Equal access to quality care: Lessons from France on providing high quality and affordable childcare and early education

Jeanne Fagnani
CNRS - IRES

Along with the Nordic countries, France leads the European Union in public childcare provision and benefits aimed at reducing child care costs for families. It has also widely been recognised that the French childcare system has many strengths (OECD, 2012). In recent years, however, in the context of economic nagging uncertainties, policy makers have been confronted with new tensions and dilemmas. While France has continued over the last decade to progressively consolidate and enhance its promotion of policies to support the work/family life balance, the introduction of new laws in the domain of child care provision has mirrored the growing hold of employment policies over childcare policies.

What has been at stake when it comes to accessible, affordable and good quality child care? What were the rationales underpinning changes and what were the key drivers of change? Against the background of budgetary constraints, what are currently the main priorities? What is the impact of organisational changes at the workplace and of the rising demand of formal childcare provisions on quality framework and tools? Here are the questions raised in this paper.

I will first briefly present the historical foundations of the current child care policy. The second part of my presentation will be devoted to the description of the early childhood provision system. Then I will focus on the quality issue and the recent decisions made in this domain. Cost of care to families will follow. To conclude I will highlight some of the challenges policy makers currently face and the tensions they have to deal with.
Historical foundations of the current child care policy

The history of public childcare in France is intimately bound up with the notion that the state has an obligation to protect maternity, childhood, and the capacity of women to work outside the home\(^1\) (Luc, 1999, Morgan, 2002). This conception, deeply embedded in Republican ideals, manifested itself in the latter stages of the 19th century, when demographic trends and the backdrop of concern over low fertility rates inspired the state to recognise that motherhood and the enhancement of children’s wellbeing required more attention. These ideas were intimately bound up with the prevailing views of how to define the idea of citizenship.

With the school laws of 1881, nursery schools (écoles maternelles) became places of education and an educational curriculum was adopted in 1887. In 1921 the teachers in nursery schools became the same as those in elementary schools. However, the major growth in the number of children attending école maternelle took place after World War II.

Later, from the post-war years to the seventies, legislators focused their attention on reducing the high infant mortality rate. Protecting the physical health of children and of pregnant women moved to the forefront of the policy agenda and it was within this context that PMI (Protection Maternelle et Infantile, child and maternal health services) services were created in 1945 and further developed\(^2\).

From the seventies onwards, and coinciding with the massive entry of women into the labour market, the hierarchy of goals and set of instruments employed to guide childcare policy shifted progressively and radically. This was accompanied by substantial changes in the type of discourse employed by policy makers who began to put emphasis on ‘the wish of women to be in employment’. The level of the ‘Single Salary Allowance’ (Allocation de salaire unique) provided to families with a single earner was progressively reduced, then restricted to low-income families, and

---

\(^1\) In the préambule de la Constitution de 1946, it is stated that: « la Nation assure à l’individu et à la famille les conditions nécessaires à leur développement. Elle garantit à tous, notamment à l’enfant, à la mère….la protection de la santé, de la sécurité matérielle, le repos et les loisirs ».

\(^2\) The infant mortality rate declined from 110 per thousand in 1945 to 7.3 in 1990 and 4.1 in 2002.
eventually abolished in 1978. Against the background of an acute labour shortage, and a growing demand for qualified women to occupy jobs in the tertiary sector (education, health, social services, administration and banking), the French government began to set up public-funded day care centres (crèches) in an attempt to facilitate the entry of women into the work force by making it more attractive (Vanovermeir, 2012). All of these factors provided a strong impetus for childcare policy change and French family policy took steps to incorporate the ‘working mother’ model. A growing proportion of unpaid private care-giving responsibility was progressively transferred into the domain of paid public provision.

At the same time, political actors were inclined to win women’s votes on the basis of their support for child care provision. Policy makers became increasingly receptive to the arguments of early childhood specialists in favour of crèches: local Family Allowance Funds (Caisse d’Allocations Familiales, CAFs) obtained additional funding to take partial responsibility along with local authorities for the running costs of public childcare services, and to improve the quality of care for infants and young children.

In the second half of the 1970s the rise in the number of crèche slots and the increasing attendance of young children in écoles maternelles finally gave decisive impetus to childcare policies which once again placed emphasis on the ‘quality’ aspect of child care provision in terms of the qualifications required for the staff employed in the childcare sector. Indeed a spate of literature emanating from psychologists and paediatricians emphasised that early socialisation was essential for children’s well-being and cognitive development, under the condition that he (or she) is supervised by qualified and well-trained staff. A 1977 law allowed registered ‘child minders’ access to proper employee status and its associated rights which had up to that point been restricted by the vagueness and ambiguity of their positions. At the same time they were required to follow training programmes. Militant action and information campaigns organized by the National Association of Nursery Nurses, doctors in the PMI services and psychologists were beginning to bear fruit. Simultaneously the public authorities improved the quality of care in the crèches while the early socialization of young children was promoted by stressing that crèches provided an ‘ideal’ preparation for the transition to nursery school and
consequently to primary education. In the nineties, these efforts were further reinforced. This well-established and long-standing early childhood system dating back to the end of the 19th century helps therefore to explain why formal childcare provisions (publicly-subsidised centre-based and home-based arrangements) on one hand and *écoles maternelles* on the other hand fall under separate ministerial auspices. This dual system is the legacy of the past.

