

Policy design and access inequalities: revisiting 25 years of ECEC policy research through a systematic literature review

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Abstract

Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) has expanded considerably across Europe over recent decades, reflecting its recognised benefits for children's development, parental employment, and social inclusion. Despite this expansion, access to ECEC remains unequally distributed across social groups and territories. Access depends not only on the expansion of provision, but also on how policies define and regulate the conditions under which ECEC can be accessed. This systematic literature review examines the evolution of European ECEC policy research on inequalities in access and the role of policy design in shaping patterns of inclusion and exclusion between 2000 and 2025. It examines, first, the thematic, geographical, and conceptual evolution of the literature, and, second, how inequalities in access and policy design features have been investigated over time. Following the PRISMA protocol, 56 publications identified across three major databases were analysed. The findings reveal a progressive shift from the initial focus on service expansion and governance towards a broader analytical agenda centred on inequalities in access and the institutional conditions shaping participation. Socioeconomic, territorial, and migrant inequalities have emerged as dominant concerns, accompanied by growing attention to policy design features such as availability, accessibility, affordability, and eligibility. The review also identifies an asymmetry within the literature between the groups documented as affected and those documented as targeted by policy. These findings highlight the importance of connecting research on inequalities in access with the policy design of ECEC systems.

Keywords: ECEC, policy design, access inequality, systematic review, Europe.

1. Introduction

Early access to educational and care settings for young children is widely recognised for its positive effects on child development, family work–life balance, and society as a whole (Bennett, 2012; Esping-Andersen, 2002; Vandenbroeck & Lazzari, 2014). In parallel, the provision of publicly funded ECEC has expanded in many European countries over the last decades. Yet, evidence suggests that expansion alone has not guaranteed equitable participation (León, Palomera, et al., 2022; León & Cerrillo, 2023). Structural access gaps persist and continue to reproduce social and educational inequalities, especially among the most vulnerable. Children from vulnerable families are less likely to attend ECEC than their more advantaged peers, giving rise to what it is known as Matthew effect (Pavolini & Van Lancker, 2018), whereby families with higher educational and economic capital are consistently more likely to access ECEC services, while those who might benefit most from them remain excluded (Van Lancker & Ghysels, 2016). This pattern reflects a relationship between socioeconomic status and ECEC participation.

These persistent inequalities have prompted growing attention to the governance and institutional design of ECEC systems, on the grounds that access is shaped not only by parental preference but by structural factors such as governance models, regulations, and financing mechanisms (Erhard et al., 2018). Where access is neither universal nor free, as in most European countries, a mismatch between demand and the availability of public places routinely generates coverage shortfalls, prompting the use of prioritisation criteria that affect inclusiveness, generating inclusion or exclusion dynamics (Ellingsæter & Gulbrandsen, 2007; León & Cerrillo, 2023).

In addition, administrative and logistical barriers may disproportionately constrain effective access among families facing diverse forms of disadvantage and care needs (Ferragina, 2025; McLean et al., 2017). Taken together, this suggests that inequalities in access cannot be understood through coverage rates alone, but require close attention to the specific design features—accessibility, availability and affordability, but also flexibility, eligibility, targeting—through which access is regulated.

Despite this expanding body of research, the literature remains fragmented across different aspects of ECEC policy and access. Existing reviews of the field have focused on specific dimensions of ECEC, including its role in fostering social inclusion among

disadvantaged children (Lazzari & Vandenbroeck, 2012), evaluations of ECEC policy reforms (Nieuwenhuis et al., 2025), interventions aimed at reducing child poverty (Soler & Maestripieri, 2023), and the equalising potential of universal ECEC provision (Schmutz, 2024). However, they do not systematically map how the field has evolved over time, nor how inequalities and policy design have been connected in the literature.

This systematic literature review addresses that gap by examining the evolution of European ECEC policy research between 2000 and 2025. It pursues two interrelated objectives: (1) to map the thematic, geographical, and conceptual evolution of ECEC policy research, and (2) to analyse how inequalities in access and policy design have been investigated over time. Following the PRISMA protocol, the review analyses 56 publications identified across three major databases.

The review identifies a shift in focus from an initial concern with expansion and coverage towards a broader analytical agenda centred on inequalities in access and the institutional conditions shaping participation. More recent studies increasingly turn to policy design features—such as eligibility, accessibility, affordability, flexibility, and availability—as key determinants of unequal access and outcomes. However, the review also reveals an important asymmetry between the vulnerable groups most frequently identified as affected by unequal outcomes and those explicitly targeted by policy design, echoing broader concerns that policy frameworks continue to be built around a narrow, idealised model of the family rather than the diversity of family circumstances they are meant to serve (Blum & Dobroć, 2021; Meyer et al., 2011).

This paper is organised as follows: first, the background section provides the analytical lens guiding the paper, situating the review within the wider debates on ECEC expansion, inequalities of access, and policy design. Secondly, the methodology section details the PRISMA-based search and selection process. Thirdly, results are presented, including analysis of the temporal evolution and geographical scope, the topics that have been addressed, and inequalities and policy design aspects. Fourthly, findings and limitations of the paper are discussed. Finally, conclusions are drawn.

2. Background

2.1. Policy design and inclusion/exclusion dynamics

The capacity of ECEC systems to promote social inclusion depends not only on the expansion of services, but also on how access is institutionally organised. The governance and institutional design of ECEC systems determine whether they function as inclusive social levellers or exclusionary mechanisms (Ünver et al., 2021). Institutional arrangements shape who is entitled to services, under what conditions they can be accessed, and whether formal entitlements translate into effective participation. Consequently, inequalities in access are not only determined by individual or family characteristics, but also by the different ways ECEC systems distribute opportunities for participation (Schneider & Ingram, 1993).

Policy design can be understood as the set of institutional arrangements through which policies are organised and implemented in practice (Howlett, 2019). Within ECEC systems, the ways in which access is organised have typically been analysed through the so-called ‘childcare triangle’, one of the most influential frameworks for understanding access to ECEC (Gambaro et al., 2014). The triangle comprises three core dimensions: availability, accessibility and affordability, which capture whether sufficient provision exists, whether services can be effectively accessed, and whether participation is financially feasible (Nieuwenhuis et al., 2021). Far from being neutral administrative choices, these dimensions shape how opportunities for participation are distributed across social groups and, consequently, the extent to which ECEC policies operate as mechanisms of inclusion or exclusion (León, 2017; Van Lancker & Ghysels, 2016).

Availability refers to the supply of ECEC services and the existence of places (Vandenbroeck et al., 2008); accessibility captures the practical conditions required to make use of those services (Pennerstorfer et al., 2025), including eligibility criteria, entitlements and conditionality (de Carvalho et al., 2026), and affordability concerns both the direct and indirect costs associated with participation (Abrassart & Bonoli, 2015). Together, these dimensions determine not only whether services are formally provided, but also whether they translate into effective access. However, other systemic features also shape how ECEC systems operate. Flexibility, for example, captures the extent to which services accommodate diverse employment and care-related needs (Bünning & Pollmann-Schult, 2016; Kröger, 2010), while governance arrangements shape how responsibilities, resources and decision-making are distributed across institutional levels and may contribute to unequal participation when resources are unevenly distributed across territories (Ünver et al., 2021). Likewise, both structural and process quality

influence children's experiences within ECEC settings and families' willingness to make use of available services (Vandenbroeck, 2020). Taken together, all these policy aspects capture the multiple institutional mechanisms through which opportunities for participation are distributed across social groups.

