

The Early Childhood Education Crisis Across Socioeconomic Contexts: A Comparative Qualitative Study From Israel

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Abstract

Early Childhood Education (ECE) is critical for children's cognitive, emotional, and social development. In Israel, however, several indicators of ECE quality continue to rank among the lowest across OECD countries. Daycare centers operate under structural crisis conditions, marked by resource constraints, staff shortages, high workforce turnover, unstable regulation, low wages, and insufficient professional training. While previous research has documented these conditions primarily through quantitative indicators, this study offers a qualitative account of how the ECE crisis is experienced in the everyday work of daycare staff. Given the central role of high-quality ECE in narrowing socioeconomic gaps, the study compared daycare centers in two socioeconomically distinct localities: a disadvantaged, peripheral city and a middle-class kibbutz. Data collection combined semi-structured interviews, focus groups, participant observation, document analysis, and follow-up meetings across both settings. Findings reveal that the structural crisis characterizing Israeli ECE manifests in both settings, but in markedly different forms. In the disadvantaged urban setting, the crisis was experienced in an intensified, acute manner, compounding pre-existing social vulnerability. In the more affluent kibbutz, the same underlying complexities emerged under more privileged, “first-class” conditions, mitigated by strong local leadership, greater organizational flexibility, and closer coordination among professional supports. Overall, the comparison suggests that socioeconomic advantage does not eliminate the ECE crisis but reshapes its intensity and lived experience. This conclusion underscores the need to address national-level funding, supervision, and guidance, alongside local organizational and managerial practices.

Keywords: early childhood education, daycare crisis, socioeconomic inequality, qualitative research, Israel

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Introduction

Early childhood education (ECE) is widely recognized as an important influence on children's development (Britto et al., 2017; Conceição et al., 2025; Daelmans et al., 2017) and as a means of reducing gaps created by social and economic inequality (Heckman, 2006, 2012; Solang et al., 2024). High-quality ECE settings are associated with cognitive, linguistic, social, and emotional gains that persist well beyond the preschool years. These gains are particularly important in low-income communities, where access to high-quality ECE could serve as a key mechanism for promoting equity (Solang et al., 2024).

In Israel, ECE for children from birth to age three operates largely outside the formal education system, through a fragmented structure of municipal, private, nonprofit, and cooperative daycare settings. This fragmented system is supervised and regulated by multiple government authorities and is characterized by persistently low-quality indicators relative to OECD countries (OECD, 2017; Vaknin, 2020). Although participation in early childhood programs in Israel is high, the system's low-quality structure limits ECE settings' ability to identify developmental challenges early and promote equity from the beginning of life. Studies examining the quality of Israeli ECE consistently report low standards: large group sizes, high child-to-caregiver ratios, chronic staff shortages, high employee turnover, insufficient professional training, and limited attention to children's emotional needs (Koren-Karie et al., 2005; Vaknin, 2020; Zano, 2020). These conditions point to a systemic crisis in the provision of quality ECE. While this crisis characterizes the Israeli ECE system as a whole, its everyday manifestations and long-term meanings may differ across distinct socioeconomic contexts.

Against this background, the present study compared two qualitative case studies conducted in contrasting socioeconomic settings. The first case examined the everyday work of caregivers and managers in a socioeconomically disadvantaged, peripheral city. The second was conducted in a middle-class kibbutz community. The comparison was guided by two questions: (1) How is the ECE crisis experienced in the everyday work of daycare staff and managers across socioeconomically advantaged and disadvantaged settings? and (2) What structural and symbolic conditions shape the form and severity of the crisis across these settings? By placing the two cases side by side, the study aimed to move beyond system-level quantitative indicators of the ECE crisis to develop a situated understanding of how socioeconomic inequality shapes the everyday realities of early childhood education and care.

Literature Review

The Significance of Early Childhood Education

Early childhood experiences have long-term effects (Parise et al., 2023; Short et al., 2019; Xu et al., 2025). Infants and toddlers, especially from birth to age three, build their cognitive, emotional, and social worlds (Britto et al., 2017; Conceição et al., 2025; Daelmans et al., 2017; Zontag et al., 2020). Developmental gaps that emerge in early years tend to accumulate over time (Kuijper & Johnstone, 2019). Research has therefore highlighted the importance of investments made during the first years of life (Harrison et al., 2012; Heckman, 2006, 2012; Moore & West, 2016).

