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“There are not barriers that cannot be overcome: A study on factors acting as facilitators, barriers and promoters for the continued attendance of children from 0 to 3 to non-formal ECEC provisions”

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Abstract

Despite the critical role Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) in children's learning and development, many children, particularly those from vulnerable backgrounds, experience limited access or low attendance. This study aims to understand the factors influencing attendance, acting as barriers, facilitators, and promoters of continued participation of very young children aged 0 to 3 in non-formal ECEC, specifically focusing on Play Hubs. Employing a qualitative research design, semi-structured interviews were conducted across three Play Hubs located in different localities of Slovakia: Prešov, Spišský Hrhov and Poprad. Ten interviews were conducted in total, five with caregivers and five with Play Hub staff, with seven interviews conducted in-person and three were online via Teams (exclusively with Play Hub staff). Transcriptions of the interviews were imported into NVivo 14 for further analysis.

Findings reveal that various factors influence Play Hub attendance for very young children and their caregivers. These factors largely align with existing literature highlighting the complex interplay between individual perspectives within each ecological system (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). In the microsystem, factors such as children's health, awareness of the Play Hub, and cost emerged prominently. Additionally, family vulnerability and the presence of school-aged siblings were identified as influential. In the mesosystem, the quality of relationships between families and ECEC staff and social cohesion were pivotal, alongside the influence of caregivers' social networks and enrolment in formal ECEC programs. At the macro level, factors included time availability and accessibility to Play Hubs, while exosystem considerations encompassed cultural relevance and language barriers.

Factors related to continued attendance include the educational opportunities offered by Play Hubs, the provision of a safe and supportive environment for families, and the facilitation of

socialization among caregivers, particularly mothers—an emerging finding recognising the key role of maternal wellbeing in children’s development and learning. Addressing these factors is crucial for supporting families from vulnerable backgrounds and enhancing overall child development and wellbeing through ECEC participation.

Introduction

Everyday experiences in children's lives significantly influence their development (Melhuish et al., 2015). Children's development encompasses multiple interdependent areas, such as cognitive, socio-emotional, and sensory-motor domains, all of which are susceptible to contextual conditions (Grantham-McGregor et al., 2007). Research indicates that nearly half of the global population aged 0 to 5 is at risk of not reaching their developmental potential due to physical and psychosocial risks (Jeong et al., 2021). In other words, the level of cognitive, socio-emotional, and sensory-motor development a child can achieve is influenced by their context, including factors such as family income, caregiver responsiveness, housing conditions, and education levels. Vulnerable or risky conditions are more likely to negatively affect this developmental potential.

The early years of life are crucial for development, as a child's brain grows rapidly and reaches nearly its full adult volume (French & Mc Kenna, 2022). According to the same authors, learning and development during this stage have long-term implications for multiple areas of a child's life, including physical and mental health, academic performance, educational attainment, employment, and general well-being. According to Schiariti et al. (2021), there is a correlation between lower development in children and poverty, which leads to higher rates of school dropout, limited learning, and lower earnings in adulthood.

Several studies have concluded that Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) initiatives, meaning all initiatives which provide education and care for children from birth until they attend compulsory primary school, are effective in promoting children's development (European Education Area, n.d.). Examples of ECEC services include long day care, kindergarten, family day care, and group or centre-based childcare (Beatson et al., 2022; Melhuish et al., 2015).

ECEC provides a supportive environment for children and their families, enhancing learning and developmental potential during this critical stage of life, particularly for children and families from disadvantaged backgrounds, such as those facing poverty, war refugees, and Roma children (Bove & Sharmahd, 2020). ECEC can also mitigate adverse childhood experiences and prevent emotional trauma through predictable, consistent nurturing (French and Mc Kenna, 2022). However, despite these benefits, a significant proportion of children, especially from vulnerable backgrounds, do not have access to ECEC or show low attendance (Beatson et al., 2022; Bove & Sharmahd, 2020; Wolf et al., 2020). Literature has identified multiple factors influencing the attendance of children at ECEC provisions. Beatson and colleagues (2022) identified barriers such as accessibility, ethnic or racial discrimination, child illness, social isolation, cost, among other factors. On the other hand, same authors recognise factors like staff level of training, establishing sensitive and supportive relationships between staff and families, and providing information about the benefits of formal ECEC attendance facilitate participation.

However, most of literature focuses on formal ECEC provisions. Therefore, the aim of this study is to understand the facilitators and barriers perceived for caregivers of children aged 0 to 3 and staff at a non-formal provision.

Empirical & theoretical background

While formal ECEC is institutionalised and hierarchical, such as nurseries and kindergartens, with great emphasis on academic competencies and the achievement of predefined outcomes (Cortellesi et al., 2018), non-formal education is considered less structured and often based on voluntariness with activities ruled by agreements that state rules of behaviour and membership. Examples are Play Hubs, play groups or parent and toddler groups (van Oudenhoven & Jualla, 2010).

ECEC services are diverse, with various characteristics such as type of education, cost, and schedule. TOY for Inclusion is a non-formal educational initiative developed by the International Child Development Initiatives (ICDI) organization. It advocates for community-based early childhood education and care, bringing services directly to areas in Europe where they are most needed (Daniel et al., 2018). Through Play Hubs, defined as safe and inclusive ECEC spaces for children and their families, relationships are fostered between young children and families from diverse backgrounds. Although all children from each community are welcome, special focus is put on those at risk of social exclusion, such as Ukrainian refugees, Roma children, and those with mental and physical disabilities. Play Hubs support children's development through play and learning, promoting family bonding, offering educational resources and providing information on childrearing, health, early learning, and development for caregivers.

While participation rates have been increasing over the past year, a concerning trend has emerged: younger children exhibit the lowest attendance rates at these Play Hubs (ICDI, 2024). This underscores a current gap in research and policy regarding the barriers faced by families in accessing ECEC services, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds. There is a critical need to understand the strategies, factors, and approaches that could enhance and

support parental participation and engagement in ECEC settings (Ünver et al., 2018; Gennetian et al., 2019).