The mere existence of services does not necessarily imply that they are geographically accessible, financially affordable or compatible with families' care needs. Similarly, formal entitlements may coexist with administrative procedures or organisational requirements that disproportionately disadvantage particular groups (Hermes et al., 2025). Previous research demonstrates that these dimensions shape patterns of inclusion and exclusion in different ways (Abrassart & Bonoli, 2015). Administrative and informational barriers frequently operate as invisible filters disproportionately affecting disadvantaged families, while eligibility criteria and prioritisation mechanisms may exclude children and families whose circumstances do not align with policy objectives (Ferragina, 2025; Palomera et al., 2024). Similarly, rigid opening hours and organisational arrangements may limit access among households whose care needs are poorly aligned with existing provision (McLean et al., 2017), whereas quality influences not only children's experiences but also families' willingness to make use of services (Otero-Mayer et al., 2025; Vandenbroeck, 2020).

Policy design thus provides an analytical lens for understanding why formally available services do not necessarily translate into equitable participation. The literature has approached these questions through different dimensions of access and institutional design, but it remains unclear which aspects have received more attention, how they have been conceptualised and operationalised across studies, and how this focus has evolved over time. This review therefore examines how the literature has investigated the design of ECEC systems, identifying which aspects of policy design have been privileged and which remain comparatively unexplored.

2.2. Inequalities in access to ECEC

The expansion of ECEC in Europe since the late 1990s is closely linked to the social investment paradigm. This understanding of ECEC as an investment has profoundly shaped European social policy agendas over the last three decades. Successive European policy frameworks, including the Lisbon Strategy (2000), the Barcelona Targets (2002),

the Europe 2020 Strategy, and the Social Investment Package (2013) identified early childhood services as strategic instruments for achieving inclusive growth, increasing female labour market participation, reducing child poverty, and promoting equality of opportunity (European Commission, 2013; Hemerijck, 2017). More recently, initiatives such as the European Child Guarantee have further reinforced the commitment to ensuring access to quality ECEC services for vulnerable children. Consequently, the expansion of publicly funded ECEC has become one of the most visible manifestations of the social investment turn in European welfare states (León, 2017).

Against this policy background, the literature has extensively examined whether the expansion of ECEC has translated into more equitable access and participation. The expectation that expanding provision would reduce inequalities in access rested on the assumption that increasing the number of available places would, by itself, extend access to previously excluded groups (Pavolini & Van Lancker, 2018). Extending provision was then understood as an equalising mechanism, on the premise that broader availability would facilitate participation among previously underserved families (León, 2017). Inequalities in participation were thus primarily attributed to insufficient supply and were expected to progressively diminish as coverage expanded (Pavolini & Van Lancker, 2018). From this perspective, broader participation was a necessary condition for achieving the desired benefits of early investment in children, which relied on the capacity of systems to reach those children and families who would benefit the most from early access to education (Van Lancker, 2013).

Reality proved to be more complex. Evidence accumulated over the last decade demonstrates that expansion has not necessarily translated into more equitable participation (León & Maestripieri, 2022). Despite substantial increases in enrolment rates across Europe, public provision remains insufficient to meet demand in many contexts. In contexts of limited universalism, eligibility and prioritisation criteria are often applied to allocate scarce places among competing groups, thereby shaping inclusion and exclusion dynamics (León & Cerrillo, 2023). The relevant question is therefore not only whether places exist, but who gains access to them.

A wealth of research has identified the existence of Matthew effects in ECEC participation, whereby families with higher educational and economic resources are considerably more likely to use these services, while those who would benefit the most

from early access to education remain underrepresented (Pavolini & Van Lancker, 2018; Van Lancker & Ghysels, 2016). Such inequalities challenge one of the central assumptions of the social investment paradigm: that if disadvantaged children are less likely to participate in ECEC, the potential of these policies to reduce social inequalities and generate long-term social returns is inevitably limited (Van Lancker, 2013). The literature therefore highlights the extent to which the potential of ECEC to reduce inequalities depends on whether children and families facing greater disadvantages are effectively able to access these services.

Research suggests that the Matthew effect is primarily driven by supply-side rather than demand-side factors. Structural constraints in provision, such as insufficient affordability and uneven accessibility, continue to limit uptake among disadvantaged families even where overall availability has increased, while dominant cultural preferences appear to play a comparatively minor role (Pavolini & Van Lancker, 2018). In other words, expansion increased the overall number of places without necessarily removing specific barriers related to cost, eligibility conditions and administrative procedures, allowing households better positioned to navigate and afford the system to capture a disproportionate share of the newly created supply (Van Lancker & Ghysels, 2016).

Inequalities in access to ECEC are neither limited to socioeconomic disadvantage nor uniformly distributed across populations. Research has documented persistent inequalities in ECEC participation across multiple, and often intersecting, dimensions. Socioeconomic inequalities are among the most consistently documented, showing that families with lower levels of income and education are less likely to participate in ECEC and tend to enter later than their more advantaged peers (Van Lancker & Ghysels, 2012, 2016). Migrant and ethnic minority families may also face lower participation, reflecting differences in eligibility, information, affordability and other institutional or administrative barriers (Ljungström & Mood, 2025; Van Lancker & Pavolini, 2023). Territorial inequalities are similarly relevant, as the availability, accessibility and quality of ECEC provision vary across regions and localities, creating uneven opportunities for participation depending on where families live (Colombaroli et al., 2025; Dobrotić & Matković, 2023; Pennerstorfer et al., 2025). Gender inequalities have also been examined in relation to how ECEC arrangements interact with gendered patterns of employment and care responsibilities (González-Motos & Saurí Saula, 2023; Kröger, 2010; Vandenbroeck et al., 2008). Children with disabilities or health-related needs may face

additional barriers to accessing and participating in ECEC, particularly where provision is insufficiently inclusive or adapted to their needs (Zamanbin et al., 2024). Finally, an intersectional perspective highlights how these dimensions can interact, meaning that inequalities may be compounded for children and families experiencing multiple forms of disadvantage simultaneously (Ünver et al., 2021; Wood, 2025; Yerkes & Javornik, 2019). These patterns suggest that access to ECEC is shaped by the interaction between individual circumstances and institutional arrangements rather than by the simple availability of services alone. Consequently, public provision does not necessarily guarantee equitable participation, particularly when different groups face distinct barriers to access.

While the expansion of ECEC has generated strong expectations regarding its capacity to promote social inclusion, access and participation remain unequally distributed across social groups. The literature has increasingly examined how the institutional design of ECEC policies shapes opportunities for inclusion and participation among different children and families. This review builds on this literature to analyse how these inequalities have been conceptualised and investigated across different dimensions of disadvantage.

3. Methodology

This systematic review adapts the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) protocol (Liberati et al., 2009; Moher et al., 2009) to synthesise and critically assess 25 years of research on ECEC policy. The protocol guides the systematic identification, selection, assessment, and synthesis of the literature under review, ensuring both transparency and replicability (Page et al., 2021). Compared with traditional reviews, systematic literature reviews offer a transparent and replicable approach to identifying, screening, and analysing heterogeneous bodies of evidence (Gough et al., 2012).