Participation in high-quality ECE programs has been shown to significantly enhance young children's development, while also improving long-term educational, economic, and health outcomes (Denham & Brown, 2010; Zontag et al., 2020). However, considerable variation

exists between daycare centers, influencing their capacity to create high-quality care. This variation is shaped by structural factors, such as child-to-caregiver ratios and group size (Bowne et al., 2017), as well as by caregivers' training, education, and professional experience (Burchinal et al., 2016). The quality of daycare centers improves when caregivers have higher levels of formal education and professional training (Lin & Magnuson, 2018) and when they understand early socio-emotional development and respond sensitively to young children's emotional cues (Sabol & Pianta, 2012).

Taken together, research indicates that children's development and outcomes are strongly influenced by the quality of daycare environments and the nature of caregiver-child interactions (Muennig et al., 2011; Phillips et al., 2011; Solang et al., 2024; Von Suchodoletz et al., 2023). Investment in ECE yields multiple educational, economic, emotional, and social benefits, some of which are expressed later in life. These benefits are particularly critical for children at risk. Research shows that ECE has a significantly more positive effect on toddlers from low socioeconomic backgrounds than on their more affluent peers. Thus, when made universally accessible, quality ECE has the potential to reduce developmental disparities and promote social equality (Solang et al., 2024).

Early Childhood Education in Israel

In Israel, education for children under the age of three is provided through several types of institutions, including daycare centers, family daycares, toddler centers, and private kindergartens. Daycare centers, which are the focus of the present paper, are supervised frameworks operated by national organizations, nonprofit associations, local authorities, or private providers. They are commonly classified into three categories: small settings (7–20 children), medium-sized settings (21–50 children), and large settings (51 children or more) (Madhala et al., 2021).

Until 2022, formal responsibility for daycare centers rested primarily with the Ministry of Labor, Welfare, and Social Services. In early 2022, responsibility for pedagogical supervision, staff training, and the development of daycare facilities began to be transferred to the Ministry of Education. However, other areas remain under the authority of different government bodies: the Ministry of Welfare and Social Services retains responsibility for toddlers with disabilities and children defined as being at risk, while the Ministry of Economy administers subsidies and eligibility for publicly supported placements (Rabinowitz, 2023). National daycare organizations and local authorities also continue to play significant roles in the management and operation of settings (Zano, 2020). Consequently, despite the transfer of formal educational responsibility to the Ministry of Education, the system remains divided among multiple governmental and organizational actors.

This fragmented structure is closely related to multiple problems of regulation, funding, and professionalization, which are common in the Israeli ECE system. Although participation in early childhood settings in Israel is high, the quality of provision has repeatedly been described as low (Vaknin, 2020). Public investment in ECE remains among the lowest in OECD countries (OECD, 2017). In addition, regulation has historically been partial and uneven, particularly in privately operated settings, where uniform requirements concerning staff qualifications, training, and suitability have not always been enforced (Madhala et al., 2021; Rabinowitz, 2019). Even in supervised daycare centers, caregivers may begin working without prior professional training, formal certifications, or a systematic assessment of their personal suitability for working with infants and toddlers. Moreover, the basic training provided by

supervising organizations is often insufficiently responsive to the distinctive developmental and emotional needs of young children (Zano, 2020).

Studies of Israeli daycare centers have identified multiple structural and pedagogical difficulties, including large group sizes, high child-to-caregiver ratios, inadequate professional training, limited attention to children's individual emotional needs, and shortages of qualified and experienced staff (Koren-Karie et al., 2005; Vaknin, 2020; Zano, 2020). These problems are intensified by low wages, poor employment conditions, difficulties in recruitment and retention, and weak or inconsistent supervision mechanisms (Rabinowitz, 2023). These conditions have contributed to an ongoing crisis in the ECE sector, expressed not only in measurable indicators such as staffing ratios and workforce turnover, but also in the limited capacity of daycare centers to provide stable, developmentally appropriate, and emotionally responsive care (Vaknin, 2020; Zano, 2020).

These manifestations are documented in the literature mainly from a structural perspective, with quantitative indicators such as staffing ratios, wage levels, and turnover rates (Rabinowitz, 2023; Vaknin, 2020; Zano, 2020). While these measures capture the wide scope of the Israeli ECE crisis, they offer limited insight into how this crisis is experienced in the everyday work of daycare staff and managers. The present study seeks to deepen the understanding of the ECE crisis by examining its concrete, lived manifestations in daycare centers. Informed by the claim that socioeconomic status and resources may shape the concrete quality and experience of children inside educational environments (Hatfield et al., 2014; Wei et al., 2021), it compares the consequences of the ECE crisis across two contrasting socioeconomic contexts.