**An extensive and segmented system of public day care and *écoles maternelles***

1. **Setting the scene for the institutions in charge of formal childcare provisions**

In childcare provision for pre-schoolers, care responsibilities are shared between the state (The *Caisse Nationale des Allocations Familiales*, CNAF, the National Family Allowance Fund, the family branch of the social security system, the Ministry in charge of Social Policies and Health, local authorities and social partners (mainly the UNAF, *Union Nationale des Associations Familiales*). Enterprises, non-profit/voluntary organisations, and the market still play a minor role in comparison to the state. Currently however, for-profit providers are increasingly being considered as real partners in policy development and service delivery in France. These services are, nevertheless, poorly coordinated. The most recent report of the National Audit Office (*Cour des Comptes*) released in July 2008 therefore recommended to “reinforce the coherence of their respective intervention”.

The CNAF and its large network of CAFs (123 Local Family Allowance Funds) play a key and pivotal role in the policies providing support and services in kind to families in numerous areas (childcare provision for pre-schoolers as well as cash benefits). Theoretically, the social partners (including family organizations, employers’ representatives and workers’ trade-unions) represented on the Executive Board of the CNAF periodically determine the orientations for intervention in family and childcare policies. In practice, decisions are made by the Government, whether approved or not by the Executive Board. It is solely at the local level that the Executive Boards of the CAFs have any real decision-making power, and in particular, a margin for manoeuvre in the provision and development of childcare services.
Since 2002, “early childhood commissions” are working at the département level: they are in charge of bringing together all the relevant actors (local authorities, representatives of the ministry of education, the CAF, the trade unions and family associations) to enhance coherence, co-ordinate services, provide information to families (through for instance the internet site Monenfant.fr), increase equality of access to services and support innovation in the field.

2. A complex combination of subsidized centre-based and home-based arrangements and a system based on the principle of universality

The French childcare system is based on the principle of universality and the rationale underlying this system is to provide equal access to all public facilities whatever the income or the social background of the family; this means that crèches are not targeted at low-income families. However, lone mothers in employment or registered as unemployed are frequently given priority. Indeed, there is a consensus among policy-makers and public opinion that the best way to lift families and their children out of poverty is to help the mother to sustain employment. The majority of children under three are, however, mainly cared for by one of the parents (mostly the mother) during the week. It is especially the case for low-income families (Table 1): though formal childcare provisions (crèches and childminders) are highly subsidised, they remain too expensive for them even when they work outside their home. Moreover there are large geographical disparities in the supply of places in centre-based provisions, the less expensive child care arrangement for low-income families (Borderies, 2012).

2.1. Centre-based provision: crèches and multi-accueil (now termed Etablissements d’accueil du jeune enfant, EAJE)

Over the last decade, there has been an increase in the number of ‘Multi-accueil’ services. They currently account for nearly three quarters of childcare facilities (CNAF, 2012) as part of the public crèches remain outside of these ‘Multi-accueil’ services. The rationale is to group together in one place, multiple and flexible childcare arrangements: public crèches, halte-garderies (half-time day care), jardins d’enfants, crèches parentales, emergency care for children at risk and meeting rooms for child minders who look after children in their own home but who regularly make
use of ‘Multi-accueil’ facilities to provide the children with opportunities to play together. The objective was to meet parents’ needs by providing them with opportunities to modify their childcare arrangements in relation to professional constraints and to have access to a sort of one stop shop for the childcare solution best suited to meeting their current obligations (from part-time to full-time for instance, on a regular basis or from time to time, etc.). The use of some slots in ‘Multi-accueil’ are therefore not defined in advance. They are open up to 11 hours a day on a year-round basis. Nearly 15% of children under three attend EAJE (Table 2).

Since 2003, the provision of childcare services is also open to for-profit providers with the explicit objective of increasing the availability of childcare places. They have access to public subsidies (from the local CAF) if they meet specific criteria (defined by PMI services) and if the fees are income-related. Moreover, while the vast majority of collective childcare centres are located in the neighborhoods where families live, a few employers have created childcare centres called crèches d’entreprise (workplace crèches, mostly run by for-profit providers) for their staff. They also have access to public subsidies if they meet specific criteria (defined by PMI services). Cooperating with local authorities and CAFs, companies can also contribute to the setting-up and running costs of publicly subsidised centre-based services (including around-the-clock home-based childcare). There are currently about 500 crèches d’entreprise (representing around 2.7% of the total of places in collective childcare centres).

2.2. The development of childcare centres in socio-economically disadvantaged areas: ‘Plan Crèches Espoir Banlieues’ (‘Project Hope in the Suburbs’)

CAF may subsidize them up to 80 per cent of the investment under the condition that companies comply with the PME legislation and sign an agreement called “Contrat enfance et jeunesse” with the CAF. CAFs can subsidize, under certain conditions, 55 per cent of the operating costs.
In disadvantaged areas\(^4\), over the last decade, the government and the CNAF made important efforts to increase access to collective childcare settings. One of the main objectives of the national programme ‘Plan Crèches Espoir Banlieues’ is to adapt to the working hours of parents often confronted with non-standard work schedules and therefore to encourage the creation of ‘innovative’ and ‘flexible’ childcare places. These services are also required by the legislation to contribute to building social networking and enhance social cohesion, by creating the conditions for parent support and involvement, and to develop a projet d’établissement (development plan) with educational and social projects.