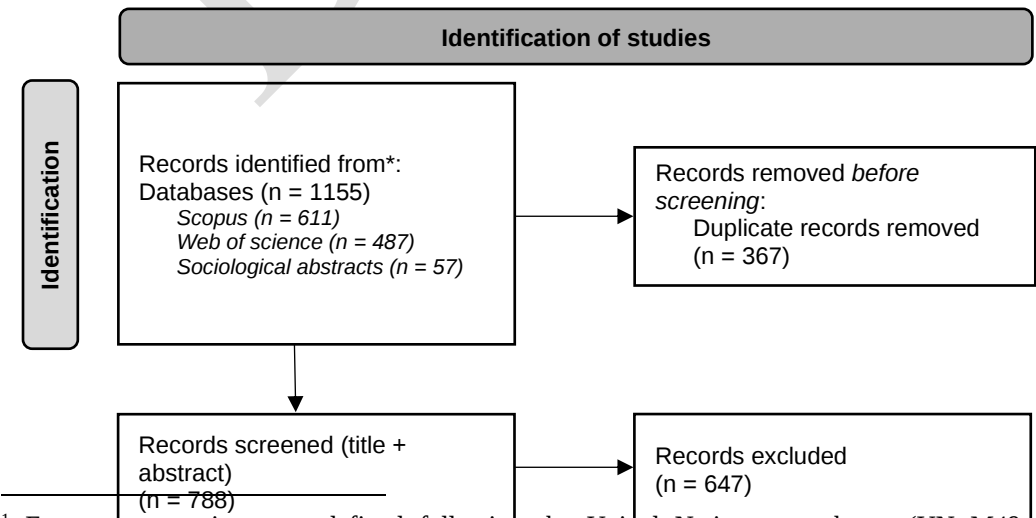
To examine the evolution of the field, the review covered publications issued between January 2000 and December 2025. The starting point was set in 2000 because the early twenty-first century marked a period of substantial expansion and reform of ECEC systems (OECD, 2001), alongside growing international and European policy attention to inequalities in access to high-quality ECEC. The search was limited to peer-reviewed academic articles and book chapters published in English and focusing on European

cases¹. This ensured that the included evidence had undergone academic quality control, met established standards of scientific rigour, and reflected the gold standard in the production of academic knowledge. The review focuses on Europe because the region has developed some of the world’s most comprehensive public ECEC systems (European Commission, 2025; OECD, 2025), making it a particularly relevant context for examining access, equity, and inclusion.

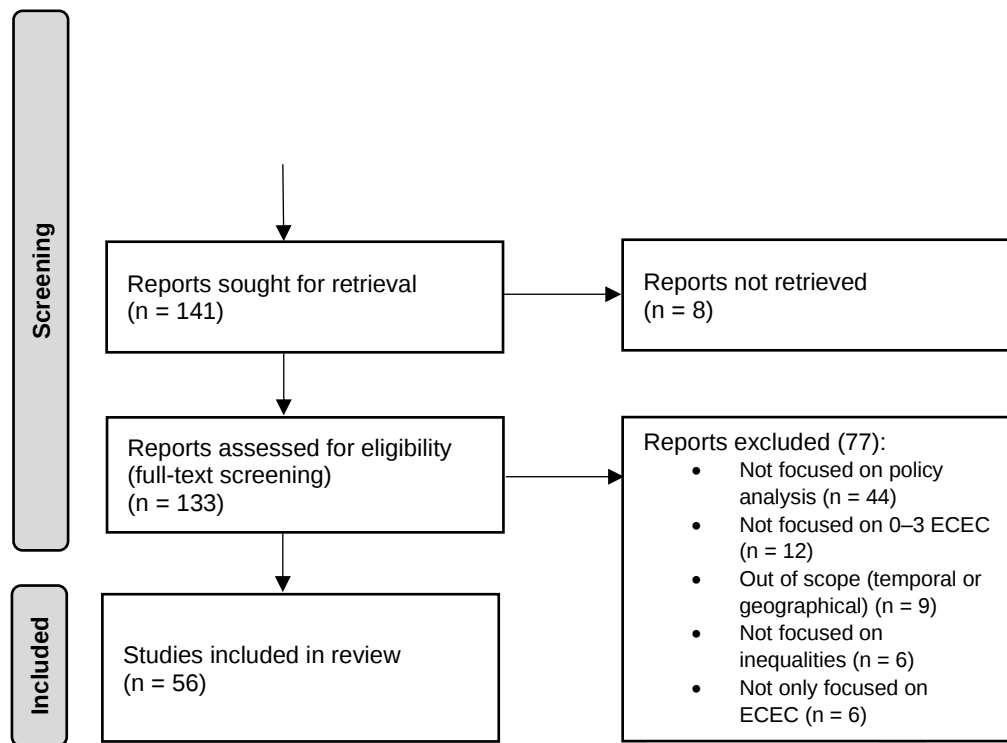
Searches were undertaken during February 2026 in three major databases: Scopus, Web of Science, and Sociological Abstracts, selected for their broad coverage of social policy, education, and interdisciplinary research. Search terms were organised into four thematic blocks derived from the review’s objectives (see Table A1): (a) the *policy field*, including terms referring to ECEC services for children aged 0–3; (b) the *policy components* capturing studies addressing governance, regulation, and policy design; (c) *inclusiveness*, identifying research concerned with access, equity, inequalities, and related concepts; and (d) *policy instruments and design features*, covering specific mechanisms through which access is regulated, such as eligibility criteria, entitlement, funding, affordability, targeting, and universalism. Database-specific search strings are reported in Table A2.

A first search was conducted to identify all records meeting the predefined metadata criteria regarding publication period, geographical scope, document type, and language. The initial search yielded 1,155 records. Figure 1 presents the PRISMA flow diagram, detailing the number of records identified, screened, excluded, assessed for eligibility, and included at each stage of the review process.

Figure 1. PRISMA flow diagram



¹ European countries were defined following the United Nations geoscheme (UN-M49 standard: <https://unstats.un.org/unsd/methodology/m49/>), which classifies countries into Northern, Southern, Western and Eastern Europe. Cyprus has been included, due to its membership in the European Union.



Source: Adapted from Page et al. (2021).

After removing duplicates, the remaining records ($n = 788$) were screened based on titles and abstracts to exclude clearly irrelevant records, such as those focused on health, clinical, or non-ECEC education topics. The screening process was guided by the following criteria: First, studies were required to focus specifically on ECEC policy for children aged 0–3. Publications addressing broader policy domains in which ECEC was only one component were excluded, including studies examining its interaction with complementary family and care policies, such as parental leave schemes. Although relevant to the broader ECEC policy context, these fell outside the specific policy focus of this review (see Dobrotić, 2022; León, 2024). Second, eligible studies needed to address policy design and/or the (re)production of inequalities in access to ECEC. Studies focusing specifically on the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic were excluded because the pandemic was treated as an exceptional and time-specific context rather than part of the longer-term evolution of ECEC policy design, despite the important debates it generated in the field (see Daly & Ryu, 2025; León & Cerrillo, 2024). Third, the review was restricted to peer-reviewed academic articles and book chapters published in English. Grey literature, including reports, working papers, and policy documents, was excluded, although such sources are relevant for documenting ECEC policy developments and reforms (see Nieuwenhuis et al., 2021; OECD, 2001). Finally, although the review was restricted to European studies at the search stage, the geographical scope of the publications was also assessed during eligibility screening, as database filters do not

always reliably capture country coverage. Only studies examining European cases were retained. For two-country comparative studies, both cases were required to be European. In studies covering multiple countries, a majority of cases had to be located in Europe.

A total of 133 publications were retrieved and assessed for eligibility at the full-text stage. Following this full-text screening, 56 studies were finally included in the review. For each retained study, data were extracted using a data extraction template designed to ensure systematic and consistent recording across the review corpus. The template captured procedural and bibliographic information, substantive focus and country scope, theoretical and conceptual frameworks, dimensions of inequality and target groups, policy processes and instruments, methodological characteristics, and the principal findings relevant to inequalities and policy design. A list of the 56 included studies and the data extraction template are provided in Appendix Tables A3 and A4, respectively.

To enhance procedural robustness and reliability, a second researcher independently screened a random 15% sample of the publications at the full-text eligibility stage. This verification process was undertaken to enhance the consistency of the application of the predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria and to minimise individual selection bias. Inter-reviewer agreement was 90%, corresponding to a substantial level of agreement (Cohen's $\kappa = 0.78$) according to the standards proposed by Landis and Koch (1977). The additional verification procedure aligns with the principles underlying the PRISMA 2020 recommendations (Page et al., 2021) regarding the involvement of independent reviewers in the study selection process and further strengthens the transparency and methodological rigour of the review.