Even within European countries, significant disparities exist in ECEC attendance among very young children, particularly across different socio-economic backgrounds (Ünver et al., 2021). It is essential to gain a better understanding of caregivers' behaviours, attitudes, and decision-making processes regarding their own attendance and their children's attendance at ECEC services, especially at non-formal initiatives like Play Hubs. This gap in understanding is deepened by the limited literature available on this issue in non-formal education. Gaining insights into caregivers' perceptions of ECEC attendance, particularly at Play Hubs, could help bridge this knowledge gap.

The literature describes multiple barriers and facilitators for caregivers and families attending ECEC services. To better comprehend the barriers and facilitators and how they interrelate, Bronfenbrenner's ecological model of human development results useful for classifying and understanding factors literature shows influence attendance at ECEC initiatives. This model incorporates the scientific study of the embedded connection between an individual and the changing environment which that person lives (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). From this model, four subsystems are present in the ecological environment: micro-, meso-, macro- and exosystem. All interconnected and contained within each other. In these systems, the reciprocal inter-influence between the individual and the environment is recognised.

On the **microsystem**, which refers to the environment which children have the most direct contact with. Factors that influence attendance include:

- Children's health (Beatson et al., 2022): illnesses, chronic diseases or medical appointments can inhibit families from attending ECEC services.

- Cost (Beatson et al., 2022; Lamb, 2020): Affordability can significantly impact whether caregivers can send their children to ECEC services.
- Parental mental health status (Mayer et al., 2018; Vandekerckhove & Aarssen, 2020; Gennetian et al., 2019): Conditions such as anxiety and stress can affect the decision to participate in ECEC.
- Parental attitudes (Furlong & McGilloway, 2014): These can either contribute to or impede engagement with ECEC provision.
- Information about ECEC and its benefits (Beatson et al., 2022; Mayer et al., 2018): The more information caregivers have about the importance and benefits of ECEC, the more likely they are to commit to attendance.

On the **mesosystem**, which refers to the interconnection between microsystems of the children, such as family and childcare, factors influencing attendance include:

- Ethnic or racial discrimination (Beatson et al., 2022): This can negatively affect attendance, as people prefer not to attend places where they are discriminated against.
- Social isolation (Beatson et al., 2022): Families not connected with educational or social networks that link to ECEC services are less likely to attend.
- Relationships between family and ECEC staff (Beatson et al., 2022; Gennetian et al., 2019): Supportive and trustworthy relationships can enhance family engagement.
- Group experiences with other participants (Mytton et al., 2014): Positive experiences with other families can promote continued attendance.

On the **macrosystem**, which refers to broader systems that indirectly influence children, factors include:

- Accessibility to ECEC services (Mayer et al., 2018; Mytton et al., 2014; Glover et al., 2021; Gennetian et al., 2019): Distance and transportation options, such as public transport and the number of connections needed, can affect attendance.
- Caregivers' work schedules (Mayer et al., 2018; Gennetian et al., 2019): Lack of time due to work commitments can be a barrier to attendance.
- Properly trained staff (Vandekerckhove & Aarssen, 2020): Having adequately trained staff is crucial for effective ECEC services.

On the **exosystem**, which refers to broader cultural and societal factors, influences include:

- Cultural relevance of ECEC (Vandekerckhove & Aarssen, 2020; Mytton et al., 2014; Gennetian et al., 2019): Cultural factors of each family's affects likelihood to attend.
- Language issues (Vandekerckhove & Aarssen, 2020; Mytton et al., 2014; Gennetian et al., 2019): Language barriers, especially for migrant or Roma families, can hinder attendance if they do not speak the language used at ECEC facilities.

These factors can influence a family's decision to attend ECEC services, particularly for caregivers of very young children. Each case or situation may be different.

For the purposes of this study, research will be focused on the context of three Play Hubs located in Slovakia. Families attending belong to the communities where Play Hubs are located, which includes families from disadvantage contexts such as low-income, Roma ethnicity, Ukrainian refugees and children with disabilities. Understanding what factors influences their attendance acting as facilitator or barriers can provide insights into why some families choose to participate in ECEC provisions.

From this perspective, the Behavioural Economics (B.E.) theory is relevant. This interdisciplinary theory, defined by Buttenheim et al. (2023) as “an approach to examining

human behaviour and decision-making that integrates research and evidence from psychology and related fields such as sociology, anthropology, and cognitive science with economic analysis” (p.1), could contribute for better understanding of human behaviour. Specifically, according to Hill et al. (2021), B.E. helps to understand how contexts can influence decision-making. In the case of children's attendance to ECEC services, as Play Hubs, their attendance is influenced by various interrelated systems (micro-, meso-, macro-, and exosystems). For families facing vulnerabilities, these contexts may undermine their aims to attend Play Hubs. Considering cognitive resources are limited, focusing on one family aspect can reduce the availability of those resources for other family-related activities. For instance, caregivers experiencing economic distress may face the vital need of earning money to buy food, which consumes a significant amount of their cognitive resources. As a result, they may have limited mental and even physical resources undermining intentions of attending Play Hubs with their children.

Research questions

This framework offers a clear overview of the problem and acknowledges the importance of better understanding about the barriers and facilitators to attend, especially on very young children and their caregivers. In this thesis, the following research question will be addressed: What factors related to micro-, meso-, macro-, and exosystems influence Play Hub attendance of very young children and their caregivers as perceived by caregivers of children aged 0-3 years, and by staff working at Play Hubs?

Followed by the sub question, according to caregivers of children aged 0-3 years who attend to Play Hubs and Play Hub staff, what factors promote their continued participation?

In relation to the research question, several factors are anticipated to emerge as significant barriers or facilitators at different ecological levels for very young children and caregiver's

attendance. At the microsystem, childhood illnesses may pose a barrier due to the ongoing development of children's immune systems in their early years (Pieren et al., 2022). Parental attitudes could also play a central role; their introspection about their attitudes during the research could offer valuable insights. Cost is not expected to be mentioned as a barrier since Play Hubs are free of charge. At the mesosystem, in line with the principles of TOY 4 Inclusion, ethnic or racial discrimination should not be a barrier, as the initiative strongly promotes social cohesion. In the macrosystem, accessibility is unlikely to emerge as a barrier, as Play Hubs are strategically planned to be located in easily accessible areas. Regarding the exosystem, language issues are not expected to be named as barriers but rather to facilitate it as Play Hubs typically employ staff qualified in the languages spoken by the participants.

