovation concept is often flexible and pragmatic, varying according to opportunities and context. The mainstream policy discourse and the radical view on social innovation both incorporate a normative dimension. From both perspectives, social innovation is a positive social phenomenon, either for incremental improvement or transformative social change, “progressing toward something better” (Brandsen et al. 2016, p. 6). They both value bottom-up initiatives as the drivers of social innovation, thereby emphasizing the importance of the local scale as the appropriate locus for effective governance. We focus the discussion on the diffusion and institutionalization process of such innovative welfare practices. Institutionalization refers to the capability of local initiatives to have an influence on the public discourse and their potential to be sustained by experiments at the local level and transformed into new social-political practices as applied to social services. The capacity of local welfare initiatives to be integrated incorporated into governance arrangements and to consolidate institutional change means going beyond the pragmatic and local benefits achieved through the diffusion of a new social practice (Haïkko, Fraisse and al., 2017). It requires taking into account the strategic links between “micro” social innovation and “macro” institutional and social changes. This multi-scalar dimension is crucial for assessing the sustainability and institutionalization of innovative practices. The long-term sustainability of socially innovative services depends on their ability to influence and be integrated into the regulatory and financial frameworks of social policies.

Research programme, methodology and data

The two case studies analyzed are part of a broader on-going research programme, “cross-cutting local social policies”, under the responsibility of LISE-INED-CEE.¹ It aims at analyzing and comparing implementation at the local level of global support programmes and initiatives designed for various recipients of social allowances (the long-term unemployed, dependent older persons and single parents). Global support means building bridges between employment and social policies generally. It supposes common institutional objectives in terms of labour market integration of specific targeted publics through a better coordination at the local level between public employment offices and social services units as well cross-working practices between professionals (employment counsellor, social workers, case manager, etc.).

The methodology consisted of about 10 in-depth interviews per case study on the basis of a common open-ended questionnaire. The people interviewed were generally the director or person in charge of the local initiative, various early childhood professionals, social workers and vocational integration advisers directly involved in the selection and support of single mothers, and several local policy-makers from the municipal childcare department (Service Municipal de la Petite Enfance) and the Family Allowance Office (Caisse d’Allocations Familiales). The information collected covers aspects

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such as context, genesis, objectives, actors, organization, funding, assessment and diffusion of these global support experiments.

The two cases studies in Nantes and Paris

The first case study is located in the city of Nantes city (France's sixth largest city located in the west along the Loire River). The initiative, implemented in one of the city's main deprived neighbourhoods, consists of improving information and support for single-parent families in their search for facilities (municipal, associations and childminders) by means of an early childhood coordination centre. The practical and organized cooperation between social workers, childcare professionals, vocational and job counsellors at the neighbourhood level has introduced more collaborative and transparent methods for allocating childcare places to single parents, recipients of the minimum income (RSA) and job seekers. About 65 children of lone parent families get a childcare place, mainly in municipal childcare facilities, at the end of 2015. Assisted by counsellors from the employment and professional integration unit of the Department Council ("Conseil Départemental"), about 78% has stabilized their professional situation: renewal of fixed term employment contract, transition from precarious to permanent job or from vocation training to job, regular mission in temporary work agency, etc. This coordination system at the neighbourhood level is completed by a flexible and emergency services devoted to single parents who get temporary jobs or attend vocational training.

Several innovative aspects of such local experimentation can be underlined. Firstly, the initiative, launched in 2011, is the result of a shared diagnosis between employment offices and local childcare institutions (the City of Nantes, local Family Allowance Fund and employment unit of the Departmental Council). This local joint assessment of families' new childcare needs by childcare institutions overcame the usual fragmented approach of multi-governance. It has contributed to making care solutions for children of vulnerable working single parents a priority for the local public agenda. A growing number of city policy-makers expressed the idea that access to employment is a crucial protection against poverty and social exclusion for single parents and that the lack of suitable childcare solutions is a serious barrier to their professional integration.

The second innovative aspect lies in the attempt to reorganize childcare facilities as a whole at the neighbourhood level in order to give priority to children of single parents looking for work. The political option has prioritized better access by reallocating places within the existing childcare facilities rather than creating an additional and dedicated service for single parents. Such adaptation of childcare supply to improve work and care arrangements of single parents has been possible thanks to a territorial network of coordination between professionals. In this process, the coordinator of the local Childhood Coordination Centre plays a major role in supporting single mothers undergoing social and professional inclusion: proposing different childcare solutions adapted to their needs and contacting the relevant facilities with them, acting as an intermediary between the childcare services and the local employment and professional integration advisors.

Institutional and organizational levels have been linked up through the implementation of steering and technical committees, both coordinated by the municipal childcare department. In concrete terms, the technical committee's role consists of sharing information about the situations of single parents. The participants are the coordinator of the local childhood coordination centre, the directors of the crèches, the social worker from the Family Allowance Fund, and counsellors from the

employment and inclusion unit. The meetings serve not only to solve concrete care and work problems but also as a moment of mutual learning about respective modes of working and professional practices.