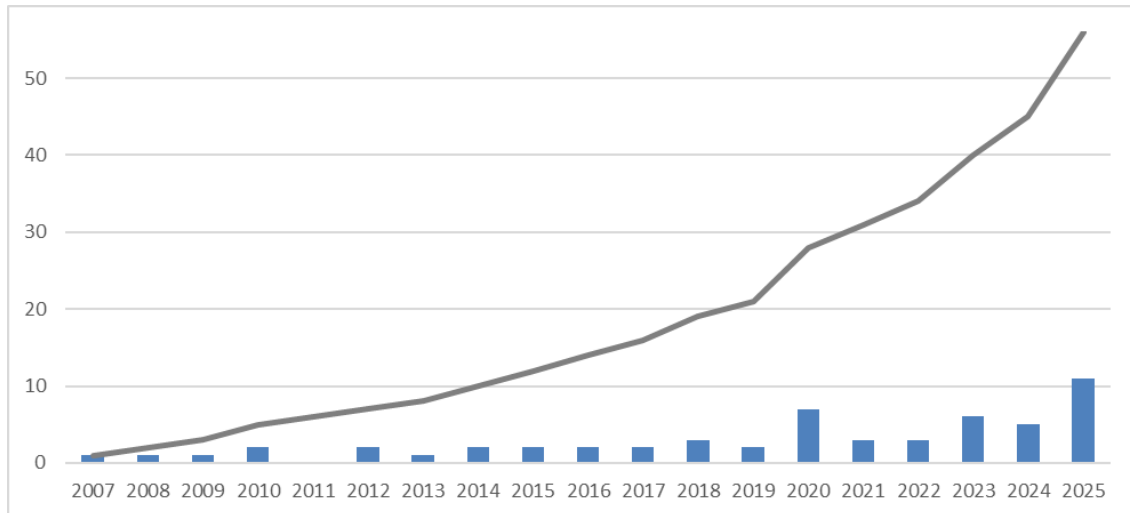
4. Results

4.1. Temporal evolution and geographical scope

The final corpus of publications comprises 56 studies published between 2007 and 2025. No eligible publications were identified before 2007, suggesting that research on inequalities in access to ECEC only began to gain sustained attention thereafter. Among the studies included in this review, only one was a literature review, indicating that the intersection of policy design and inequalities in access to ECEC has not been systematically mapped. Figure 2 presents the annual distribution of publications and the cumulative total across the period under review. Publications remained modest and

relatively steady until 2019, followed by a sharp acceleration. A total of 37 studies were published between 2019 and 2025, representing two-thirds (66%) of the final corpus.

Figure 2. Temporal evolution of ECEC research by year (blue) and cumulative (grey)



Source: Own elaboration.

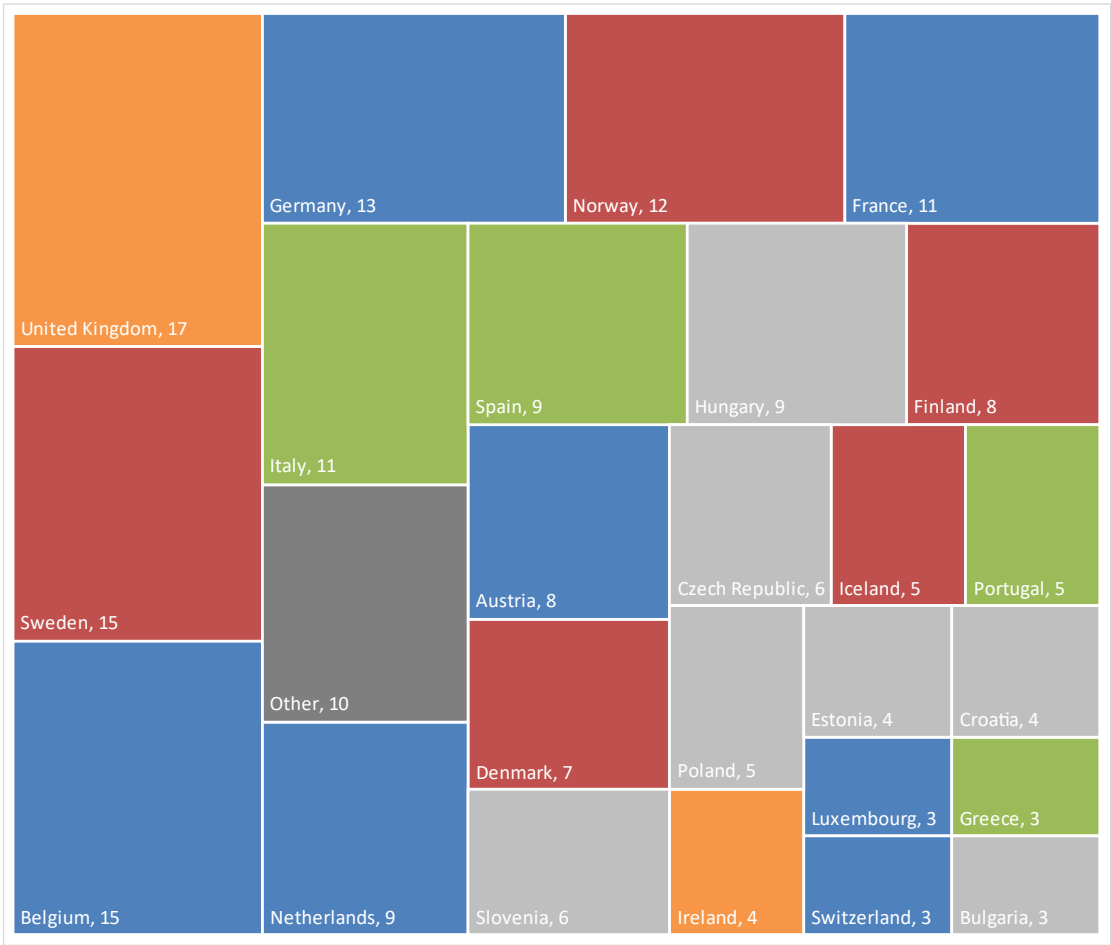
The geographical distribution of publications reveals a field that is unevenly concentrated across countries and welfare contexts. The systematic review identified 32 European countries² represented across the included studies (see Figure 3). However, the evidence is strongly concentrated in a small number of countries: the United Kingdom was the most frequently studied case ($n = 17$), although this may reflect its strong research infrastructure and the English-language bias of the review, followed by Sweden and Belgium ($n = 15$ each), Germany ($n = 13$), and Norway ($n = 12$). This concentration indicates that the evidence base is shaped disproportionately by a small group of countries, leaving several European countries underrepresented. Countries appearing fewer than three times in the reviewed literature — Slovakia, Russia, Lithuania, Latvia, Romania, Malta and Cyprus — were grouped as 'Other' ($n = 10$) for presentational clarity.

At the welfare regime level, using Esping-Andersen (1990) typology extended by Ferrera (1996) and Fenger (2007), the Conservative/Corporatist (blue) cluster accounted for the largest number of appearances ($n = 62$ across seven countries, led by Belgium, Germany and France). This was followed by the Social-democratic/Nordic cluster (red) ($n = 47$

² Seven non-European cases — Australia ($n = 4$), the United States ($n = 3$), Canada ($n = 1$), Israel ($n = 1$), Japan ($n = 1$), Chile ($n = 1$) and Georgia ($n = 1$) — were excluded from the figure under the UN M49 geoscheme, which places Georgia within Western Asia rather than Europe. These countries nonetheless featured within comparative-study frameworks alongside European cases and are noted here for transparency. Cyprus ($n = 1$) was retained despite its UN M49 classification as Western Asian, on the grounds of its European Union membership.

across five Nordic states), the Post-socialist cluster (grey) (n = 45 across twelve countries, most prominently Hungary, Slovenia and the Czech Republic), the Southern European cluster (green) (n = 30, led by Italy and Spain), and the Liberal cluster (orange) (n = 21, comprising only the United Kingdom and Ireland once non-European liberal-regime cases were removed).