It does not mean, however, that children from the most deprived families have systematically priority access to day care centres for under-threes because the system is based on the principle of universality and one of the criteria of the choices (among candidates on the waiting list) made by the local council is to mix children from diverse social backgrounds. Moreover this childcare arrangement is highly valued and the demand emanating from middle-class families is high. The early socialization this provides is held in high esteem, and the probability that a child will attend a crèche increases significantly when his or her mother has reached a high level of educational attainment. 21 per cent of those children whose parents are in senior or middle management or occupying supervisory roles are enrolled in a crèche as their main childcare during the week, compared with only 5 per cent of children from working-class families (Ananian, Robert-Bobée, 2009). Table 1 also shows that children living in the wealthiest families are overrepresented in childcare centres.

2. 3. Registered childminders: a major contribution to the supply of childcare services

Since the nineties, the primary method for bridging the gap between supply and demand for childcare has been to increase government support for licensed childminders\(^5\) who look after children in their private home. They are required to register with local authorities, a procedure that is mandatory if parents who rely on them wish to be eligible for the related childcare allowance paid by the local CAF and the tax deduction.

---

\(^4\) Located in the 215 neighbourhoods designated as “Sensitive Urban Areas” (Zones Urbaines Sensibles) or in communes with an ‘Urban social cohesion contracts’ (contrats urbains de cohésion sociale, CUCS).

\(^5\) By 2010, the number of childminders looking after children reached 306 256 (including 1 434 men).
When both parents are working full-time, the childminder is the main and primary form of care arrangement for under-threes: 37% are looked after by a childminder. The same is true for the whole population of children looked after in any formal care arrangement (Table 2). They are directly employed by the parents who are required however to pay them the minimum statutory wage (the net median wage per hour was €2.96 by 2010 and the net average wage €3.03) (Fagnani, Math, 2012). It is significant that the families who rely the most frequently on childminders belong to the two upper income quintiles (Table 1).

Other registered childminders are directly employed by municipalities or by NGOs (termed crèches familiales). In rural areas, some local authorities have developed micro crèches, where childminders look after children in a collective place, mixing individual childcare by childminders and collective care.

In socio-economically deprived areas, low qualified women are being encouraged to become childminders, both to increase the supply of places in formal childcare and to support women’s employment. A counsellor of the local Employment agency advises them and they may be provided with a financial aid from the CAF to support them in adapting their home in order to comply with the PMI requirements.

2.4. ‘Nannies’ and home helpers: a care arrangement publicly subsidized but not supervised

Working parents can also hire a baby-sitter or a nanny to look after their children. Provided that she is declared, a childcare allowance covers part of the social security contributions that must be paid by these families. In addition, they may deduct 50%, up to €6,000 per year, of the real costs from their income tax. However, only a few parents can afford this care arrangement (Table 2).

3. Nursery schools: écoles maternelles

Ecoles maternelles are fully integrated into the primary school of the National Ministry of Education, with the same guiding principles, opening hours, and administration as elementary schools. According to the French Education code⁶ ‘every child upon

⁶ Following the introduction of the law passed on 10 July 1989 regulating children’s attendance of nursery school.
reaching the age of three has the right (but it is not compulsory) to attend a nursery school and almost all children aged three to six attend it full time. But the share of children aged between two and three in écoles maternelles has fallen off sharply from 37% in 2000 to only 5.1% in 2009: this is mainly due to funding restrictions at the national ministry of Education and to the increase in the number of children aged between three and six (following a growth in fertility rate since 2000) who are given priority. On the other hand many children’s experts underline that école maternelle is not appropriate to the needs of under-threes.

There are usually three levels of école maternelle: petite section (little section) for three-year-olds, moyenne section (middle section) for four-year-olds and grande section (large section) for five-year-olds. Mixed-age grouping is relatively uncommon. In schools with many two-year-olds, there may be a toute petite section (very little section) or children may be integrated with the three-to-five year olds. In 2010-2011, there was on average one teacher to every 25.7 children. It is important to note, however, that most of the under-threes attend school only in the morning (Vanovermeir, 2012).

3. Funding structures: the state, social security schemes, and local authorities

Despite a general tightening of purse strings in public expenditures, childcare policies have continued to see increases in funding and remain a growth area in the French welfare state. Therefore the system of public crèches, and more generally EAJE, has suffered no funding cutbacks.

Funding structures, however, vary according to the type of care arrangement and are designed to account for family income levels, the numbers and ages of children, and the professional status of the parents (e.g. whether or not both parents are in paid work).

As far as the childminders are concerned, total costs to the state (tax breaks and childcare allowances paid by the CNAF), irrespective of the income level of the...

---

8 As far as collective childcare facilities are concerned, CNAF expenditures increased by 59.4 per cent over the period 2006-2011.
parents, are lower than the other care arrangements. Child care centres are more expensive, in particular as far as low income families are concerned because they pay much less than well-off families (Boyer, 2012). This also helps to explain why governments and local authorities (which are funding day care centres but not childminders) are more willing to encourage parents to rely on childminders than to develop childcare centres.

**Quality of care and the current regulatory framework: a considerable diversity depending on the type of child care arrangement**

1. **PMI services: a crucial role in ensuring quality**

PMI services, a national public system of preventive health care and health promotion for all mothers and children from birth through age six, play a crucial role and are responsible for upholding the quality of public childcare provision (childcare centres as well as licensed childminders). They are charged with licensing and monitoring all care services which fall outside the remit of the public school system and intervene regularly across many areas. Primarily, they ensure compliance with health and safety (including preventive health exams and vaccinations), nutrition and staffing standards. They have to identify at-risk children, provide additional services as needed and special assistance to children with physical and mental disabilities.

