

SÍNDIC

EL DEFENSOR
DE LES
PERSONES

MONOGRAPHIC REPORT (SUMMARY)
September 2007

**SCHOOL ENROLMENT FOR
CHILDREN 0 TO 3 IN
CATALONIA**

SUMMARY

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In this special report, “School Enrolment for Children 0 to 3 in Catalonia”, delivered to the President of the Catalan Parliament, Ernest Benach, on 4th September 2007, by the *síndic* Rafael Ribó, and the deputy for the Defence of Children’s Rights, Xavier Bonal, the *Síndic de Greuges* (Catalan Ombudsman) recommends a new plan for greater public preschool capacity and improved access conditions and quality.

School enrolment for children between 0 and 3 years of age has become an area of special social and political significance. These are several factors (rise in birth rates, higher female employment levels, expansion of educational rights of the population, weakening of unauthorized centres, etc.) that have entailed an important increase in demand on the part of the families as well as political prioritization on the part of public powers concerning the creation of offer.

Despite recent legislation developed in order to regulate first-cycle children’s education and to create quality nursery schools to assure a sufficient offer, the demand for nursery and preschool is still higher than that available.

The activity of the Catalan Ombudsman has not been unaware of the situation in this sector. The institution has received many complaints, 227 in the last five years, about problems related to this educational area. All of these complaints underline certain precariousness during the first-cycle children’s education subsystem in our country.

Considering the increased importance in the education of children zero to two years old and also the deficits related to the offer, the Catalan Ombudsman assumed the commitment to elaborate an extraordinary report to analyse the situation in this educational area.

In the preparation of the report, the complaints and consultations of citizens who addressed themselves to this institution have been considered; especially those presented during 2006 and 2007. A survey was carried out in 331 town councils, 243 of which answered (a percentage of 73,4%), providing information related to the municipal nursery schools. The information provided which refers to the model of management, number of students, and professionals, and their qualifications, the educational project, the organizational model and programming of services offered, has also been very useful in making the current report.

Likewise, the report includes some of the results of the study requested by the Catalan Ombudsman in the middle of 2005, with the title *L'educació i cura de la primera infància a Catalunya (Education and care in early childhood in Catalonia)*. The Department of Education of the Catalan Government has also provided information about education in this age group and about the deployment of the Plan launched to create public capacity for thirty thousand new students during the period 2004-2008.

In ten chapters, this report analyzes all this information as well as the situation of the education of children zero to three years in Catalonia, and comes to some conclusions and makes some recommendations and suggestions summarized below.

Some of the main conclusions of this report are as follows:

1. Good compared position of Catalonia regarding the levels of coverage of preschool services

The rate of children from zero to two years education (public and private) in Catalonia (31%) practically doubles that of Spain (16%); only the Basque Country shows higher levels.

On a European scale, Catalonia occupies a medium position, similar to that of countries leading in social policies like France and Finland, and clearly above neighbouring countries in the south of Europe, like Spain or Portugal.

2. Low public education of children 0 to 2 years old

The good assessment of the levels of cover offered by the compared analysis is not applicable to the situation of public education. In first-cycle children's education, more than 50% of Catalan children are schooled in the private sector, while in the rest of cycles of the educational system, this proportion is inverse. In fact, there are counties and many medium towns that practically do not have public offer addressed to children of this age group.

3. Significant territorial inequalities in the education of children 0 to 2 years old

The lack of planning of the school offer has contributed to consolidating important inequalities between counties and towns related to the zero to two years' education.

A priori, the deployment of the Plan to create 30,000 public places has to entail a significant advance in the reduction of territorial inequalities, though this situation will not be completely resolved.

4. Low diversification of the preschool care policies

In northern and central European countries, families enjoy a more extensive network of children's schools and, moreover, have a wider range of care options than is the case of Catalonia. Families have, in short, more resources in services (schools), in money and in time to dedicate to their children. This diversification of resources implies more flexibility so that the families can take care of the children, depending on their preferences or working needs, especially during the child's first year of life, when they are more reluctant to take children to schools. Resources in time normally come from reduction in the work day, flexible timetables and parental leave of absences. Resources in money, however, come from deductions in taxes or retribution of work leave of absence, among others.

Southern European countries, including Catalonia, have a child-care model very dependent on the informal sector, relying on the family, through the so called intergenerational solidarity, that covers some specific welfare needs.

In short, in Catalonia there is a very important task to be accomplished in the development of complementary services in schools that help families and give them more flexibility to organize child-care and education.