Figure 3. Geographical and welfare regimes distribution of publications (n)



Source: Own elaboration.

These clusters differ not only in number, but also in their distinct research agendas, which reflect the specific structural tensions of each welfare regime. Whilst the literature in the Conservative/Corporatist cluster focuses on administrative burdens and informational frictions that hinder equal access (Ferragina, 2025; Hermes et al., 2025), the Social-democratic/Nordic cluster focuses on the limits of universalism, investigating why socioeconomic and enrolment gaps persist even in contexts where ECEC is a guaranteed social right (Drange & Telle, 2021; Ljungström & Mood, 2025). Research within the Post-socialist cluster centres on the political instrumentation of reforms to benefit the

working middle class while excluding groups considered ‘non-deserving’ (Szelewa & Polakowski, 2020), alongside territorial inequalities derived from decentralisation (Dobrotić & Matković, 2023). This territorial component is also a concern in the Southern European cluster, highlighting the ‘postcode lottery’ and how access is jeopardised across regions (León et al., 2022; Palomera et al., 2024) and ‘the double Matthew effect’, whereby household poverty is compounded by severe disparities in ECEC provision (Colombarolli et al., 2025). Finally, publications in the Liberal cluster prioritise the study of marketisation, exploring how for-profit provision and parental choice affect equity and quality in childcare systems (Cohen et al., 2021; West et al., 2020).

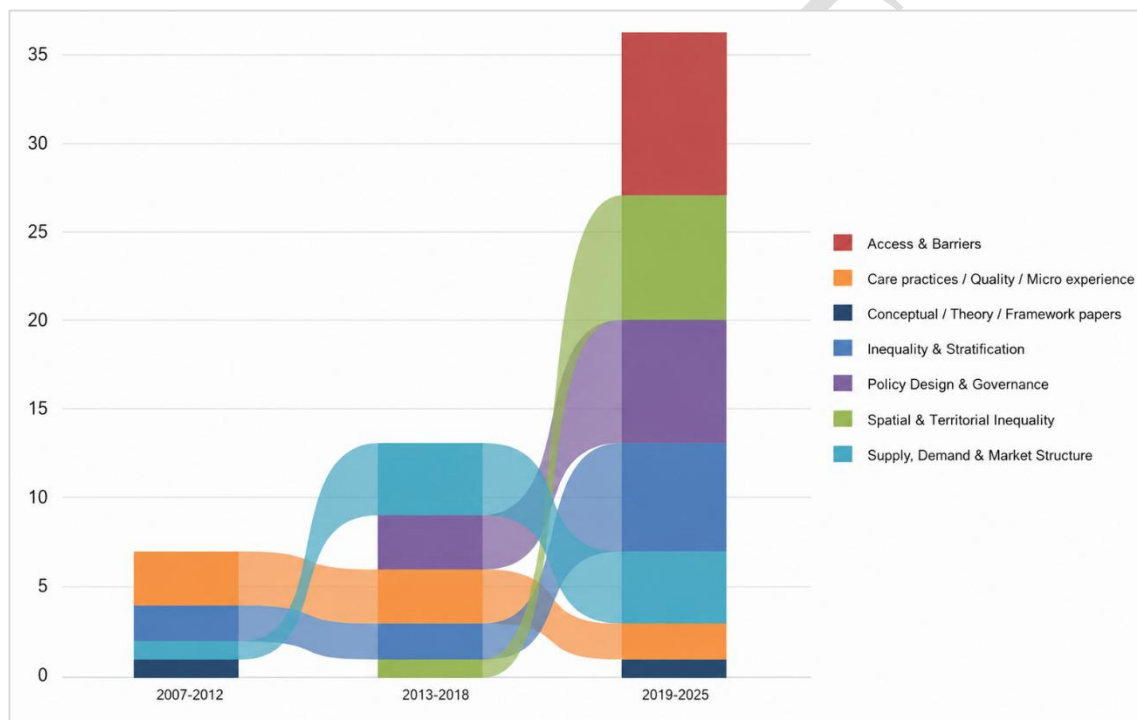
4.2. The evolution of research agendas: from expansion to inequality

The thematic composition of the scholarship has changed considerably since 2007 (see Figure 4). Between 2007 and 2012, research was primarily concerned with the organisation and experience of ECEC provision, with care practices and quality representing the largest theme ($n = 3$), followed by inequality and stratification ($n = 2$), and, to a lesser extent, supply and demand ($n = 1$) and theoretical papers ($n = 1$). Early contributions addressed the determinants of ECEC policy (Hasan, 2007), the relationship between ECEC availability and parental preferences (Vandenbroeck et al., 2008), and the needs of specific groups, such as lone mothers (Kröger, 2010) and asylum-seeking and refugee families (Dolan & Sherlock, 2010). Other works examined the implications of childcare quality for disadvantaged children (Vandenbroeck, 2010), as well as challenges in food provision (Buttivant & Knai, 2012). At the same time, inequality in access was already present in the literature, including research analysing the social distribution of subsidised childcare (Van Lancker & Ghysels, 2012), but remained less central than the study of provision and care practices.

Between 2013 and 2018, the thematic boundaries of the field began to expand. Alongside continued attention to supply and demand ($n = 4$), care practices and quality ($n = 3$) and inequality ($n = 2$), questions of policy design and governance ($n = 3$) and the first contribution on territorial inequalities ($n = 1$) also emerged. Studies increasingly examined how institutional arrangements shape access and participation. For example, research examined the effects of privatisation on childcare prices, availability and quality (Akgunduz & Plantenga, 2014), targeted funding to increase the enrolment of vulnerable children (Vandenbroeck et al., 2014), and the shift from universalism towards more

selective access in Finland (Lundkvist et al., 2017). Territorial inequalities also entered the agenda, explaining the East-West divide in ECEC expansion in Germany (Mätzke, 2018). Moreover, Pavolini and Van Lancker (2018) found that the Matthew effect was mainly driven by supply-side constraints in childcare availability and affordability, rather than employment differences or cultural norms. This period thus marks a transition towards examining the consequences of specific policy choices and institutional arrangements within ECEC systems.

Figure 4. Temporal evolution of themes (n)



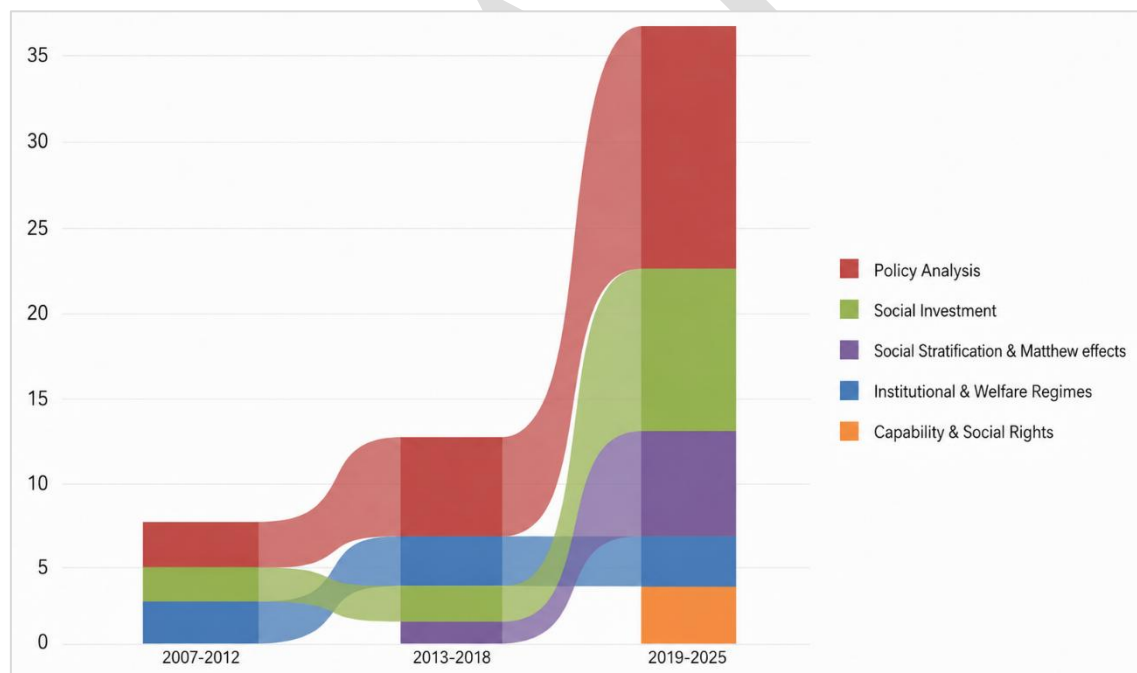
Source: Own elaboration.