Methodology

The study employed a comparative qualitative case study design. Two daycare settings, located within the same geographic region in northern Israel, were selected to represent different socioeconomic backgrounds. Case 1 was conducted in a socioeconomically disadvantaged, peripheral city, and Case 2 in a middle-class kibbutz. Findings from both cases were then analyzed jointly through a cross-case comparative lens.

Research Sites and Participants

Case 1: A Disadvantaged Peripheral City

The first case study was conducted across daycare centers operating in a small city with approximately 30,000 residents. According to the Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics (2021), the city is ranked in socioeconomic cluster 5 out of 10.

The city's ECE system comprises medium- and large-sized supervised daycare centers, managed by various private and nonprofit providers. A municipal ECE team oversees these providers and provides them with professional guidance and support. Members of the municipal ECE team explained that a significant number of children enrolled in the city's supervised daycare centers come from lower-middle and working-class families, many of whom face various socioeconomic challenges (such as single-parent households, immigrant status, or large family size).

Data collection focused on five daycare centers, all classified as medium- to large-sized. Each center was organized into two or three separate age groups. Each group had one lead caregiver

and two to three additional staff members. Each daycare center also had a general manager who was responsible for administrative and financial management, human resources, parent relations, and so on.

Case 2: A Middle-Class Kibbutz

The second case study was conducted in a kibbutz community, also located in northern Israel, but unlike Case 1, classified as middle- to upper-middle-class in socioeconomic terms. The kibbutz's ECE system was characterized by a cooperative communal structure, and the caregiving workforce was employed directly by the kibbutz rather than by an external municipal body or nonprofit providers.

Children from birth to age three were cared for across three separate age-based settings: an infant center (birth to one year), a toddler group (one to two years), and a young kindergarten group (two to three years). Each setting had a lead caregiver (or, in the case of the young kindergarten group, a certified kindergarten teacher), along with three to four additional caregivers. The system as a whole was headed by a manager who served as a senior member of the kibbutz management and was responsible for all ECE-related matters.

The child population in the kibbutz's daycare settings comprised two distinct groups. The first consisted of children whose parents lived in the kibbutz and were part of its community. The second consisted of children whose parents resided in nearby localities, and they paid substantial fees to enroll their children in the kibbutz's ECE system. These parents were, in most cases, career-oriented individuals seeking a setting that would provide their children with a calm environment for extended daily hours, while also offering a solution for workdays that fell during the formal education system's holidays. Kibbutz-based ECE systems are widely perceived as addressing both of these needs. They are often regarded in Israel as high-quality frameworks, known for values-based education, frequent outdoor activities in nature, and considerable resources. In addition, they offer extended hours of operation during school holidays and vacations.

Data Collection and Analysis

Chronologically, the study was conducted in two phases: first in the urban locality (2020–2021), and later in the kibbutz (2024–2025). This sequence reflects the study's broader rationale: having documented the ECE crisis in a disadvantaged, working-class setting, the research team sought to examine how the same structural crisis is experienced in a middle-class community to identify points of similarity and difference between the two settings.

Data collection combined participant observations, semi-structured in-depth interviews, focus groups, and document analysis, supplemented by follow-up contact via phone calls and Zoom meetings. Participants included ECE municipal administrators, the kibbutz head of the ECE system, daycare managers, and caregivers. Table 1 and Table 2 summarize the data sources for Case 1 and Case 2, respectively.

Table 1*Data Collection Activities, Case 1 (Disadvantaged City)*

Data Source	Interviews	Focus Groups	Additional Meetings
Daycare managers	5	-	-
Caregivers	-	5	-
Municipal ECE administrators	2	-	-
Follow-up contacts (phone/Zoom)	-	-	6
Total	7	5	6

Table 2*Data Collection Activities, Case 2 (Middle-Class Kibbutz)*

Data Source	Interviews	Focus Groups	Additional Meetings
Municipal ECE administrator	1	-	1
Head of the kibbutz ECE system	1	-	2
Lead caregivers	-	1	-
Caregivers	-	2	-
Total	2	3	3

In both cases, interviews and focus groups were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed thematically, first within each case and then across cases. The cross-case comparative stage focused on identifying themes that were shared across the two settings, as well as themes that diverged in form, intensity, or meaning.