2. **Policy priorities and goals affecting childcare provision**

All publicly subsidised childcare services (except ’nannies’ or home helpers) are submitted to licence procedures and controls that are expected to ensure quality and safety of care.

The following primary objectives are defined through various texts framing State action:
- Ensuring children with safety, health, and a sense of well-being by focusing on education, socialisation, and cognitive development
- Giving parents a ’choice’ over childcare arrangements
- Enabling parents (in particular mothers) to participate in the workforce
- Enhancing equal opportunities for children
- Complying with the principle of social justice (income-related fees in childcare settings)
- Encouraging social mix that underpins social cohesion. It is assumed that child care centres can partly offset the negative outcomes for children living in families coping with hard living conditions (in particular overcrowded housing).
But against the background of high unemployment rate, there is also an underlying rationale: creating a tool to fight unemployment by encouraging parents to hire someone to look after their children (licensed childminders and nannies).

3. Various interpretations of “quality” according to types of childcare arrangement

There is a different understanding of quality in nursery schools and in services for under-threes. This dual system is a legacy of the past. Their respective procedures setting their quality framework/tools are complex, but the quality framework/tools are legally enforceable.

3.1. Ecoles maternelles
They are fully integrated into the national education system with the same guiding principles and opening hours (generally from 8.30 am to 4.30 pm) as elementary schools (see in annex, the quality conditions for Two-year-olds in the Val-de-Marne Department, for instance).
Health services are integrated in Ecoles maternelles: they have a doctor and psychologist on their staff several hours per week or available for consultation as needed to provide evaluations and referrals. Preventive health exams are mandated for all four year-olds. These help identify medical, visual, hearing and behavior problems and recommend appropriate treatment. Trained medical staff from the local PMI services also play a role in helping integrate children with congenital disorders, physical disabilities and behavioral problems.

Nursery schools are routinely closed on Wednesdays, but are supplemented by half-day Saturday sessions. All of these schools have canteen facilities (under the supervision of a dietician) where fees are income-related.
3.1.1. The ‘Zone d’éducation prioritaire’ (ZEP): Bridging families, schools and communities in disadvantaged areas

Over the last decade, against a backdrop of worsening social problems, integrating children with a disadvantaged socio-economic background has gained importance in France. An area is designated as a Zone d’éducation prioritaire (ZEP), ‘priority education areas’, when it includes a high proportion of those children, defined according to a variety of criteria outlined by the national Ministry of Education. The government passed a law in 2005 to encourage and extend in these areas access of under-threes to école maternelle by providing them with priority access. Child/staff ratio is most often falling to 20 children plus an assistant and is capped at 25. The shortfall of places in crèches and the fact that this service is free, has given parents living in ZEPs a strong incentive to ask for a place in a nursery school. Each ZEP is entitled to receive additional funding and resources from the state for its junior high schools and its elementary and nursery schools. These financial resources may be used, for example, to lower staff-child ratios, establish specific sections for 2-year-old children, hire social workers and other support staff, fund staff bonuses and invest in pedagogical materials.

Usually, a ZEP is affiliated with a larger network of schools, known as ‘Network of Priority Education’ (Réseau d’éducation prioritaire, REP) that groups together schools serving disadvantaged populations within a broad geographical area, and provides them with technical support, pooled resources and opportunities to exchange innovative practices. Each network is directed by an education inspector and governed by a Council which defines and oversees the ‘contract for success’ of schools in the REP. ‘Contract for success’ outlines the pedagogical requirements of a ZEP within the framework of the national goals defined by the Ministry of Education.

REP-ZEP coordinator is an experienced teacher whose role is to help coordinate the objectives and activities within a zone and help decide how to allocate resources and work with local partners involved in ZEP. REP-ZEP coordinators are often actively involved in bridging the activities that meet objectives of both ZEP and the ‘politique de la ville’ (Urban and housing policies).
Increasingly, priority education policy is linked to urban development policies. As part of the politique de la ville, mayors of big cities have signed seven-year contracts with the national government to improve the living conditions of families and foster social integration in disadvantaged urban areas. Mayors develop the objectives, budget, time frame, tailoring the contracts to local economic and social conditions. The Politique de la ville (Urban policies) encourages cities to develop their plans to comply with the educational objectives of the ZEP ‘contracts for success’. In this context, schools are able to implement outreach programmes with parents and residents in their community with the additional resources from urban policy. A city, for instance, can use the grant to support a drop-in-child-care centre run by immigrant women in a public housing project.

The schools in Zone d’éducation prioritaire are granted by the national Ministry of Education the status of Pôle d’excellence scolaire when they form partnerships with cultural, educational and other local institutions. The aim is to support creative projects and field trips to visit partner institutions, such as museums.

3.2. Collective childcare settings (EAJE)

There is no national curriculum for EAJE, but since 2000 crèches and Multi-accueil are required to elaborate an ‘Education and social project’ (Projet d’établissement) that includes a Projet éducatif (Education programme) and a Projet social (Social project) that specify: maximum capacity, facility requirements, role of parents, adult-child ratio, group size, staff qualifications, affiliation with a doctor. The main elements embedded in the quality framework/tools are: enhancement of cognitive and physical abilities, development of pedagogical activities, respect for biological rhythms, ensuring children with safety, health and child well-being, promoting and favouring social integration (see supra). Parents are therefore encouraged to participate in the everyday life of the setting. Emphasis is also put on the exchanges with stakeholders involved in childcare policies, as well as on coordination with different agencies.