This transformation became particularly evident in the most recent period. From 2019 onwards, the literature experienced both a substantial increase in publication output and an unprecedented thematic diversification. Access-related questions became the most prominent theme ($n = 9$), reflecting the growing concern in the literature with understanding not only whether ECEC services are provided, but also who is able to access them and under what conditions (Ferragina, 2025; Hermes et al., 2025). Growing attention was also devoted to territorial inequalities ($n = 7$), policy design and governance ($n = 7$), and inequality and stratification ($n = 6$), highlighting the increasingly multidimensional nature of inequalities in access to ECEC. Rather than treating ECEC expansion as an end in itself, recent research increasingly interrogates who benefits from such expansion (Drange & Telle, 2021; Ünver et al., 2021; Van Lancker & Pavolini,

2023), under what conditions (Vandenbroeck, 2020; Yerkes & Javornik, 2019), and through which policy mechanisms (Jessen et al., 2020). Overall, these findings show how the (re)production of inequalities in access to ECEC has recently become a central concern of the field.

The thematic transformation is also reflected in the evolving conceptual frameworks that have shaped ECEC policy research (see Figure 5). Policy analysis has remained the dominant analytical lens throughout the period under review, reflecting as well the concern of the literature with the organisation, regulation and provision of ECEC services. While the social investment paradigm declined during the intermediate period, it regained considerable attention from 2019 onwards, becoming one of the most prominent conceptual frameworks in the recent literature. Institutional and welfare regime perspectives were also present from the earliest period, highlighting the importance attributed to broader welfare arrangements in shaping access to ECEC.

Figure 5. Temporal evolution of conceptual frameworks (n)



Source: Own elaboration.

Over time, however, the conceptual repertoire of the field has broadened considerably. Social stratification and Matthew effects perspectives emerged in the second period, signalling growing attention to the unequal distribution of access and participation across social groups. However, they only gained prominence in the most recent period, when social investment perspectives simultaneously consolidated their position within the

literature. The increasing weight of both perspectives reflects an important debate within the literature between understanding ECEC as an investment strategy aimed at promoting equal opportunities and recognising that unequal patterns of participation may themselves reproduce existing social stratification. More recently, capability and social rights perspectives have begun to emerge, extending debates beyond service provision to questions concerning entitlements and opportunities to access ECEC.

These developments suggest that inequalities in access are increasingly understood as multidimensional phenomena requiring complementary analytical perspectives. While policy analysis remains central to the field, contemporary research increasingly combines institutional, distributive and normative approaches to explain how ECEC systems shape patterns of inclusion and exclusion. This conceptual diversification mirrors the thematic evolution identified previously and reinforces the growing emphasis on inequalities in access and policy design within the literature.

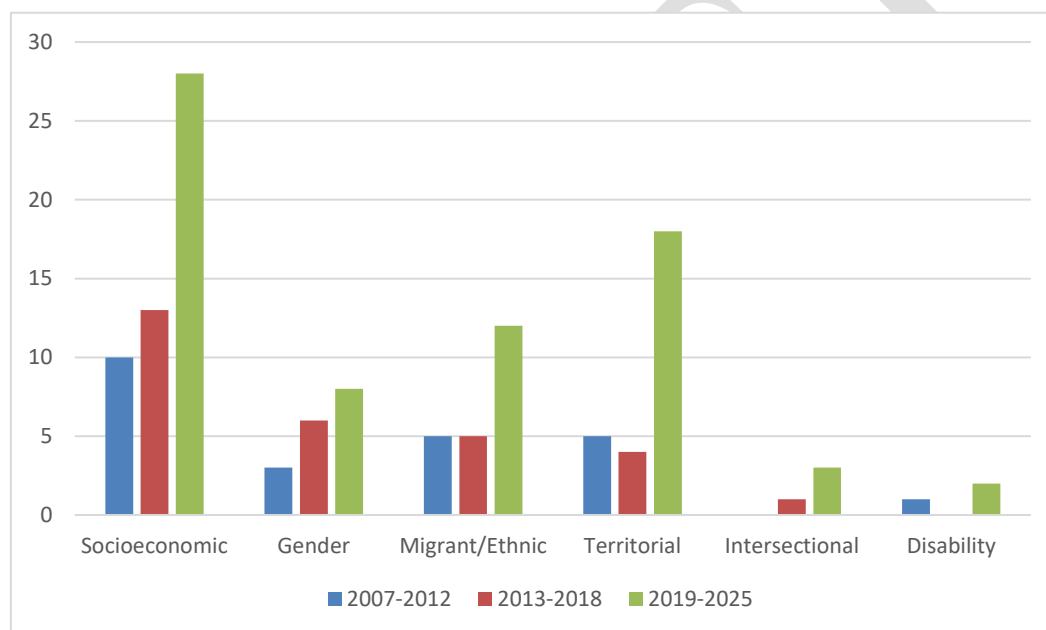
4.3. How has inequality been studied? Types, groups, and measurement

Issues of inequality constitute a central concern within the literature included in this review. Since the review criteria required studies to address policy design or inequalities in access in order to capture inclusion or exclusion dynamics in ECEC, the high prevalence of inequality-related publications is partially a consequence of the research design of this review. However, inequality or inclusion/exclusion dynamics were a primary focus in 95% of the studies, while only 5% addressed them as a secondary concern. The review also identifies an empirically derived classification of the types of inequality examined, how these are measured, and the groups considered.

Figure 6 shows the temporal evolution of inequality types across the three periods analysed. Literature has concentrated on a relatively narrow set of inequality types. Socioeconomic inequalities remain the dominant focus throughout the period under review, most commonly centred on differences in enrolment by household income, parental education, or social class (Hermes et al., 2025; Van Lancker & Ghysels, 2012, 2016). Studies compare low- and high-income households, educational groups, or occupational classes, and several examine unequal take-up derived from Matthew effects (Pavolini & Van Lancker, 2018). Territorial inequalities in access to ECEC have received growing attention, particularly since 2019, with studies examining differences in

coverage, funding, availability and affordability across regions, municipalities or neighbourhoods, as well as spatial accessibility (Baranyai, 2023; Pennerstorfer et al., 2025; Pennerstorfer & Pennerstorfer, 2021). Migrant and ethnic inequalities have similarly expanded, generally through the study of migrant-native participation gaps, or between different migrant-origin groups, but also through attention to care preferences, practices and the extent to which ECEC systems respond to their needs (Ljungström & Mood, 2025; Maes et al., 2023; Van Lancker & Pavolini, 2023). Together, these patterns show that research on unequal access to ECEC has primarily examined how socioeconomic position, place-based disparities, and migrant background shape participation.

Figure 6. Temporal evolution of inequality types (n)



Source: Own elaboration.