Ethical Considerations

Both case studies received approval from the institutional ethics committee prior to data collection. Participation was voluntary and based on informed consent. To protect participants' anonymity, all identifying details have been removed. In addition, participants are identified by role only (e.g., “head of the kibbutz ECE unit,” “lead caregiver”) rather than by name.

Findings – A Shared Crisis, Different Conditions

Across both cases, participants described a shared set of structural difficulties - staff shortages, demanding workloads, inconsistent professional training, and tensions in relationships with parents. The shared problems confirmed that the crisis documented in the disadvantaged city was not unique to that setting. At the same time, the two cases diverged in the intensity, visibility, and lived meaning of these problems, as detailed below.

Staff Shortage and Workforce Instability

In both settings, participants described a persistent difficulty recruiting and retaining qualified caregivers. In the disadvantaged city, this shortage was described as acute and persistent, forcing managers to operate with higher child-to-caregiver ratios for extended periods and to absorb the resulting workload personally. In the kibbutz, staff shortages were buffered by the kibbutz's ability to draw on a wider pool of potential substitute caregivers, including, for example, older kibbutz members and women with disabilities seeking supported employment.

The head of the kibbutz's ECE system mentioned, for instance, the support she receives from the kibbutz's seniors' club: *"They are an integral part of the work routine – of the children's daily life, of ceremonies, of everything. It gives you that extra something."*

Wages and Employment Structure

Caregivers in both settings were employed at or near minimum wage, reflecting a national pattern in which ECE caregiving is compensated as low-skilled labor regardless of the socioeconomic context in which it takes place. In the disadvantaged city, low wages compounded broader financial precarity and were repeatedly cited by caregivers and managers as a central driver of turnover. For instance, one daycare manager noted the mismatch between the demanding nature of the job and the minimal compensation: *"There is a huge gap between what we do and the responsibility we carry, and the wage, that fails to compensate for it."*

A lead caregiver at another daycare also echoed this perceived gap: *"to give everything for the benefit of the children and receive nothing [for yourself]."*

In the kibbutz, employment was structured differently: caregivers were employed directly by the kibbutz rather than through an external municipal or private body, and the head of the kibbutz's ECE system held discretion to authorize additional compensation or benefits (for example, in the form of additional paid vacation days or holiday gifts) and to absorb budgetary deficits at the community level. This arrangement did not eliminate low base wages. Nevertheless, it reduced the sense of employment precarity and unfairness described by caregivers in the disadvantaged city.

Trust and Tension Between Caregivers and Parents

In both cases, caregivers described their relationships with parents as a possible source of professional strain, shaped by parents' anxiety about entrusting very young children to the care of others and by caregivers' awareness of being closely, and at times suspiciously, observed. In the disadvantaged city, caregivers described a heightened sense of being viewed with distrust, including concerns about being perceived as potentially neglectful or abusive. This sense of suspicion added an emotional burden to already demanding daily routines.

In the kibbutz, caregivers likewise described the need to actively maintain parents' trust and, at times, to apologize or justify their decisions or actions. Nevertheless, this tension was described as occurring within a broader context of communal familiarity and long-term relationships between families and daycare staff, which tempered its intensity. In addition, tensions with parents were tempered by the significant role of the head of the kibbutz's ECE system, who maintained meaningful relationships with both staff members (a matter that will be further elaborated below) and parents. The head of the ECE system's mode of operation created a

bridge between caregivers and parents when needed and, no less important, provided ongoing support for caregivers in their interactions with parents.

Professional Training and the Coordination of Guidance

Consistent with the broader difficulties of the Israeli ECE system described throughout the literature review, access to professional training and pedagogical guidance was inconsistent and difficult to obtain in both settings. In the disadvantaged city, the lack of sufficient training was accompanied by overlapping and at times contradictory guidance from multiple supervising bodies, which produced confusion about expectations and reduced the practical value of the support that was available.

In the kibbutz, on the other hand, caregivers had access to a more coordinated support structure, including a pedagogical advisor affiliated with the Kibbutz Movement (*Hatnua HaKibbutzit*), working alongside the head of the kibbutz's ECE system. While the kibbutz's ECE system was also characterized by insufficient training for the caregivers and lack of formal education, the degree of coordination among the professionals involved was markedly higher than in the disadvantaged city. In addition, the kibbutz had the resources to send caregivers for further professional training and education.