Regarding the sub-question, since Play Hubs is an educational provision it could be expected caregivers and staff identify the developmental and learning opportunities these spaces offer to children as a crucial factor for continued attendance, as they recognise the positive impact on children.

This study aims to contribute to better understanding of the factors that act as barriers, facilitators, and promoters of continued participation of very young children aged 0 to 3 in non-formal Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC). These factors are perceived by both children's caregivers and Play Hub staff. The study focuses on this crucial period of life, essential for achieving cognitive, socio-emotional, and sensory-motor developmental potential, which has well-recognized consequences for the future.

The findings are expected to contribute to the development of policies that enhance facilitators and promote continued attendance while reducing barriers for very young children. These policies would support attendance at Play Hubs or any ECEC initiative that could benefit their

developmental and learning potential, ultimately improving their overall well-being. It also expects to add new findings on this topic for non-formal education.

Methods

Study design

A qualitative methodology is employed in this study. Qualitative methods can be particularly useful for better understanding caregiver's experiences and perceptions regarding their attendance with their children aged 0 to 3 to Play Hubs, as well as for gaining insights into staff perceptions about this topic. Semi-structured interviews were chosen to conduct this research due their effectiveness on collecting meaningful data and better understanding of participants' perspectives related to the research topic. This approach also offers flexibility to adapt questions and conversations to each interviewee when needed (Holley & Harris, 2019). All semi-structured interviews with caregivers were conducted in-person. With staff, two of them were in-person and three of them online via Teams.

This research has received ethical approval of the Utrecht University's Ethics Committee. All interviews were anonymized, and every participant read an informed consent form containing all necessary information about the research and signed a statement of consent for their participation.

Study sample

For collecting the data for this research, a fieldtrip to Slovakia was planned in collaboration with ICDI and its local partner, Škola Dokorán. Slovakia hosts the largest amount of Play Hubs under the TOY 4 Inclusion initiative, with fourteen Play Hubs in Slovakia, representing the 35% of the total active Play Hubs in 2023. These Play Hubs also have the highest number of child participants, nearly 78% (N=16.972) of the total participants across the European

countries where the initiative is implemented. Slovakian Play Hubs openly welcomes all children and families from their respective communities, with particular focus on families at a disadvantaged contexts as Roma children, Ukrainian refugee children and those with any physical or mental disabilities.

The eligibility criteria for participating in this research were:

- (a) For caregivers: Those who have participated or are actively participating in the Play Hubs with their children aged 0-3 years.
- (b) For Play Hub staff: Those with at least one year of work experience at Play Hubs or with the Toy 4 Inclusion initiative.

In the context of this research, three Play Hubs were visited: Prešov, Spišský Hrhov and Poprad. The first two are located in primary school premises, while the third one is in a Charity Centre. These Play Hubs were selected due to their proximity to each other, the willingness and motivation of their coordinators and staff to participate in the study, and the diverse backgrounds of the families involved.

The field visit took place from April 23rd until April 25th. Given the tight time constraints, it focused exclusively on visiting the Play Hubs and conducting on-site data collection. Priority was given to interviewing caregivers, as they might be a more difficult group to reach outside the field setting, while staff interviews could be scheduled for a later date online.

The Škola Dokorán team invited caregivers to participate in advance. Professionals were provided with detailed information about the research, including eligibility criteria and the importance of having an adequate number of participants. This ensured clarity on the study's

aim and helped in structuring a schedule to accommodate the participants' availability, allowing the researcher to spend one day at each Play Hub. Play Hub staff were invited to participate directly by the researcher. Depending on their availability, these interviews were conducted in-person or via Teams.

Škola Dokorán professionals faced several challenges in recruiting caregivers to participate in this study. The issues were explained on the arrival of the researcher to Slovakia and included caregivers' limited availability, some caregivers' disinterest, and timing of the study, which coincided with a period of lower attendance for children aged 0-3. Despite their efforts, only five caregivers participated in the study.

Due to these constraints, the study's methodology and eligibility criteria were adjusted. Originally planned as a focus group, the format was changed to semi-structured interviews. Additionally, the eligibility criteria were broadened to include a mother who had been attending the program with her daughter since the child was four years old. The interview questions were adapted to help this mother reflect on her participation and imagine how it might have been if her daughter had started attending when she was between 0 and 3 years old. More details about the semi-structured interview questions are available in an annex.

Interviews were conducted in English, despite none of the participants or the researcher were native speakers. This decision was based on practical considerations, as English language was more accessible in the research context. Two translators provided live translations during interviews for participants who did not speak English. These translators were English teachers. One translated interviews in Spišský Hrhov and Poprad, and was the headmaster of one school involved in the TOY 4 Inclusion initiative in Slovakia and worked for Škola Dokorán. The

other one worked as an English teacher in the school in Prešov and had not previous connection to the initiative.

In total, ten semi-structured interviews were conducted during this research. Five with caregivers and five with Play Hub staff. Seven interviews were conducted in-person and three were online via Teams. The online interviews were done exclusively with Play Hub staff.

Caregiver Interviews

Regarding the interviews with the caregivers of children aged 0 to 3, all were mothers of children. Two were from the Roma community, two were Ukraine (one being a refugee, and the other one having migrated earlier), and one was Slovakian. The interviews lasted on average 44 minutes. All of them were conducted individually except for the first interview where the two Roma mothers participated together due to time constraints.

Table 1. Characterisation of caregivers and children.

Participant	Relationship with the children	Play Hub were they participate	Current age of the youngest child	Year when started participating in Play Hub
P.1.M.	Mother	Spišský Hrhov	4 years	2018
P.2.E.	Mother	Spišský Hrhov	3 years	2020
P.3.L.	Mother	Poprad	2 years	2022
P.4.M.	Mother	Poprad	2 years	2022
P.5.M.	Mother	Spišský Hrhov	7 years	2021

Staff Interviews

Five interviews were conducted with Play Hub staff. Two were in-person and three online via Teams. All interviewees have been part of the staff of Play Hubs for at least two years, since the beginning of their respective Play Hubs, and held various roles, and even some of them worked in more than one Play Hub. Two of them also worked in the coordination of this initiative at Škola Dokorán office. The two in-person interviews required translation assistance from the same two professionals who collaborated with the caregiver interviews, while the three online interviews didn't need translation. These interviews lasted on average 51,5 minutes.