Other objectives include enhancing equal opportunities for children, thereby contributing to prevent social exclusion and to foster gender equality by supporting mothers’ participation in the labour market.
In crèches, staffing standards are laid down nationally: 1 adult to 5 children who are not yet walking; and 1 to 8 for other children. To ensure psychology wellbeing, each child is under the specific supervision of a “personne de référence” (contact person).

3.3. Childminders (family day care providers)

They are closely supervised by PMI services, though with a frequency depending on the local authorities. Before being licensed, they are interviewed by a social worker, a paediatric nurse, and a psychologist. The housing conditions and environment for receiving children should be approved, especially in terms of space, hygiene, and safety.

The license is valid for five years and can be renewed for consecutive periods. It specifies the number (no more than 4 simultaneously) and the age of children that can be cared for by the childminder, either fulltime or part-time.

Taking into account that this formal care arrangement is the main one for under-threes (Table 2), policy-makers have been addressing in recent years the issue of their qualification. Indeed, though their average educational achievement had increased since the 1970s, in 2005, 49 % had no qualification whatsoever and 35 % had very low qualifications. Therefore, parallel to the reduction in the cost to parents of this type of care (see further) was an accompanying increase in the professionalism of childminders, who have been required since the law passed in 2004 to receive 60 hours of additional training (in total 60 before and 60 in the two years following their registration). Despite these significant improvements, childhood experts and childminders’ trade union, however, still point out the persistent shortcomings and the heterogeneity of the training programmes across the country and claim for a further development of their qualifications (Fagnani, Math, 2012).

As of March 2012 PMI services have therefore been required to use common standards for criteria related to the registration of childminders. And since 2005 registration procedures have to take into account the childminder’s educational skills. However, parents cannot always afford to rely on a qualified childminder despite generous childcare allowances: such a person can be more demanding in this regard than a less trained counterpart (see further).
Additionally the childminders’ work rules were revised in 2005: the aim was both to improve the quality of care through the improvement of their working conditions and to make this profession more attractive by regulating more strictly its working conditions. The objective of the reform was to make work regulations closer to the common work rules, especially with regard to the labour contract, to earnings and working time regulations. The ‘professionalisation’ programme brings up to date the childminders collective agreement that settles the labour relations between employers (parents, municipalities, NGOs) and the childminders. The labour contract is compulsory and limits the legal working time to 48 hours per week with a rest of at least 11 continuous hours per day and 24 hours per week. The training programme is paid and supervised by local authorities. The law also settles the principle of hour-based payment calculation instead of a daily payment, therefore introducing more flexibility for both parents and childminders. In addition, the salary should be paid monthly in order to provide childminders with regular earnings all over the year as well as entitlement for an annual paid leave. The principle of overtime payment was also settled in the law. Finally, the childminders became entitled to tax breaks on part of their earnings.

Moreover, to enhance early socialisation of children, childminders are encouraged to participate in childminders centres (Relais assistants maternels - RAM) where they can exchange on their own experience with other childminders and also receive advice from a qualified child nurse, while children can participate in collective activities. The purpose is also to prevent tensions and resolve conflicts between employers and employees.
childminders and parents. Conferences and talks on the education and children development are often organised, therefore enhancing their knowledge and skills. RAMs are highly valued by childminders because it gives them the opportunity to meet up with other colleagues (Fagnani, Math, 2012). Despite their rapid increase over the last years (the numbers currently reach 500), there is still a lack of these facilities.

3.4. Staff qualifications and training programmes

In crèches and Multi-accueil, most of the early childhood professionals are well-trained, closely supervised and relatively well-remunerated. There are three types of workers. The *puéricultrice* (pediatric nurse) usually works as the director of a centre. But the director may also be doctor or midwife. At least half of the staff in centres must be *auxiliaires de puéricultrice* (assistant pediatric nurse). If the centre has more than 40 places, there must be at least one *éducatrice de jeunes enfants* (early childhood educators).

The *puéricultrice* has a four year post-secondary educational commitment. The *auxiliaire* is required to attend an ‘école d’auxiliaires de puéricultrices’ a vocational qualification that lasts only a year. The *éducatrice* has pursued a vocational post-secondary training lasting 2 years and 4 months at a specialised training centre (training centres are mainly run privately, but accredited by the Ministry of Health and Social Affairs). The training includes pedagogy and human development; education and care; child development and educational practice; group management; law; economics and social studies; and professional studies and methods.

In *écoles maternelles*, all teachers (*professeur des écoles*) are public servants and must have passed before teaching a national exam which is open to those who have a three-year college degree. The exam includes written papers in French, math, science and art, a practical exam in sport, and an oral exam on workplace experiences. Those who pass the exam enrol in one of the public academic institutes for a year of professional training (about 450 hours). It generally includes studies in education; philosophy; history of education; sociology; psychology; subject study and preparation for administrative tasks; The second year of training includes about 8 to 12 weeks of practice teaching supervised by
inspectors of the Ministry of education. Teachers are entitled to 36 weeks of in-service training during their careers (most of this training is to be spent in the first years). Inspectors and pedagogical counsellors also offer four half-days of mandatory professional development during the school year.