By contrast, other types of inequality remain comparatively underexplored. Although gender inequalities have attracted growing attention over time, they are often examined alongside other dimensions: lone-motherhood, socioeconomic and working status, among many others (Bünning & Pollmann-Schult, 2016; González-Motos & Saurí Saula, 2023; Kröger, 2010). Only a small number of studies address intersecting inequalities combining multiple dimensions of disadvantage surrounding ECEC (Colombarolli et al., 2025; Ünver et al., 2021; Wood, 2025). Similarly, disability and health-related inequalities are even less visible: the reviewed literature includes studies addressing accessibility and affordability barriers for children with disabilities (Zamanbin et al.,

2024), as well as nutrition-related inequalities in ECEC provision (Buttivant & Knai, 2012; Piórecka et al., 2024). The limited presence of these perspectives suggests that unequal access to ECEC continues to be examined predominantly through single-axis forms of inequality, with comparatively little attention devoted to the overlap of multiple forms of vulnerability reinforcing each other.

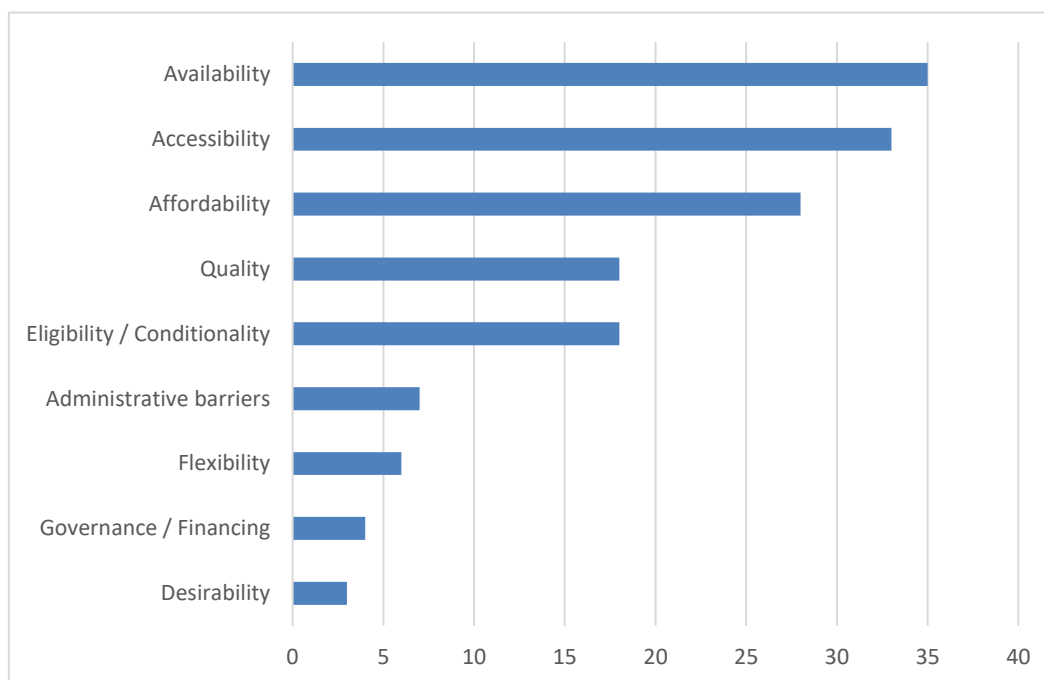
The reviewed studies also vary considerably in how inequality is measured. Socioeconomic inequalities are most often captured through enrolment or participation gaps, using income quintiles, poverty thresholds, parental education or occupational class, while some studies employ specific indices and measures (Ünver et al., 2021; Van Lancker & Ghysels, 2012, 2016). Territorial inequality is usually operationalised through differences in coverage, availability, affordability and accessibility, including spatial measures based on travel distance and the distribution of ECEC places across territories (Palomera et al., 2024; Pennerstorfer et al., 2025; Pennerstorfer & Pennerstorfer, 2021). Migrant and ethnic inequalities are predominantly studied through the comparison of native and migrant-background families, sometimes distinguishing between migrant generations or origin groups (Maes et al., 2023; Van Lancker & Pavolini, 2023).

This disparate distribution of scholarly attention highlights the selective ways in which inequalities are currently addressed within the literature. Whilst research increasingly recognises that access to ECEC is shaped by social inequalities, it continues to privilege particular forms of disadvantage over others. Consequently, the literature provides a comparatively rich understanding of socioeconomic, territorial and migrant-related inequalities, while offering more limited insights into the experiences of children and families facing intersecting or less visible forms of disadvantage.

4.4. Policy design as the emerging explanation for unequal access

In terms of policy design, Figure 7 presents the frequency with which different features are examined across the included studies. Whilst the prominence of availability ($n = 35$), accessibility ($n = 33$), and affordability ($n = 28$) is partly built into the search design of the review, these dimensions are the most frequently analysed. They constitute the ‘childcare triangle’, a common framework in ECEC research (Gambaro et al., 2014). To a lesser extent, eligibility and conditionality criteria ($n = 18$) and quality ($n = 18$) also received substantial attention, extending the analysis towards questions concerning allocation mechanisms and service characteristics.

Figure 7. Frequency of policy design features (n)



Source: Own elaboration.

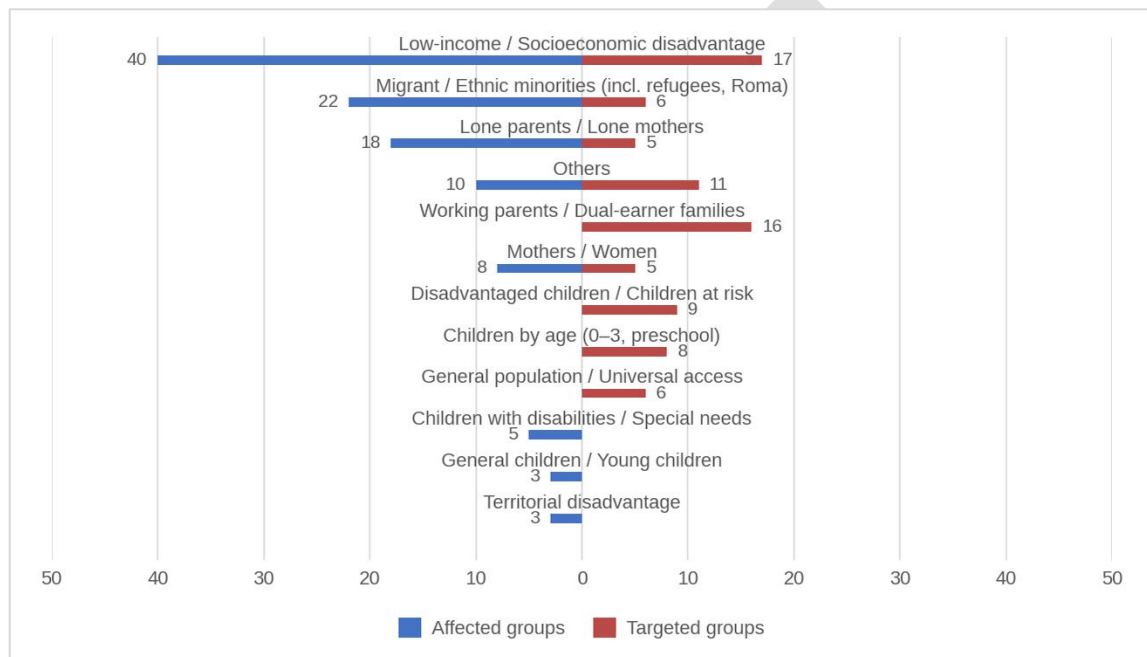
The predominance of the childcare triangle is particularly revealing. Although unequal access is recognised as a complex policy phenomenon, research continues to approach it primarily through questions of whether services exist, whether they are accessible and whether families can afford them. By comparison, substantially less attention has been devoted to understanding how administrative procedures, financing arrangements or the capacity of services to adapt to families' needs shape access in practice.