Table 2. Characterisation of staff.

Participant	Gender	Main Work Location	Years working in this initiative
S.1.R.	female	Prešov	2 years
S.2.T.	female	Spišský Hrhov	6 years
S.3.P.	male	Spišský Hrhov	6 years
S.4.M.	male	Košice	7 years
S.5.N.	female	Prešov	2 years

Topics of the interviews

Exploratory, explanatory and descriptive questions were asked through all interviews. Initial questions aimed the eligibility criteria of participants and to understand the context within which they began their participation in the Play Hub or the TOY 4 Inclusion initiative.

The questions regarding the factors acting as barriers and facilitators were based on findings from relevant literature. Further content was added in the staff interviews. Preliminary results or answers from caregivers were shared to foster reflection and more in-depth answers. This was intended to better understand how different factors, acting as barriers and/or facilitators, have an impact in the caregivers' decision-making to attending non-formal provision, as Play Hubs. Some interview questions were created based on Bronfenbrenner's theory and the B.E. model to explore different levels of influence and factors affecting caregivers' decisions regarding participation in Play Hubs.

Data Analysis

All interviews conducted in this research were recorded to ensure high-fidelity posterior transcription. To protect participants, all real names were changed. Transcriptions were double-checked and cleaned by re-listening the recording audios once transcription was made.

For data management, qualitative research software was selected due to the documented qualities of efficiency and built-in structure for organising the data (Holley & Harris, 2019). Transcriptions were imported into NVivo 14 for further analysis, as it is an easy-to-use tool that systematises data and facilitates in-depth analysis (Mortelmans, 2019).

The data analysis employed both inductive and deductive approaches. Codes and categories were based on the literature particularly those related to the research question regarding the factors acting as facilitators and barriers, matching what interviewees recognised and what is documented in the literature. Additionally, new codes were created based on the ideas and answers provided by participants during the interviews. This iterative process allowed for the construction of a comprehensive coding framework that better reflects the data and provides a deeper understanding of the participant's experiences and perspectives.

Critical reflection on research process and positionality

It is important to acknowledge potential biases that could affect the interpretation of the data. The researcher was an intern at ICDI, the coordinating organisation of TOY 4 Inclusion, when conducting this research and worked directly with the individuals involved in the creation of the project. Regular consultations with university supervisor may provide a second perspective, helping to identify possible blind spots and maintain focus on the study's objectives.

With a strong commitment to social justice and extensive experience primarily in Latin America, focusing on children and families in disadvantaged contexts and evidence-based social interventions, the researcher brings a critical perspective to the study. This shapes the understanding of the potential outcomes of social initiatives, influenced by the involved organizations, advocacy practitioners, and the needs and motivations of participating children and families. In this regard, TOY 4 Inclusion is seen as a well-planned approach to providing educational services to disadvantaged children and families. It also prompts curiosity and critical examination regarding its practical implementation and impact on attending families and established communities.

Results

Main findings

Throughout the research conducted on the perceptions of caregivers of children aged 0-3 years and Play Hub staff, interesting insights were gained into the dynamics of attendance at Play Hubs. Results will be presented regarding the research question and sub question. Concerning the research question, several factors emerged during interview as influencing the attendance of very young children to Play Hubs. Some of them as B.E. model states, affected individuals

differently. Therefore, results of the first question will present the most significant factors influencing as barriers or facilitators for attendance. Additionally, to enhance clarity, factors will be organised according to Bronfenbrenner's systems. Within each system, factors are ranked based on their relevance of appearance.

1. What factors related to micro-, meso-, macro-, and exosystems influence Play Hub attendance of very young children and their caregivers as perceived by caregivers of children aged 0-3 years, and by staff working at Play Hubs?

a) Factors in the microsystem

Children's health

This factor was noted by several participants as a barrier when referring to children's illnesses and appears to be particularly prevalent in very young children.

“Or... Little children are very... Just frequently sick. Uh-huh. And when they meet with some other kids, they catch some virus or bacteria and they every time have a headache or... Something like that.” (Caregiver 3).

Family level of vulnerability

From another perspective, the level of vulnerability experienced by some families emerged as a sensitive and significant barrier, particularly among Roma and Ukrainian families. The level of vulnerability might influence the decision-making of those families, that give priority to survival needs:

“The reason might be they are poor, and they have more children, and they are very very kind of pessimistic about life, they can't afford buying things, they can't afford buying, you know like food, so they, they wouldn't go to Play Hub”. (Caregiver 2).

“They have the kind of troubles to live off from their income. If they are on social benefits, they do not have enough even to cover the basic needs of the family. So, they do not follow any offers, they do not see any positive aspects out of it”. (Caregiver 1).

“Ukrainians live everywhere when they could find possibility to rent a house, or they share houses and flats with Slovak families. That's even more difficult to them and their priority is to survive, you know”. (Staff 3).

Having siblings at school age

The presence of school-aged siblings emerged as a significant factor during the interviews. It acts as a barrier for caregivers when their older children attend schools located far from the Play Hub, requiring mothers to attend school meetings or pick up their children. This situation sometimes influences the decision of families to stay home, as older siblings require a quiet environment for homework. Conversely, having older siblings can be beneficial for some families, especially when the Play Hub is located at the same school premises, as acknowledged by some staff members:

“Usually, siblings of those children who are visiting the elementary school are our target group from 0 to 3. So, these are the younger siblings. And those parents, their parents, they know the environment, they know the school, they know the place where the Play Hub is located. And that's why they are bringing also younger children”. (Staff 4).

Information or interest about the Play Hub

Some caregivers highlighted a critical observation regarding non-attendance at Play Hubs: individuals may not be aware of their existence, and even those who are informed may lack interest. Staff members actively address these issues by promoting Play Hubs within the community through channels such as social media, school meetings, and local municipality activities. Despite their efforts, they acknowledge that generating interest remains a challenge, which could pose a significant barrier to the attendance of very young children:

“I think the only one barrier is the willingness to participate. So, this is something we cannot affect (...) the youngest ones, they are fully in the hands of their parents. And when the parent doesn't want to be active, doesn't want to change anything, and is satisfied with his or her life. So, then it's very difficult to change it”. (Staff 4).