To help teachers with daily activities such as clean-up and toileting as well as in carrying out pedagogical activities, assistants named as ATSEM (Agent territorial spécialisé des écoles maternelles) are employed by local authorities. Since 1992, ATSEM are required to hold a certificate in early childhood education. These aides are appointed by the mayor and work under the supervision of the director of the school.

**Cost of care to families: a large diversity**

In regard to collective childcare settings (EAJE) the rules that govern their levels of public funding (by the State and the CNAF), and the setting of fees (income-related) to be born by the parents, are set up nationally following guidelines fixed through accords signed every four years between the government and the CNAF (Convention d’objectifs et de gestion, COG). Costs of care to parents therefore are depending on the type of care arrangement chosen, the number and ages of children, and the income level. Indeed for all forms of subsidized childcare provision (outside écoles maternelles which are free) parents pay on a sliding scale according to their income.

1. *Childminders: a large diversity of costs to parents*

The state, through tax concessions (tax deductions up to a limit of €1,150 per year and tax credits for families who are not liable to income tax), and the CAFs through an allowance (‘Complément de libre choix du mode de garde’-CLMG- Supplement for the freedom of choice of the child care arrangement)\(^\text{10}\), subsidize this care arrangement. CLMG is income-related, covering the social security contributions to be paid by the employer of the registered childminder, and providing the family with an additional and income-related financial contribution. The amount of this allowance

---

\(^{10}\) To be eligible both parents have to be employed or registered as unemployed or attending a training course.
also varies according to the age of the child (less than 3, and 3 to 6) and the number of children living in the family.

Within the framework of the written contract signed between parents and the childminder it is compulsory to pay them a statutory maximum income defined by the CNAF: €46.10 per child and per day corresponding to 10 hours of care for the child\textsuperscript{11}. When the childminder looks after a child on a full-time basis, the cost to parents, after tax concessions and childcare allowance (CLMG), amounts to €0.7 per hour for families whose income-level (per consumption unit) is less than €1,100 per month to €1.9 for families with more than €2,300, including lunch (DREES, 2009).

Thanks to the significant increase in its amount (decided in 2004), a measure targeted at low-income families, it has become cheaper for them to rely on a registered childminder than before. For most of them, it remains however too expensive. Consequently, in 2007, only 4% of the families with income below 1,100 euros per month could afford a childminder to care for their child aged below three compared to 22% of the families whose income was between 1,100 and 1,700 euros and 37% of the families earning more than 2,300 euros (DREES, 2009) (see also Table 2).

2. Cost of childcare centres (EAJE): much higher to well-off families than to low-income families

Parents pay on a sliding scale according to their income. The cost of a place in an EAJE also depends on the number of hours of attendance. For instance, in a family with a single child cared for 9 hours a day and 18 days per month, net out-of-pocket expenses amounts to an average of €400 per month to parents with an income-level of €5,471 and more while for an income-level of €2,163 this amount represents €100 per month (Boyer, 2012).

\textsuperscript{11} Many childminders are still poorly paid: in 2007, their net earnings were on average €767 per month and their net median earnings were €703 (Fagnani, Math, 2012). There are also strong geographical disparities: childminders living in the metropolitan Paris area – in particular those located in Paris downtown - are those who are the best paid (1440 € per month on average) as a result of the mismatch between supply and demand.
To those low-income families, despite the related childcare allowance (CLMG), the cost of a childminder is twice the cost of a place in a crèche. The shortage of places in EAJE is therefore detrimental to them, in particular to lone parent households, and presents a barrier to full-time work. Consequently when they are in employment they most often rely on relatives or to undeclared childminders.

**Tensions and inconsistencies**

French childcare policy is currently facing new challenges linked to the numerous and dramatic changes which have occurred both on the labour market and in the family sphere. Policy makers have therefore to deal with tensions and difficult trade offs. In a context where their room of manoeuvre is limited, ensuring high quality provision seems at odds with affordability and availability of places for under-threes. How to reconcile children’s interests with other interests, e.g. gender equality, employment and employers? Alongside some progress it is clear that reforms recently introduced appear to be driven more by labour market pressure and mothers’ rights to paid work than always couched in terms of the ‘best interests’ of the child.

Indeed, over the last decade the ministry in charge of family policies, local authorities and the CNAF, have refocused their energies and currently place more emphasis than before on the following issues: how to increase the number of available slots in the formal childcare sector (in response to the rise in the number of births and the need for many women to be in paid employment) and enable parents confronted with non standard or family-unfriendly flexible work hours to combine their job with family responsibilities (Fagnani, 2009) and at the same time how to promote female employment in economically disadvantaged neighbourhoods.

1. **Tensions between quality of care and a shortfall of places in EAJE**

Although measures were being taken over the last decade to compensate for a persistent shortfall in supply, policy makers have yet to satisfy the ceaseless demand for places in childcare facilities and the services of registered childminders. This problem has been aggravated by the lack of qualified staff in EAJE and by the fact that the number of children born in 2011 reached 827,000 representing a steady rise.

---

12 The gap between supply and demand for formal childcare has been estimated at a minimum of 350,000 places (Haut Conseil de la Famille, 2010).
from the 776,000 reported in 1999. Moreover the enhancement of women’s employment has continued to be an explicit objective of French family policies (Fagnani, Math, 2011). The increase in the number of places has therefore been given higher priority on the policy agenda. The results of a recent survey of local elected officials are indicative of this trend: over the last four years, 46% declared that they put at the forefront of their care policies the development of childcare places (CNAF, 2012).