In contrast, the comparatively limited attention devoted to administrative barriers ($n = 7$), flexibility ($n = 6$), governance and financing arrangements ($n = 4$), and desirability ($n = 3$) suggests that some dimensions of policy design remain conceptually peripheral within the field. Yet, these features are likely to be relevant for understanding why formally accessible services do not necessarily translate into effective participation for all families, particularly when access depends not only on formal entitlements but also on the ways policies are implemented and experienced in practice.

Figure 8 shows the groups most frequently identified in the literature as affected by ECEC policy outcomes ($n = 109$ mentions) and those specifically targeted in policy design ($n = 83$ mentions). In both cases, low-income and socioeconomically disadvantaged families stand out as the most significant group, highlighting the major role of socioeconomic inequalities in the literature. However, there were clear differences between the two

distributions. Migrant and ethnic minority families (n = 22 vs. n = 6) and lone-parent households (n = 18 vs. n = 5) were often reported as facing unequal policy outcomes but were less frequently identified as explicit targets of policy design. By contrast, working parents and dual-earner households were considerably more represented among the intended policy beneficiaries (n = 16) than among the groups identified as experiencing disadvantage (n = 5). Similarly, children defined by age-specific eligibility criteria (n = 8) and the general population through universal provision (n = 6) appeared more frequently as policy targets than as groups affected by unequal outcomes.

Figure 8. Asymmetries between affected groups and those targeted in ECEC policy (n)



Source: Own elaboration.

By and large, the comparison suggests a partial asymmetry between the populations most affected by inequalities in access to ECEC and those prioritised in policy design. Rather than revealing a simple mismatch, these findings point towards an important asymmetry within the literature itself. Research has been considerably more concerned with documenting which groups experience unequal access to ECEC than with examining whether and how policy design explicitly addresses the needs of those populations. Consequently, vulnerable groups frequently appear as those affected by policy outcomes rather than as the intended beneficiaries of policy interventions.

This asymmetry may be related to broader policy priorities within ECEC systems. The greater representation of working parents and dual-earner households among targeted

groups is consistent with the longstanding emphasis placed on labour-market activation objectives within ECEC policies, whereas several socially vulnerable groups remain comparatively less visible within discussions of policy targeting. However, determining whether this pattern reflects the substantive orientation of ECEC policies themselves would require direct analysis of specific policy instruments, which falls beyond the scope of the present review.

5. Conclusion

[TBD]

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Appendices

Table A1. Keywords

Thematic blocks	Keywords
Policy field (ECEC 0-3)	ECEC, "Early Childhood Education and Care", childcare, "child care"
Policy components	Polic*, welfare, reform*, "policy design", governance, regulation
Inclusiveness	access*, inequalit*, equal*, inclusi*, coverage, "Matthew effect*", stratification, "social investment"
Policy instruments/aspects	entitl*, eligib*, avail*, affordability, fund*, target*, universal*, "means test*", design*

Table A2. Search Commands by database

Databases	Search terms
Scopus	TITLE-ABS-KEY((ECEC OR "Early Childhood Education and Care" OR childcare OR "child care") AND (Polic* OR welfare OR reform* OR "policy design" OR governance OR regulation) AND (access* OR inequalit* OR equal* OR inclusi* OR coverage OR "Matthew effect*" OR stratification OR "social investment") AND (entitl* OR eligib* OR avail* OR affordability OR fund* OR target* OR universal* OR "means test*" OR design*))
Web of Science	TS=((ECEC OR "Early Childhood Education and Care" OR childcare OR "child care") AND (Polic* OR welfare OR reform* OR "policy design" OR governance OR regulation) AND (access* OR inequalit* OR equal* OR inclusi* OR coverage OR "Matthew effect*" OR stratification OR "social

	investment”) AND (entitl* OR eligib* OR avail* OR affordability OR fund* OR target* OR universal* OR “means test*” OR design*))
Sociological Abstracts ³	((TI,AB,SU(ECEC OR “Early Childhood Education and Care” OR childcare OR “child care”)) AND (TI,AB,SU(Polic* OR welfare OR reform* OR “policy design” OR governance OR regulation)) AND (TI,AB,SU(access* OR inequali* OR equal* OR inclusi* OR coverage OR “Matthew effect*” OR stratification OR “social investment”)) AND (TI,AB,SU(entitl* OR eligib* OR avail* OR affordability OR fund* OR target* OR universal* OR “means test*” OR design*)))

Table A3. Included studies in the review

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³ A geographic filter for Europe was applied in Sociological Abstracts in order to capture both single-country and comparative studies, while avoiding the arbitrary exclusion of European cases. Additionally, country-specific filters were applied to ensure comprehensive coverage.

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Table A4. Data extraction template

Section	Field	Description / Categories
A. Procedural metadata	Review ID No.	Internal identification number
	Title	Title of the document
	DOI	DOI of the document
	URL	URL of the document
	Database retrieved from	e.g. WoS, Scopus, etc.
	Date of retrieval	dd-mm-yyyy
	Date of review (full-text screening)	dd-mm-yyyy
B. Bibliographic information	Article Reference (APA)	Full reference
	Year of Publication	Year
	Abstract	Copy full abstract
	Article type	Article / Literature Review / Report / Book Chapter
	Type of analysis	Descriptive / Analytical–explanatory / Normative–prescriptive / Review
C. Substantive focus and scope	Main topic / research question	Short description
	Country case(s)	Specify case

	Welfare regime classification (Esping-Andersen, 1990) ⁴ :	e.g. Social-democratic, Conservative, Liberal, Southern, etc.
	Level(s) of policymaking addressed	EU/Supranational / National / Regional / Municipal
	Period of observation/study	e.g. 2000–2010; cross-sectional 2018
D. Theoretical and conceptual framework	Theoretical/conceptual framework used	e.g. Social Investment, welfare regime theory, governance theory, institutionalism, Matthew effects, etc.
	Is policy design a central focus?	Yes – central / Yes – secondary / No
	Is inequality/inclusion a central focus?	Yes – central / Yes – secondary / No
E. Inequality and social groups	Type(s) of inequality addressed	Socioeconomic / Gender / Migrant-Ethnic-racial / Territorial / Multidimensional-intersectional / Other: _____
	How is inequality defined and measured?	NA; Indicators used; comparison groups; benchmarks; operationalisation
	Groups/households/family types analysed as affected by policy outcomes	Low-income / Lone-mothers / Migrant-Ethnic minorities / People with disabilities / Other: _____
	Groups/households/family types targeted in policy design	Low-income / Lone-mothers / Migrant-Ethnic minorities / People with disabilities / Other: _____
	Mechanisms of inclusion/exclusion discussed (if any):	As explicitly identified by the article

⁴ Classification used by the reviewer (not necessarily by the article)

F. Policy process, design and instruments	Policy stage(s) addressed (policy cycle), (Jann & Wegrich, 2006) ¹ :	Agenda-setting / Formulation / Decision-making-adoption / Implementation / Evaluation / Outcomes
	Policy design features identified	Eligibility/conditionality; Affordability; Accessibility; Availability; Flexibility; Quality; Administrative barriers; Other:_____
	Policy instruments mentioned	e.g. childcare vouchers; tax credits; guaranteed places; income-tested fee; schedules; parental leave extensions; targeted grants; etc.
	Conditions/factors promoting or hindering inclusion	As explicitly identified by the article
G. Data and methods	Data source(s)	Survey data; administrative data; interviews; document analysis; etc.
	Methodology	Quantitative / Qualitative / Mixed methods / Comparative / etc.
	Unit of analysis	Individual / Household / Municipality / Country / Policy document / ECEC centres/ etc.
H. Findings	General findings / main argument	Open field
	Key findings relevant to inequalities and policy design	Open field