Cost

Caregivers did not mention the factor of cost as a barrier or facilitator for their attendance although it was mentioned by staff participants. This could be attributed to the fact the Play Hubs are free of charge, therefore not a relevant factor to consider when discussing barriers to attendance:

“We have this open. I mean free for fees. So, this is true. I didn't realize. If they have to pay it can be a barrier that they will not come too much. It will be a very big barrier”. (Staff 2).

However, the interviews revealed cost-related factors could still influence participation, primarily serving as facilitators rather than barriers. For instance, not having to commute to the Play Hub allowed caregivers to save money on transportation. In addition, the wide selection of toys, which are mainly new and of good quality, enabled caregivers to save money by not having to purchase multiple toys for home use, opting instead to use and borrow those provided by the Play Hub. This was perceived as a prudent financial decision:

“The selection of toys is maybe motivation to parents as well because when I noticed and found out what the Play Hub is offering, it could help me to save money from our income, I wouldn't buy the toy because I could go to Play Hub and use it there and then I can spend money more wisely in the household”. (Caregiver 1).

Other factors at this system such as parental mental health status, parental attitudes were barely mentioned by participants.

b) Factors in the mesosystem

Social networks of caregivers

Throughout the interviews with caregivers, a common facilitator for their participation in Play Hub was being invited by someone already familiar with this non-formal provision. Typically, this is a friend who is already involved or a staff member from the school where the Play Hub is located. Several staff participants corroborated this finding, seeing it as an effective method to invite and bring new families to participate to Play Hubs:

“Uh, sometimes, uh, they're coming, um, parents or mothers who are friends in Roma or non-Roma who are friends and, uh, they just call, come, come with me”. (Staff 2).

“Ukrainian people. Very strong. Very. Community. Community. Very strong community. If one mother here. Say other mother. Invite for viber. For social. Very, very, very strong community”. (Staff 5).

Relationships between family and ECEC staff

This factor was mentioned mostly by staff participants, as it is a relevant matter for them. Play Hub staff expressed commitment to children and their families and to make efforts trying to build relationships with them. From their perspective has a positive impact on participants as they build trust and decrease distance:

“What was also very positive experience that they were contacted the professionals they met at Play Hubs. They phoned them or they texted them, asked them about activities but also in some more, I don't know, I would say more private conversation when they were looking for help, for advice. As far as I know, they build up good relationships between the parents and professionals at Play Hubs”. (Staff 3).

Establishing positive and close relationships is something relevant also from an organisational level. Therefore, each Play Hub places effort into employing staff from their community, with the aim of facilitating familiarity, with special focus on those from vulnerable backgrounds:

“And when there is someone from their community in the staff, so it's even better, they don't feel that they are going somewhere when that is strange for them or when they are not familiar with the institution”. (Staff 4).

It is also noteworthy some caregivers appreciate Play Hubs' staff are constantly cleaning and replacing damaged toys.

Enrolment in Formal ECEC

One factor identified through interviews and only confirmed during the last interview due to a concept lost in translation, is the attendance of children to kindergarten. In Slovakia, children can start attending to this formal ECEC when they turn three years old (with one participant mentioning even age two). Although it is not mandatory at this age and cost money, staff mentioned Ukrainian mothers participating in Play Hubs might enrol their children in a kindergarten or nursery once they start working. These provisions provide a safe place where children can stay during their mother's workday. Additionally, if ECEC provisions have similar schedules, it presents another barrier.

“Well, because most of them are in kindergarten. Usually, the small children are in the kindergarten, and usually parents pick them from kindergarten at around 4 p.m., when kindergarten is closed and also the Play Hub is closed at this time”. (Staff 5).

Ethnic or racial discrimination / Social Cohesion

Although this factor was not explicitly mentioned as a barrier, several participants highlighted the absence of discrimination, or more accurately, the presence of social cohesion, as a facilitator for attendance. The Play Hub was described as a safe space where children and

mothers from different backgrounds can share and spend quality time together. For some caregivers and staff, Play Hubs provide a unique opportunity for socialization between Roma community, Ukrainian refugees, and locals. Significant bonds have been established between adults from different backgrounds:

“What it is the most important thing is the feel of safety because they are trying to heal the wounds because they have a very bad experience, especially the mothers (from Ukraine), they have lost family. We all are very happy when the husbands can visit them and we all are crying together, the community, when they have to come back to fight. It’s community here. That’s the best part”. (Caregiver 4).

Social isolation and group experiences responses will be considered on the sub-question answer.

c) Factors in the macrosystem

Time availability (Caregivers' work schedules)

This results a major factor and mostly a barrier across all participants perception. The amount of free time, particularly of caregivers acts as a determinant in participation:

“It depends of parents if they have free time and are willing to come, because small children can’t come on their own”. (Staff 4).

The lack of time emerged as the most common barrier mentioned in the interviews, reflecting a broader global phenomenon. Many caregivers cited housework or paid work as the main reasons they could not attend the Play Hub, even if they were motivated to participate:

“If I had no time to cook or sometimes if I didn’t have time to prepare something, to cook, to bake, I would not come. Maybe other common things: people don’t have time because they have to cook and bake or do things at home, because the other day you go to work”.
(Caregiver 5).

Accessibility to Play Hub

Throughout the interviews accessibility emerged more as a facilitator than a barrier. As some staff explained, location of Play Hubs was intentionally planned to be accessible to the community, by locating them in strategic premises such as schools or charity centres that are close to neighbourhoods. This provides families with short walking distances or easy transportation:

“Our Play Hub was in centre, because our school in centre of Prešov (...) Kids housing other, other position of faraway of school. But we have good position, because in centre. In centre for go by bus, by car. It's good, good”. (Staff 5).

Some caregivers easily recognized the proximity they have to the Play Hub as a facilitator for attendance. Having this space close to their homes seems to be a huge advantage from multiple perspectives: no need of drive license, easy to commute with the stroller for the child, and considering the disadvantaged context many participants face, it allows them to save money:

“Difficult here? (for attendance) No, I haven't because I live very near, maybe five minutes. I go with...Stroller. Yeah. It's easier. Because I nearly have a flight”. (Caregiver 3).

Although accessibility was not explicitly mentioned as a barrier by many participants, it can still pose a challenge. Some indirectly referenced this issue when discussing the decline in their children's attendance, attributing it, for instance, to their new work location:

“They come once a month (her children). It's less frequent because I'm working in another place (and not at the Play Hub as before)”. (Caregiver 4).