2. Tensions between quality and affordability
The objective of the enhancement of women’s employment – in particular in disadvantaged areas – does not always go hand in hand with an easy access to affordable childcare. And as far as registered childminders are concerned, the move towards their professionalization pushed up the price of this care arrangement. The increase in the amount of the CLMG, decided in 2004, did not fully offset this phenomenon. It is therefore detrimental to low income parents who are likely to be less demanding in terms of quality of care provided by childminders since demand far outstrips supply in childcare settings (EAJE).

Concomitantly policy makers are once again confronted with another dilemma: taking into account the shortage of childminders in many urban areas, how to make more attractive this profession without increasing their earnings (Himmelweit, 2007)? Against the background of budgetary constraints, will the parents be willing to pay more a better trained childminder? A recent research based on a representative sample of parents relying on a childminder shows that only around a third would be willing to pay more (Fagnani, Math, 2012).

3. Tensions between quality and the objective of meeting the needs of parents confronted with atypical working schedules
Along with the organisational changes at the workplace, staff in the sector childcare have been placed under pressure to adapt their own working hours to the needs of the increasing number of parents confronted with long and/or nonstandard working hours. Moreover a growing number of employees have a low degree of command over the scheduling of their work hours, in particular employees located on the lowest steps of the social ladder.
Taking into account their family obligations, individuals employed in the childcare sector are all striving to protect their own interests and are reluctant to submit to ever more flexible working schedules. Registered child minders, if they can afford to\textsuperscript{13}, will often refuse to look after a child outside of standard working hours. The result is that young children are often cared for by a rotating cast of characters and institutions within the same day. This is particularly true when both parents have non-standard work schedules; or when the parent is living alone (Bressé et al., 2007).

4. Recent decisions made at the expense of quality in childcare provision
Against this background, the following decisions have been made over the last decade on how to relieve some of the tensions inherent in the current childcare policies.

- New legislation was passed on June 2010 introducing significant reforms in the ‘Code de la santé publique’ (Public health regulation). First, a decision was made to decrease from 50% to 40% the minimum share of staff required to qualify as skilled workers (i.e., specialists in early-childhood education, childcare assistants, nurses and therapists) in childcare centres. This decision was the consequence of the fact that a shortage of skilled workers has been acting as a brake on the swifter development of such centres. Indeed due to funding restrictions, there is a dearth of places in training centres for people looking to qualify for jobs in the childcare sector.

- Secondly, citing the fact that many young children registered in childcare centres are not in attendance every day or on a full time basis, the government decided to raise the number of children these centres would be authorized to accept. From 2011, crèches with more than 40 slots are allowed to increase by 20% the number of children registered and attending the crèche (15% for crèches with less than 40 slots and 10% for those with less than 20 slots).

- Third, since the law of 2009 was passed, instead of being limited to having only three children simultaneously under their care, registered childminders are now

\textsuperscript{13} In cases where it is difficult for parents to make alternative arrangements or when the caregiver is held in high esteem by the family.
allowed up to four. The aim was to increase the number of places in childcare provision and to provide the childminders with the opportunity to earn more thereby making this job more attractive. However, in a survey of local officials (Pillayre, Robert-Bobée, 2010) based in 94 departments and responsible for the supervision of childminders, 69% declare that this measure will result in less time devoted by childminders to each child, less opportunities to play with them and less availability to enhance their cognitive development. Almost one out of five underline the risk involved as far as security is concerned and insufficient space in the home for each child to be able to rest.

None of these decisions have passed without controversy and some trade-unions and associations have denounced them as threats to the quality of childcare. So far, the government has turned a deaf ear to these criticisms.

- According to the French Education code (1989) ‘every child upon reaching the age of three has the right to attend a nursery school located as close as possible to his or her residence’. This measure is intended to spare children any fatigue related to a long commute and the potentially detrimental effects it could have on their well-being. But, drawing a veil over the ‘best interests’ of the child in terms of his/her biological rhythms and the fact that the average commuting time in France has increased dramatically over the last decades, the ministry in charge of family affairs introduced a measure in 2004 to promote the creation of crèches in private companies (termed ‘crèches d’entreprise’) by providing them with tax deductions along with partial funding from the CAFs.

- Correlatively, in an attempt to satisfy employers’ demand for more atypical work hours the last decade has witnessed an increase in the number of childcare services and crèches operating 24 hours a day and 7 days a week in order to allow working parents to meet the demands placed upon them by employers. These company-run centres (partly funded by the CAFs, see above) are a response to the new realities of the workplace. The need for extended childcare opening hours set to match is a

---

14 In April 2010 they drew up a petition against the new legislation under the banner of ‘Pas de bébé à la consigne’ (Left luggage: no babies allowed) and organised several demonstrations. [http://www.pasdebebesalaconsigne.com](http://www.pasdebebesalaconsigne.com)

15 Following the introduction of the law passed on 10 July 1989 regulating children’s attendance of nursery school.
shared one. The example of Renault (a leader in the French automotive industry) is emblematic of the new reality: since 2010 its employees have enjoyed access to childcare from 5:30 am to 10:30 pm and this clearly illustrates that the children of its employees are spending significant amounts of time in outside care and thereby in commuting\textsuperscript{16}.