After a positive external assessment of this local programme, the steering committee decided last year to extend the experiment to another neighbourhood in Nantes. However, several difficulties and challenges in the diffusion of this innovative initiative have been identified. Despite better coordination between policy-makers and professionals, the statutory institutional framework restricts the access of single mothers who are recipients of the minimum income (RSA - Active Solidarity Income). Although informed and interested, the local employment office remains lacking in commitment, pointing out the limits in the interconnection of childcare and employment policies. Finally, most of the places available were located in municipal day care centres. The expected commitment of childminders to working with vulnerable single parents was disappointing. Few families received effective childminder care despite the creation of a common Guarantee Fund (30,000 euros) in case of the non-payment of childminders' salaries by families. In the local context where there is a shortage of places, childminders are in a position to choose the profile of the parents, and low-income single families undergoing professional inclusion are not attractive to them.

The “crèche d’insertion” in Paris

The second case study analyzes the implementation of a standardized new childcare service, so-called “crèche d’insertion”, promoted and implemented by a not-for profit organization, “The Institute, in Paris’ 18th district. This is the ninth “crèche d’insertion” created in northern areas of Paris, mainly in Seine-Saint-Denis. The specificity of the “crèche d’insertion” is to combine day care places for children and support for professional integration of single parents, mainly lone mothers, within the same organization. In this case, this global support provided to lone mothers is internalized within the day care centre. An inclusion and employment counsellor follows-up and advises single parents in their training and job-seeking activities on a weekly basis in coordination with the childcare team. In this configuration, interactions with the local public employment office and counsellors are quite informal, without any new institutional arrangements and services being reorganized between employment and childcare policies.

Whereas the Nantes example values a partnership approach aiming at better coordination and coherence between existing local childcare institutions and services, the “crèches d’insertion” are characterized by an entrepreneurial approach promoting the implementation of additional and standardized private providers alongside traditional childcare services. Although a few years ago a group of early childcare practitioners identified and asserted the need for adapted care solutions for young children of lone mothers, the creation of a “crèche d’insertion” is not the result of a co-production process (Pestoff, Brandsen and Verschuere, 2012) based on a shared diagnosis of local childcare supply and demand. This childcare facility is presented as an effective “turnkey service”, regardless of the sociodemographic characteristics of the neighbourhood where it is located.

The multiplication of “crèches insertion” in the last ten years can be presented as successful story telling. The founder and director of The Institute possesses some characteristics similar to an “institutional entrepreneur” (Di Maggio, 2008). Beyond strong leadership and the ability to advocate and persuade local authorities, she has built a personal network of relationships with local and national child childcare policy-makers. Benefiting from the tendency for national childcare policy to

favour the development of company day nursery places (“entreprise de crèches”), The Institute has been able to adapt local childcare rules, regulations and funding to the goals and organization of “crèches d’insertion”. In this respect, the director and the inclusion counsellor are members of the municipal admissions commission and have priority access to the selection of application forms submitted by families. They clearly target the more employable and experienced precarious single mothers, excluding those who have other family, health and housing problems to deal with. Bearing in mind this process of selection, the rate of return to employment is about 85% according to a self-evaluation from The Institute.

In summary, the innovative aspects often underlined in terms of this initiative are: (1) the response to unmet new work and care reconciliation needs by completing inadequate day care facilities for young children of single-parent families living in working class neighbourhoods, (2) the ability to offer, relatively successfully, global support for work and care arrangements of low qualified single mothers thanks to the presence of an inclusion counsellor at the “crèche d’insertion”, and (3) a public and private partnership based on the implantation of a standardized service and the adaptation of municipal criteria and the process of selection of day care access.

One of the most interesting aspects is the initiative’s diffusion process. Beyond the creation of nine similar services over ten years in northern areas of Paris metropolitan, the “crèche d’insertion” is one of the experiments in France which has inspired the recent national programme called “crèches à vocation d’insertion professionnelle” (professional integration day care centres) or “crèches VIP”. This is a case where the up-scaling process of bottom-up welfare initiatives is explicitly reconfigured and generalized by the National Family Allowance Office. Top-down institutional incentives and funding is a way of mainstreaming, in different cities, these sorts of day care centres incorporating professional support advice to lone mothers.

Limited and differentiated impacts in the governance of the local welfare system

The two cases studies illustrate the ability of the local welfare system to implement specific kinds of childcare facilities aiming at the professional integration of vulnerable single mothers with dependent children.