Properly trained staff was barely mentioned and only by staff interviewees.

d) Factors in the exosystem

Cultural Relevance

During the interviews this factor emerged as a barrier to participation in Play Hubs, particularly among Roma population. Interestingly this was mentioned by caregivers from the same cultural background. When reflecting on barriers to attendance for other caregivers they pointed out that some Roma families may not prioritize childcare or dedicate quality time with their children:

“It's enough when they have children and it's done. So, they don't even think about how to take care, how to educate, it's not Roma agenda. For them, the most important thing is

to have meals and stay together, even if so many people are in the same house.”

(Caregiver 1).

One staff member explained that in Slovakia is a common cultural practice to have multiple children with short age gap between them. Therefore, mothers of very young children often expect another baby, which becomes a barrier to attending the Play Hub:

“So, it's also an obstacle. You know, once she's pregnant, she's more careful. She stays home or she visits family but doesn't go to Play Hub. Obviously, you know, it's very practical (...) she prefers visiting her parents or staying at home than going to play up because she's pregnant. There's a risk of, you know, illnesses and so on”. (Staff 3).

Language issues

Considering that Play Hubs welcome Ukrainian and Roma families, Slovak is not necessarily the primary language spoken for many of the children attending to these provisions. Interestingly it was not a topic strongly emerged from caregivers. By the contrary, all staff emphasised its relevance. At an organisational level, Play Hubs consider this factor when hiring staff, aiming to have a team capable of speaking the languages spoken within the community. In some cases, is seen as a facilitator that helps to connect and understand the children:

“I can speak both, Slovak and Ukrainian, so it's helpful, they (children) are more open, they believe, maybe each other, and also, individual, individual approach, to Ukrainian, and also to Slovak”. (Staff 1).

2. According to caregivers of children aged 0-3 years who attend to Play Hubs and Play Hub staff, what factors promote their continued participation?

Several factors emerged during interviews as consistent promoters for caregivers and their very young children to continue participating in Play Hubs. These factors were aspects that caregivers and children discovered and valued over time through their visits to the Play Hubs. Exploring reasons for sustained attendance and perceived benefits, both from caregivers and staff, provided insight into what this non-formal provision offers to caregivers and their young children, motivating their participation despite potential barriers. The results will be presented based on their relevance to the participants.

Educational opportunities

Caregivers unanimously valued the educational opportunities provided by Play Hubs for young children. They emphasized the meaningful developmental and learning experiences provided at this provision, where children have the chance to enhance their communication skills through interaction, engage in play, and share with others. In addition, caregivers expressed great value when seeing and understanding how much joy and developmental benefit it brings to their children:

“Because children meet other kids, and they can play together, and they build new relationships, and maybe they learn someone things, like drawing, or... And they learn to share toys”. (Caregiver 3).

Staff members underscored the importance of workshops and activities designed for children to promote their development. They emphasize the freedom children have to choose their activities, as participation is voluntary. Moreover, staff strive to provide individual attention to

each child's development process. Furthermore, staff mentioned providing learning activities for caregivers, such as enhancing parental skills and explaining the benefits of ECEC:

“Every two weeks we invited professionals to provide lectures and lessons. We always had pediatricists, nurses, psychologists, experienced mothers. I don't know, ladies from job centres for those who were searching job after maternity leave, maybe the rich variation of activities in play hubs besides play. That was what made them come and visit”. (Staff 3).

In addition, participation in the Play Hub appears to positively influence children's behaviour at home, with some caregivers considering it a motivating factor for improved behaviour:

“How to specify it? It's even good motivation for home behaviour of kids. If my kid is promised to go to Play Hub, he is looking forward to it and he even is able to modify behaviour at home and improve their behaviour. So, it's kind of factor of motivation, Play Hub to them”. (Caregiver 1).

Play Hub as a Safe, Positive and Relaxing Environment

Safe, flexible, relaxing, feels like home, ideal... all these words are used along the interviewees to describe their appreciations about the Play Hub for and their children. These spaces present themselves as a break from their routine, as well as a safe place for their children which relaxes them, as they rely in their kids having a good time and being supported by staff. These also holds a great impact on the incentives for them to keep attending. Staff perceptions are totally aligned, as they recognise caregivers appreciate feeling safe, that their kids are safe, they also appreciate to drink and eat something and their collaboration. They mentioned they try to work to create a positive and peaceful environment for participants, which mothers value:

“(The Play Hub is an) Oasis of peace [laughs]. Oasis of peace. Island of peace, you know (...) Because we can leave the house. We can go somewhere where we feel at home, safe, where it's warm where I can have a cup of coffee and play with the kids”. (Caregiver 4).

Socialization between caregivers (mothers)

“When the Play Hub opened, it was the first time for them (caregivers), the first chance to meet several mothers of the same age or similar age with their children of similar age 0 to 3. I can remember when we had activity purely for children 0 to 3, there were something like 17 mothers with toddlers. It was full of children on the carpet playing and screaming and crying, but it was very lively, very friendly and they all stayed for a long time. No one wanted to leave because they saw children happy and they were chatting, you know”. (Staff 3).

Having a space to establish social relationships between caregivers, preventing social isolation and enjoying from the group experience tends to be central factors for attendance and adherence across all participants perceptions. Caregivers greatly value having a space to meet with other mothers. This aspect serves as a significant motivation for them to attend. There are several reasons:

“Because I'm at home alone. And here is people that I can speak with them and talk. And I feel better when I meet some others as my children. Because I need to talk with older people as small. Because when I don't speak with older people, oldest, I will be nervous. Because all the time I speak with small. And it's... Language is different with adults and

children (...) [I can talk about] my problems. With... Problems with the children. And... What is a good...Results with the problem.” (Caregiver 3).