In the same line of vision, while the government supports the development of childcare centres in socio-economically disadvantaged areas (see above), strong emphasis is put on the promotion of opening hours that are more in tune with ‘the needs of working parents’ and on the development of so-called ‘flexible’ and ‘innovative’ child care arrangements. Operating hours of the childcare centres have been extended to over 10 hours per day, exceeding the current regulations granting children the right to attend a 	extit{crèche} as well as an 	extit{école maternelle} up to a maximum of 10 hours per working day.

- In 2009, the government decided to create and support a new type of collective arrangement, called ‘\textit{jardins d’éveil}’ (kindergartens), where 2 to 3 year-old children could be cared for. Vocal criticisms were raised as the quality of this type of childcare would be patchier than in 	extit{crèches} where the statutory child-to-staff ratio is 8:1 compared to 12:1 in ‘\textit{jardins d’éveil}’. These new centres were also widely viewed as an underhanded way to transfer more of the financial burden for care from the government to parents’ shoulders by reducing the demand for places in nursery schools and siphoning it into the ‘\textit{jardins d’éveil}’. These centres have met, however, with little success.

\textbf{Conclusion}

Though the ‘EU Framework of Law for Children’s Rights’ (2012)\textsuperscript{17} states that ‘all EU policies must be designed and implemented in line with the child’s best interests’, new developments in France have given rise to increasing tensions and dilemmas despite attempts have been made to reconcile the quantitative with the qualitative in

\textsuperscript{16} Strazdins and al. (2006) have demonstrated that non-standard work schedules have detrimental effects on children’s well-being and on the quality of interactions within the family.

\textsuperscript{17} European Parliament Directorate-General for Internal Affairs (2012) \textit{EU Framework of Law for Children’s Rights}
the formulation of consistent childcare policy. While the focus has continued to remain on supporting mothers’ employment by subsidizing both formal individual care arrangements as well as collective ones, reforms introduced since the mid-nineties illustrate clearly the ways in which employment policies have encroached on the ground previously occupied by French family policy.

Moreover, reforms introduced by the government have created employment both on the supply-side (increased labour market participation of women) and on the demand-side (increased number of jobs in childcare services), but there are still important gaps in quality as far as childminders are concerned, and heterogeneity in this field is still the rule.

In all these domains, responsibilities (spread over different social partners) are all too often dissipated which leads to a lack of accountability for actions taken; and no one is held responsible for instance for the mismatch between supply and demand of childcare at the local level. Spatial disparities in supply of places in centre-based settings also remain wide and continue to hinder access of all families to high quality childcare.

Last but not least, the issue of the predominantly female workforce in the childcare sector has not yet been addressed though it would be a significant component of a holistic and comprehensive approach to promoting high quality childcare.

References


Table 1– Children aged under 3: Breakdown according to the main childcare arrangement during the week and the family income level (in %)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Income per consumption unit</th>
<th>Parent</th>
<th>Relatives</th>
<th>Licensed childcare</th>
<th>Childcare centres (EAJE)</th>
<th><em>Ecole maternelle</em></th>
<th>Nanny/ day-care employee</th>
<th>Other</th>
<th>TOTAL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>First quintile</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second quintile</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Third quintile</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fourth quintile</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fifth quintile</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Borderies (2012).

Table 2: Main childcare arrangements for under-threes during the week (in %)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Collective childcare facilities (EAJE)</th>
<th>All children (in %)</th>
<th>Both parents work full-time (in %)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Collective childcare facilities (EAJE)</td>
<td>14.7</td>
<td>18.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nursery schools (<em>école maternelle)</em></td>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Registered (licensed) childminders</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nanny/ day-care employee (publicly subsidized)</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Looked after by parents or other people
(relatives, friends..)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>48.7</th>
<th>64</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


* A child can attend the nursery school in the morning and be cared for by a childminder in the afternoon or looked after by a nanny after having spent the day in a crèche.

Annex

An example: Quality Conditions for Two-Year-Olds in the Val-de-Marne Department

The Val-de-Marne, southeast of Paris, currently enrolls about 24% of its two-year-olds in the école maternelle. As part of an effort to promote the quality of care and education, the académie of the Val-de-Marne has developed 9 conditions for welcoming two-year-olds in the école maternelles:

- A large and bright classroom located on the ground floor with direct access to the playground.
- Classroom furniture/materials adapted to the size and developmental needs of two-year-olds (e.g., sensory activities, painting, book corners, etc.) And which can change during the year.
- A bathroom nearby with adapted toilets and sinks, as well as a shower.
- A designated dormitory, with a bed for each child, and attention to their emotional comfort.
- Access to a washing service/machine for soiled clothing and sheets.
- A specific relaxation and gross motor room near the classroom.
- Regular access to a playground with games/equipment that meet the safety of two-year-olds.
- A cafeteria with a separate section for two-year-olds, and adapted dishes, cutlery, and menu.

- An ATSEM, with early childhood training, assigned to each section with two-year-olds who works in partnership with the teacher on specified tasks and functions.

As part of this effort, education inspectors conducted an assessment of the existing conditions for two-year-olds in schools. The report was presented to a multi-stakeholder working group in 2002. Subsequently, the group developed a quality certificate, based on the above nine conditions, for all schools enrolling, or likely to enrol, two-year-olds. The certificate is pre-condition for opening any new classrooms for two-year-olds. The académie also has engaged in discussions with mayors of towns located in ZEPs about how to ensure appropriate conditions for two-year-olds in maternelles in these disadvantaged neighbourhoods.

For more information: http://www.ac-creteil.fr