In terms of governance, several trends can be underlined. The first is a multi-level growing concern and shared representations between national and local childcare policy-makers that the adaptation of the local childcare system can contribute to a better reintegration of lone mothers into the labour market. To a certain extent, the joint assessment between employment and childcare institutions in Nantes or the specific expertise of The Institute in Paris have locally reinforced existing analysis and recommendations produced at the national level. The bottom-up process and the local scale of these experiments constitute a second trend. Contrary to other global support schemes promoted by national employment policy (Eydoux, Lima, Simha, Vivés, 2017), the building of bridges between local childcare and employment policies is not the result of a top-down process of regulations and incentives from the State for improving coordination between local authorities and institutions. In both cases, the local Family Allowance Office has participated in and supported the new care and work reconciliation solutions for low-income single parents. But they did not instigate the initiatives and are not at the heart of the decision-making process. A third trend is that local childcare stakeholders (policy-makers and professionals) act as the promoters of local initiatives for improving

work and care reconciliation for vulnerable single-parent families rather than local employment stakeholders. In Nantes, the demonstrated interest of the local employment office has not taken the form of concrete participation similar to the involvement of the employment and professional integration unit of the Departmental Council (“Conseil Départemental”). In the case of Paris, the internalization within the “crèche d’insertion” of vocational and professional support to single mothers in combination with access to care places for their children limits formal interventions by other local employment advisers. Finally, the last trend produces ambivalent impacts on the diversification processes that characterize childcare policies in France. The French governance childcare model is related to the high degree of diversification of childcare services (individual and collective, part time and full-time) and providers (municipal, for-profit and not-for-profit), especially in urban areas. Governance of childcare diversity has become a challenge for social cohesion. Without multilateral and negotiated governance (Fraise, Petrella, Lhuillier, 2008), it is very difficult to deal with major social cohesion issues, such as the absence of a shared approach to parents’ needs and demands, social polarization between collective and individual care, lack of coordination between municipal, non-for-profit and for-profit supply, unequal quality of services, and the fragmentation of professional statuses and staff qualifications (Eme, Fraise, 2005). The two case studies provide different perspectives with regard to this issue. The “crèches d’insertion” in Paris reinforce the process of diversification of local childcare supply (Fraise, Andreotti, Sabatinelli, 2004) by creating an additional service dedicated to a specific demand and a targeted public. In addition, it creates an exception to local regulations by obtaining specific treatment within the municipal process of selecting parents’ demands. The strategy adopted in Nantes has tried to reduce the fragmentation of childcare supply at the neighbourhood level. Giving priority access to children of lone mothers seeking employment has required better coordination between institutions and services for providing shared information to the parents, a common form of guidance, a harmonised system for processing demands and allocating places as well as coordinated global support for lone parents.

Lessons for sustainability and diffusion of innovative work and care arrangements

Contrasting lessons can be learned on sustainability and the diffusion of such innovative experiments.

The Nantes case study presents a certain degree of sustainability, characterized by an implementation period exceeding six years, positive external assessment, long-term commitment of the local institutions and the recent political decision to transfer the initiative to another neighbourhood. One of the factors explaining this sustainability seems to be a relatively coherent link between different forms of coordination: cognitive (shared diagnosis on the problem to be solved), institutional (steering committee), organizational (the key role of the early childhood centre) and professional (personal networking between professionals at the neighbourhood level).

Despite the coherence of this multi-stakeholder welfare initiative and the external interest expressed by some national researchers (Coqblin, Fraise, 2013) and European experts (Eurocities, 2014), the case has not inspired other local childcare initiatives or policy outside Nantes. The multi-stakeholder coalition has not really been completed by a multi-level version. Thus, neither the employment and professional integration unit of the Departmental Council nor the Local Family Allowances Office have promoted the initiative within their administration or in other areas. This could be explained by the context-sensitive coalition-building process, where the municipal childcare department has played a key role. Political efforts, technical resources and funds have been mobilized for making the

experimentation sustainable at the municipal level without any pretention of modelling the initiative and transferring it to other levels.

The relative inertia of the transfer process in the Nantes case study contrasts with the dynamic diffusion of the “crèche d’insertion.” After nine reproductions of the initial service in different municipalities across northern areas of Paris over the last 10 years, it has been one of the practices to inspire a new national scheme “crèches à vocation d’insertion professionnelle.” The diffusion process of this innovation mixes an entrepreneurial model of diffusion with active connections in institutionalized networks. The Institute has sufficiently modelled and labelled the “crèche d’insertion” for it to be presented as a standardized and successful work and care reconciliation solution regardless of the neighbourhood where it is implemented. It transforms a singular practice emerging within a specific context to a more or less mainstream concept or narrative that can become visible at other levels and to affect the public discourse on social policy. The Institute has acted similarly to a parent company. The difference with classical diffusion through marketization of an innovative prototype is that the up-scaling process is to a much greater extent the result of a multi-level institutional investment aiming at incorporating “crèches d’insertion” in the regulatory and financial frameworks of national policies, with targeted childcare policies as a priority.

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