5. Deficits of regulation of the services addressed to early childhood

As a matter of fact, Catalonia already has some complementary services addressed to early childhood, such as "play centres". In general, the deficits of regulation and control of this type of services which entail a lack of control and guarantee of the quality they offer should be highlighted. The report also found that there is no administration that takes care of control, within the framework of these services, about the rights of the child to a quality attention.

6. Stagnation and other limitations in the regulatory framework regulating early childhood education

In general, legislative initiatives, not only educational, but also those concerning support to the family, employment, etc., tend to incorporate references to the importance of the early childhood care. The evolutionary analysis of regulations, however, shows that these regulations do not incorporate really structural changes with regard to 0-3 stage. In fact, the report reveals that, in many respects, the current regulatory framework does not differ very much from the situation of the decades during the 80's and 90's.

The very fact of inclusion or exclusion in the educational system at this stage has not contributed to a solid foundation on which to construct a true subsystem of first-cycle children's education. The same transitory periods of adaptation to the regulations established by the different and successive promulgated legislations have left no time to guarantee and consolidate the changes.

7. Deficits related to the conditions of quality of service

In comparison, the demands of quality are in general lower in Catalonia than in the leading countries in early childhood school policies.

Moreover, the report shows that many nursery schools do not meet the legal requirements for per-group ratios, professionals to children. It goes without saying that these circumstances have a negative effect on the quality of the attention. The report also mentions the precariousness of many sector professionals' working conditions: low retribution, no payment for the extra time, etc., which contrasts with the working conditions of the rest of the educational cycle's professionals. In general, the data brings to light that the private sector shows more precarious conditions than the public sector, both as to ratios as well as to working conditions.

8. Deficits in educational quality such as supervision and support to early childhood education

Legal oscillations over the last decades have negatively conditioned full integration of this stage to the educational system.

The current report finds deficits related to little appraisal of educational aspects in the procedures of concession of management of the municipal nurseries, where some of them work without an educational project or a bad human resources endowment and organization.

Moreover, political competences' fragmentation as to children 0 to 3 years of age education, without the corresponding coordinating mechanisms and supervision, can nourish a certain effect of diffusion of responsibilities when guaranteeing the quality of the offer. The report shows, for example, that, when problems concerning functioning of the activity arise, there are no clear models about which administration – educational or local– is in charge of resolving them.

9. Lack of educational recognition of the first-cycle children's education

Lack of educational recognition at this stage is partly responsible for the quality deficits of the offer. For many, nursery schools are still services more directed to early childhood care than to education.

This lack of recognition has also brought to light the working conditions –less salary for more working hours– or with fewer professional qualification requisites.

10. Social inequalities and deficits related with to accessibility to educational offer

Finally, the report discusses certain social inequalities in access to education. It shows that children from families with stronger cultural and economic backgrounds attend school in higher numbers. The lack of public capacity and the cost of nursery schools are the reasons behind these inequalities.

The three fundamental guiding principles this institution considers for the definition of public policies addressed to nursery school are the following:

1. Social and territorial equity

This report has made the existence of strong social and territorial disparities in the access of Catalan families to the first-cycle children's education evident. Social and territorial equity is, therefore, a principle that has to guide political action, which implies the establishment of the necessary mechanisms to correct the situations of current imbalance.

2. Quality and educational recognition

A second guiding principle focuses on considering the importance of the quality at this stage. The needs of expansion of the early childhood services, in a context of increasing pressure of demand, can have effects on the quality of the offer. A quality that means, likewise, to concede full educational recognition –and not care– to the early childhood services, as an integrated stage (non compulsory) in the structure of the educational system.

3. Educational and local administrations co responsibility

Finally, the two former principles are only viable in a system that starts from the principle of co responsibility. Conceptualization of early childhood services as proximity services, and therefore, as services that have to be offered by town councils has to be accompanied by a clear role of the Catalan Autonomous Ministry of Education to supervise quality and equity in the provision of these services. A certain system's disorder requires, then, the active presence of a central organ that establishes the necessary mechanisms to guarantee that the service is offered with quality and educational equity conditions.

The main proposals and recommendations made by the Ombudsman in order to optimize the situation of preschool education in Catalonia are the following:

1. Policies of school offer promotion

The Ombudsman is proposing a minimum mandatory public school capacity for children 0 to 3 years old. Catalan Ombudsman Rafael Ribó, has recommended the definition of a new plan for the creation of public nursery school capacity for the 2008-2012 period that ensures continuity of the plan now in force, and sets school enrolment goals higher than present levels (30% for municipalities of up to 20,000 inhabitants; 25% for municipalities of 20,000 to 50,000 and 20% for municipalities of over 50,000 inhabitants).