Caregivers enjoy the opportunity to connect with others, they like talking with parents, exchange advice, share experiences and life stories, make friends, and enjoy a cup of coffee in a place where they feel safe and relaxed, knowing their children are engaged in play and having a good time. In summary, the Play Hub offers an ideal environment for socializing, relaxation, and temporarily setting aside other responsibilities, while also fostering a supportive social network among caregivers:

“Because sometimes mothers can feel physically and mentally tired, and another mothers or parents can just talk to you and help with some advice, they can support you, as someone else knows and give you strength. It is very good”. (Caregiver 5)

Discussion

Overview of the findings

The results of this study indicate that various factors related to micro-, meso-, macro-, and exosystems influence Play Hub attendance for very young children and their caregivers. These factors, as perceived by caregivers of children aged 0-3 years and by staff working at Play Hubs, largely align with existing literature. Multiple factors can influence the decision-making of a single caregiver, highlighting the complexity of this issue. The most significant factors acting as barriers or facilitators varied depending on individual perspectives within each system. As Beatson et al. (2022), Lamb (2020), and Mayer et al. (2018) state, in the microsystem, significant factors including children’s health, information or interest in the Play

Hub, and cost were significantly mentioned through this study. Additional factors identified were the family's level of vulnerability and the presence of school-aged siblings. In the mesosystem, important factors include the relationships between family and ECEC staff, and social cohesion as highlighted by Beatson et al. (2022) and Gennetian et al. (2019). Caregivers' social networks and enrolment in formal ECEC also emerged as relevant factors at this level. In the macrosystem, factors described by Mayer et al. (2018), Mytton et al. (2014), Glover et al. (2021), and Gennetian et al. (2019), such as time availability (affected by caregivers' work schedules), and accessibility to Play Hubs, were significant for participants. Lastly, in the exosystem, cultural relevance and language issues were significant factors, as stated by Vandekerckhove and Aarssen (2020), Mytton et al. (2014), and Gennetian et al. (2019).

Regarding the sub-question factors highlighted by participants, as promoters for continued participation of caregivers and young children included the educational opportunities offered by this non-formal ECEC provision, the value of a safe, positive, and relaxing environment for families, and socialization among caregivers. This socialization was particularly valuable for sharing experiences, making friends, and enjoying a cup of coffee with other adults while their children were in a safe place.

The results of the study matched several of the researcher's expectations, but also provided new insights. On the first question, factors influencing attendance from participants perspective were childhood illness, social cohesion, as expected, and cost was, in fact, barely mentioned by caregivers. Accessibility to Play Hub and language issues confirmed their role as facilitators. In the other hand, even though it was expected, the factor of Parental Attitude was not mentioned during the interviews. Considering the sub-question, the most relevant factor in relation to the continued participation of very young children and their caregivers was aligned with expectations, as the educational opportunities was greatly mentioned by participants.

The results concerning the factors influencing participation, while not particularly surprising, align closely with existing literature, which predominantly focuses on formal ECEC settings. The consistency may arise as participants are part of the target group for ECEC provisions. Differences highlighted factors that Play Hubs are addressing, considering the vulnerability background of the attending families. For instance, cost is logically not a concern for caregivers since Play Hubs are free of charge, while address the barrier formal ECEC has for this group. Moreover, aspects of the TOY 4 Inclusion initiative, such as fostering social cohesion, emerged as noteworthy themes in participants' perceptions.

It is interesting to analyse results from Bronfenbrenner's (1979) perspective, where the combination of factors influencing different systems is unique for each individual. Given this uniqueness, a factor may be a barrier for some and a facilitator for others. For instance, having information about the Play Hub and its benefits can facilitate attendance, while the lack of such information can be a barrier for those unaware of the provision. From the Behavioural Economic model, findings suggest that for families facing vulnerabilities, these contexts may undermine their ability to attend Play Hubs. For example, having school-aged siblings can be a facilitator if the Play Hub is located in the same school, reducing logistical challenges for the caregiver. Conversely, if older children study far from home and the Play Hub, the caregiver might have to invest more resources in managing logistics, potentially prioritising picking up the older children and not attending the Play Hub with the youngest one.

Even though Mytton et al. (2014) describe that group experiences facilitated engagement in parenting programmes, what results a novel finding is the importance for caregivers, particularly mothers, to have a safe place where they and their children can interact with others. Socialization among mothers is significant within Play Hubs, which primarily focus on children

but also recognise the crucial role of maternal wellbeing in children's development and learning (Jeong et al., 2020).

Motherhood often appears to be a predominantly lonely role in modern Western societies (Chaudhary, 2023), where women tend to assume complete responsibility and dedication. Literature acknowledges the significance of mothers' roles in children's development and learning, particularly in the early years (Jeong et al., 2020). The demanding routine of motherhood can become a stressor that compromises mental wellbeing, consequently affecting emotional availability to meet the needs of very young children (Alvarenga et al., 2020).

Promoting the development of children is important, but equally crucial is focusing on the wellbeing of mothers. Play Hubs address these needs by providing mothers with opportunities to "escape" home duties, step out of their homes, enjoy a cup of coffee, and engage in conversation—activities typically associated with adults and likely participated in before becoming mothers. As noted by Chaudhary & Swanepoel (2023), motherhood should not be a solitary experience but a shared one. However, mothers in this context tend to lean towards isolation. Play Hubs provide the social support necessary for maintaining wellbeing.

Strengths

One notable strength of this study lies in the ability to conduct main part of the data collection at Play Hubs and interview, including in-person interviews with caregivers and staff. Visiting the country and the non-formal ECEC spaces, and engaging with participants and staff firsthand, provided deeper understanding of how this initiative operates.

Another strength it is find its methodological flexibility, which facilitated the collection of comprehensive information despite contextual challenges previously mentioned. The inclusion of mothers from diverse cultural backgrounds enriched the sample, offering varied perspectives. Additionally, the diversity of staff roles in Play Hubs contributed to a well-

rounded view of the initiative. Participants demonstrated genuine interest and willingness to share their experiences during interviews, without significant time constraints or distractions.

Limitations

However, there are limitations in this study. Constraints on fieldwork time and caregivers' availability for data collection may have impacted the depth of data gathered. For instance, due to the difficulties to gather caregivers to participate, the initial idea to conduct focus groups had to be adapted to semi-structured interviews. Furthermore, linguistic challenges due to multiple languages spoken may have led to nuances being lost in translation, especially considering that translators were the school principal and a teacher, which may have influenced the desirability of the responses. Additionally, the small sample size of participants, despite the efforts to increase it, limits the representation of a wider range of voices related to this topic, such as other caregivers (fathers, grandparents, etc) who attend to Play Hubs and those who not. It is also important to mention that during the data collection, caregivers and staff were aware Play Hubs were closing at midyear due to the end of grant funding. This information might have also predisposed the desirability of the responses, as participants could expect their answers could influence in the continuation of this initiative.