Leadership and a Sense of Belonging

A theme unique to the kibbutz case was the centrality of a single, stable leadership figure – the head of the kibbutz's ECE system – who was described by caregivers as a source of continuity, fairness, and personal investment in their well-being. Several caregivers reported that their decision to work, or continue working, in the kibbutz's daycare settings was tied specifically to their relationship with this individual, describing a sense of belonging to a small, family-like organizational unit rather than to an anonymous municipal system.

This was echoed in a focus group with caregivers, one of whom recalled: *“If we don't feel well, she [the head of the ECE system] tells us immediately to go home, she'll find someone else [to replace us].”* In response, another caregiver explained how this responsiveness sustained her motivation: *“It gives you the motivation to keep working. It is the kind of support that keeps you from burning out.”*

No equivalent figure or organizational structure was described in the disadvantaged city, where responsibility for daycare oversight was distributed across a municipal department without a comparably personal or stable point of leadership.

Discussion and Conclusion

Taken together, the findings support the view that the structural crisis affecting Israeli ECE – staff shortage, low wages, inconsistent training, and strained caregiver-parent trust – is not confined to socioeconomically disadvantaged settings but extends into middle-class communities as well. This finding extends previous accounts of the Israeli ECE crisis (Madhala et al., 2021; Rabinowitz, 2019; Vaknin, 2020), which have documented the scope and severity of the crisis primarily through quantitative data and system-level indicators. Building on this body of research, the present study examined how the ECE crisis is enacted and experienced in the everyday practice of caregivers and managers across different socioeconomic environments.

While the ECE crisis in Israel appears to be widespread, the comparison shows that socioeconomic status and resources shape the way it is experienced and functions in practice. As might be expected from studies showing that the quality of ECE is associated with neighborhood resources, community socioeconomic conditions, and program funding (Hatfield et al., 2014; Wei et al., 2021), the kibbutz's greater organizational, financial, and social resources appeared to buffer the effects of the ECE crisis. A wider pool of potential substitute caregivers reduced the practical impact of staff shortage, and discretionary authority over compensation reduced the sense of employment precarity. In addition, better-coordinated professional support increased the practical value of available training, and a stable, personally invested leadership figure fostered a sense of belonging that was absent in the disadvantaged city. These mechanisms suggest that the form and severity of the ECE crisis are shaped by the organizational and communal resources available. Thus, the findings offer a complementary lens for understanding how social inequality operates within ECE systems.

In sum, the comparative findings indicate that socioeconomic advantage does not eliminate the ECE structural crisis but substantially reshapes its intensity and lived expression through organizational buffering mechanisms. For policy, this suggests that interventions addressing the ECE crisis need to attend not only to system-wide structural factors such as wages and staffing ratios, but also to the organizational and community-level resources – leadership continuity, staffing flexibility, and coordinated professional support – that appear capable of buffering their effects. For research, the study suggests that future work on the ECE workforce would benefit from deliberately comparative designs spanning multiple socioeconomic contexts, in order to move beyond aggregate, system-level indicators toward a fuller understanding of how inequality shapes the everyday experience of early childhood education.

Limitations

Several limitations should be noted. First, the two cases differ in the volume and depth of data collected, with the kibbutz case comprising a smaller number of interviews and focus groups than the disadvantaged-city case. This asymmetry may limit the extent to which the full range of experiences in the kibbutz setting has been captured. Second, data for the two cases were collected during different periods (2020–2021 and 2024–2025), a window during which the governance of Israeli ECE underwent institutional changes. Future comparative research would benefit from collecting data within the same timeframe to more clearly isolate the role of socioeconomic context from broader temporal and regulatory shifts. Third, as with any qualitative case study, the findings are not intended to be statistically generalizable to all socioeconomically advantaged or disadvantaged ECE settings in Israel, but rather to offer analytically transferable insight into the mechanisms through which socioeconomic context shapes the ECE crisis.

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Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

During the preparation of this manuscript, the authors used Claude (Anthropic) to assist with organizing and drafting sections of the text based on the authors' own prior writing. In addition,

Grammarly was used to assist with language editing. All scientific content, analysis, and interpretation remain the sole responsibility of the authors, who reviewed and edited all AI-assisted text and take full responsibility for the content of the publication.

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