The Ombudsman has also suggested a mandatory minimum public preschool and nursery school capacity to overcome the current shortage. Despite the plan launched by the Catalan Government, still in force, to create capacity for 30,000 students during the 2004-2008 period, the demand for nursery and preschool is still higher than the available supply. There is no sign this trend will change in the short term, given certain indicators such as the rise in birth rates and higher female employment levels.

Contrary to the first plan, the new plan should take the real data on current unmet demand into consideration. Acknowledgement of the unmet demand is important to plan the capacity offer and involve the administrations competent in the management of existing needs. Planning must be the responsibility of both the Department of Education and the local entities.

2. The Catalan Autonomous Ministry of Education as the central body of the system

Although services for early childhood are local services and must be covered by local councils, a clear role must be played by the Catalan Autonomous Ministry of Education in ensuring their quality and equality. This role is especially necessary in the context of diverse municipal economies, with very unequal levels of service provision, territorial dispersion, presence of private centres with different traits and disparate working conditions.

Against such a backdrop, public resources are often insufficient to ensure proper management of the existing diversity, as is the case concerning special educational needs. The Catalan Ombudsman's report emphasizes the importance of promoting full integration of first-cycle children's education in the educational system, so that nursery schools

may have access to the Catalan educational administration's schooling support resources and services.

The authorization or partial financing of the centres is not enough. There must also be decentralization accompaniment policies, and municipal projects that provide support services, supervise offer conditions and guarantee regular inspections.

3. The need to improve access conditions and to reduce social inequalities

The Catalan Ombudsman is proposing new admissions criteria and scales to reduce access inequalities in this educational period. To do so, the Ombudsman recommends an analysis of the accessibility needs of the social groups with the highest risk of marginalization. He also suggests the incorporation of criteria that prioritize single-parent families, as is already done with large families, and the establishment of income criteria that would cover a wider proportion of the population facing financial difficulties.

Additionally, it would be necessary for the Catalan Autonomous Ministry of Education to assume greater control over admission criteria, and for these criteria to be standardized in all municipalities. At present, some competent local councils set their own requisites, such as being registered in the local census for a certain number of years. Such measures do not benefit equal access to the offer.

Lastly, the Ombudsman has proposed reinforcement of the economic support policies for families with access difficulties. Families assume around 30% of the cost of public schools' operation. This entails paying an estimated average annual tuition of 2,172 euros per child (including lunchroom fees). In 50% of Catalan households, these fees stand for over 10% of the family income for each child in school. Many municipalities do not offer grants or aid for economically disadvantaged social groups. The insufficient offer does not only leave children without a school to attend. It also diminishes parents' opportunities to reconcile professional and family life.

4. Stricter quality regulations compliance

Some nursery schools still do not meet legal requirements on per-group ratios of professionals to children (which range from 8 to 20 children, depending on age) and regarding staff qualifications. What is more, one of the foremost claims among sector professionals involves reducing the legal limit of children per group. The Catalan Ombudsman also recommends tougher regulations, among them, implementation of classroom ratios lower than current levels, a measure that would improve the quality of service.

As for the sector professionals' qualifications, the Ombudsman proposes increasing the proportion of teachers, and making the qualification requisites for first-cycle children's education professionals equivalent to those for all other educational stages.

5. Improvement in professionals' working conditions

The inequalities faced by first-cycle children's education professionals, caused by a lack of acknowledgement of this educational period, compared to those of all other educational stages, must be eliminated. In this sense, it is recommended that the salary and scheduling conditions of first-cycle children's education professionals be brought up to levels of second cycle professionals.

Further, there must be dialogue among social agents to improve the salary and scheduling conditions established in the private education teachers' collective agreement to minimize inequalities with public sector professionals.

It should also be a priority to reduce the inequalities among professionals, derived from outsourcing management of the service. The Catalan Ombudsman recommends including mechanisms of supervision of working conditions in the specifications for sub-contracting processes. Along these lines, agreements established by the local councils vary widely from one to another.

6. Regulation and inspection of unauthorized centres

Once again, the Ombudsman has reiterated the importance of inspection and supervision that must be carried out by the Catalan Autonomous Ministry of Education on the offer of facilities that operate as equivalents of preschools and nursery schools under different names, such as "play centres" without administrative authorization. In this regard, the Ombudsman recommends developing the legislation necessary for mandatory authorization of these centres by the Ministry of Education, to put an end to the current legal void.