Implications of the findings

This research focused on understanding the factors that act as barriers, facilitators and promoters of continued participation of very young children aged 0 to 3 in non-formal ECEC. The findings largely align with existing literature suggesting that the participants are part of the target group for ECEC provisions. Differences highlighted factors that Play Hubs are addressing, considering the vulnerability levels of attending families. Significant factors that emerged include cost-free participation and providing a safe and relaxing environment for families. Although it may seem evident, policymakers should map communities beforehand to

understand the relevant factors influencing their target groups when developing policies or interventions. Additionally, the distinctive role of Play Hubs in incorporating caregivers into ECEC provisions should be considered as it provides a more integrated learning and developmental space for children and their support network, potentially having a greater impact on children's development and wellbeing. Practical measures, such as creating interactive spaces for caregivers and ensuring comfortable adult infrastructure, could enhance participation. Play Hubs should also emphasize caregiver participation in their outreach efforts to invite new participants.

These findings contribute to non-formal ECEC studies by identifying factors influencing attendance in a non-formal ECEC provision. Further studies could focus on the experiences of caregivers who do not attend any ECEC provision or include a wider sample to integrate a broader range of voices on this topic. Special attention should be given to the socialization between caregivers, as it is a key factor for continued participation, addressing mothers' needs, and promoting their wellbeing, which in turn positively influences the wellbeing of very young children.

Conclusion

Considering the limitations and strengths, this study provides valuable insights into the factors acting as barriers, facilitators, and promoters of continued participation of very young children aged 0 to 3 in non-formal ECEC. It highlights the importance of addressing factors that affect families with vulnerable backgrounds, as these factors were identified as key promoters of continued participation, ultimately contributing to greater child development and wellbeing. In addition, this study also recognises the valuable role of Play Hubs in the lives of children and caregivers, as well as the genuine commitment of individuals involved in this initiative.

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Annexes

Annex 1: Code tree

CATEGORY	SUBCATEGORY	CODES	CHILD CODE
	Microsystem	Caregivers attitudes	Barrier

Research Question: Factors acting as barriers or facilitators for very young children's attendance to Play Hub			Facilitator
		Caregivers mental health status	Barrier
			Facilitator
		Children's health	Barrier
			Facilitator
		Cost	Barrier
			Facilitator
		Family level of vulnerability	Barrier
			Facilitator
	Having siblings at school age	Barrier	
		Facilitator	
	Information about the Play Hub	Barrier	
		Facilitator	
	Interest on Play Hub	Barrier	
		Facilitator	
	Mesosystem	Family-staff relationship	Barrier
			Facilitator
		Enrolment to formal ECEC	Barrier
			Facilitator
		Social Integration	Barrier
			Facilitator
	Macrosystem	Group experience	Barrier
			Facilitator
		Social isolation	Barrier
			Facilitator
		Social network of caregivers	Barrier
			Facilitator
	Exosystem	Accesibility to Play Hub	Barrier
		Facilitator	
Staff level of training		Barrier	
	Facilitator		
	Time avalability	Barrier	
	Facilitator		
	Cultural Relevance	Barrier	
	Facilitator		
	Language issues	Barrier	
	Facilitator		

CATEGORY	CODES
Sub-Question: Factors continued attendance to Play Hubs	Educational opportunities
	Play Hub's positive atmosphere
	Socialization between caregivers (mothers)

Annex 2: Questions for semi-structured interviews

<u>Semi-structured interview questions for caregivers</u>
Initial questions:

1. For starting I would like to ask your first name and the age of your child(ren).
2. How did you find out about the Play Hub? How often do you attend?
3. What do you and your children usually do at the Play Hub?
4. What made you decide to start attending to the Play Hub with child(ren)?
5. If you had to describe the Play Hub to another caregiver of very young child(ren), what would you tell them?

Core questions:

1. What do you think your baby/toddler enjoys about the Play Hub? Is there anything that they don't like?
2. As caregiver of a child between 0-3 years old, what do you like about the Play Hub? Is there anything that you don't like?
3. Why do you and your child continue to attend the Play Hub?
4. How do you and your children benefit from attending?
5. Considering your living situation as a caregiver: (daily routine and lifestyle)
 - What makes it easy for you to go to the Play Hub?
 - What makes it difficult to go to the Play Hub?
 - Is there any trade-off for visiting the Play Hub?
6. As a caregiver of a very young child(ren), is there something about the Play Hub you would like to be different or be improved?
7. Why do you think other caregivers of a child(ren) from 0-3 do not attend or stopped attending the Play Hubs?
8. What do you think could be done to make parents of very young children access the Play Hubs?
9. **(Summarise the discussion).** Final last question! Is there anything else about the Play Hubs and very young children and their caregivers you would like to add?

We are done! I'm really grateful for having this conversation with you and thank you again for helping with this study!

Semi-structured interview questions for staff

1. How long have you been participating in this project (TOY 4 Inclusion and Play Hubs)?
2. What do you think about Play Hubs? What elements do you recognized as strengths and weaknesses?
3. How would you describe a Play Hub to a new family?
4. Why do you think children and caregivers between 0-3 participate in Play Hub?
5. Why do you think children between 0-3 have the lowest attendance (in comparison with other ages)?
6. What elements do you identified as barriers for the participation of this group (0-3) at Play Hubs?
7. What elements do you identified, makes it easier for parents and children (0-3) to participate in Play Hubs?
8. During the interviews, caregivers of children from 0 to 3 mentioned multiple barriers: distance to play hub, child illness, lack of time, lack of interest, etc. as barriers to go to the play hub. As a staff member what is your impression?
9. During the interviews, caregivers of children from 0 to 3 mentioned the short distance to play hub, their children enthusiasm, the possibility of children to play with peers and the possibility for caregivers to relax and share with other parents, as elements that facilitate their participation to play hub. As a staff member what is your impression?
10. What do you think are the reasons that make caregivers of children from 0 to 3 keep attending/participating to the Play Hubs?
11. What improvement, specifically for children from 0 to 3, do you consider it would be important to make?
12. We are finalising this interview; do you have any other comment or opinion you would like to express?