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Comparative studies of early childhood education and care: beyond methodological nationalism

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ABSTRACT

With early childhood inhabiting a firm position on policy agendas, an emerging global consensus acknowledges the need for research into early childhood education and care (ECEC) systems. However, standardised approaches to comparison dominate the field. These studies tend to be grounded in methodological nationalism, assuming nation states as the natural and necessary unit to study social phenomena. I argue the national unit is not sufficient to understand ECEC systems and that we need to consider subnational levels (district and local). Subnational approaches enable the reconstruction of the different actors and institutions at play in all levels of ECEC systems. This movement beyond methodological nationalism requires a shift towards integrated approaches and territorialised policy analysis. I illustrate my argument drawing on qualitative data from two subnational studies in Argentina. I discuss the conceptual and methodological implications for international comparison and comparative research in the early childhood field.

KEYWORDS

Early childhood education and care; early childhood policies; early childhood systems; methodological nationalism; subnational research; comparative studies

Introduction

With Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC)[1] gaining momentum as a policy priority in the Global South and North, there is a well-stablished consensus around the need for systems research, and for systemic perspectives in early childhood research in general. Systemic approaches acknowledge that ECEC does not exist in a vacuum, but rather in a system that connects policy, practice, and research across different actors and actants (Kagan 2020; Urban et al. 2012; Kagan 2018). Early childhood services not only include ECEC provision but also family leave, parenting programmes, income transfers, and healthcare. In this paper, I focus exclusively on ECEC systems as including all types of ECEC provision, understanding they are part of a larger system aimed at ensuring children's rights and needs.

However, research on ECEC systems is dominated by cross-national standardised comparisons, some promoted by international organisations such as the OECD (OECD 2020;

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OCDE 2015). These large-scale approaches tend to focus on the nation state as the sole unit of analysis, often erasing disparities within countries to expedite comparison. In doing so, they overlook the 'messiness' of ECEC systems (Urban 2014). ECEC systems are the result of a more or less connected collection of policies, programmes and initiatives that often have separate ownership, provision, regulation and funding (Dale 2007). For instance, in South America, a three-year-old child may attend a for-profit *creche* indirectly subsidised by a local social welfare authority; a state-managed preschool fully regulated by the provincial department of education; or a community-based nursery not regulated or funded by any state level, among other possibilities.

Arguably, the focus on the national state as a reference and starting point hinders the myriad of subnational ECEC realities and disparities. Although the role of subnational levels and their implications have been widely discussed in the social sciences (Giraudy, Moncada, and Snyder 2021) and in Comparative Education specifically, this has been almost absent from the early childhood debate. Along these lines I aim to contribute to opening a debate around the need for broadening our approach to research on ECEC policies and systems to integrate the subnational scales both theoretically and empirically. I argue the national unit is not sufficient to approach ECEC policies and systems building on a field-specific argument that reconstructs the wider discussion from the social sciences to consider the particularities of early childhood research. I point to the possibilities that subnational approaches may bring to ECEC research and suggest national and subnational approaches should complement each other to advance our understanding of ECEC policies and systems.

The article is organised as follows. Starting from the current state-of-the-art, in the first section I describe the limitations of methodological nationalism and I point to the need for rescaling downward to subnational levels. The subnational is analysed as an arena where the national and the local manifest as interconnected. Following, I discuss two encompassing movements: one towards integrated systems' perspectives and another towards territorialised policy approaches. Then, I draw on research into the case of Argentina to illustrate the possibilities of subnational approaches. Finally, I reflect on the possibilities of subnational approaches to contribute to fully comprehend (and compare) ECEC systems.

The subnational levels: moving beyond methodological nationalism in ECEC research?

In the education field, there is a growing tendency towards standardised comparisons of countries, actively promoted by international organisations, such as the OECD. The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) is probably a paradigmatic example, now with its own assessment of early childhood, the International Early Learning Study (IELS) (Auld and Morris 2019; Urban and Swadener 2016). In early childhood, the OECD has dramatically changed its approach over recent years. After two landmark reports, *Starting Strong* I and II (OECD 2001, 2006) that offered a contextualised insight into early childhood systems, the organisation's approach shifted towards decontextualised large-scale comparisons (OECD 2012, 2017a, 2017b, 2015). That said, this approach is not unique to international organisations: standardised cross-national comparisons are also present in the production of knowledge in the education field in general, and in the early childhood field in particular.

Cross-national comparisons, and the nation state as the default unit of analysis in early childhood research, can be viewed as a manifestation of methodological nationalism. As Chernilo (2011, 2) argues, when methodological nationalism is present 'the nation state is treated as the natural and necessary representation of modern society'. The paradox of this paradigm is that, while no one admits being committed to it, 'its presence is allegedly found in every corner of the contemporary social scientific landscape' (Chernilo 2011, 5).

For decades, the nation state has been the basis of comparison not only in education, but in the social sciences in general (Amelina 2012; Martin, McCann, and Purcell 2003). This has meant that the prevailing theoretical and methodological approaches have rarely challenged the hegemony of the nation state as the sole theoretical reference and appropriate empirical focus of analysis (Giraudy and Niedzwiecki 2021). Studies at subnational level are relatively few given the continued emphasis on the national. There are few references to studies at the sub-national level in the field of Comparative Education in this journal (view, for example, Broschek 2021; Fry 1996). In fact, the nation state is one of the core concepts in the project of modernity, which partly explains why scholars struggle to envisage alternatives to it. Hence, methodological nationalism builds on the assumption that the nation state is the container of 'society' and therefore *the* appropriate unit of analysis in social sciences.

The fact that much data is produced at the national level contributes to the attractiveness of the national for researchers and organisations. The national scale of data creates a reality that we are able to address and describe, and internationally compare – e.g. the OECD Family Database, which includes a section that compares ECEC between nations. Thus, subnational policies and politics have remained below the theoretical and empirical radar of much of the mainstream research in social sciences, education, and early childhood. As a result, Harbers et al. (2021) identify

> a 'streetlight effect' or 'drunkard's search bias'. Just as the midnight drunkard is looking for his lost keys under the streetlight because that is the only place where he can see, scholars have focused their investigations on questions where data is available (7).

In the last decades, the limitations of methodological nationalism have been extensively criticised by social scientists – see, for example, Mongia (2012). The post-national movement of policy and politics sparked off a debate around rescaling in many branches of social sciences, including education (Lingard and Rawolle 2011). While most arguments focused on moving from the 'national eye' to the 'global eye' (Nóvoa and Yariv-Mashal 2003), others argued for scaling social research downward (Snyder 2001), as a counterbalancing movement. In the education field, for example, the movement away from methodological nationalism predominantly focused on the relationship between the global and the national level. Subnational levels – in education, but specially in early childhood education – received less attention.

Nonetheless, some of the most relevant criticisms of methodological nationalism point to the importance of the subnational. Within the frame of methodological nationalism comparing societies becomes equivalent to comparing nation states (their economic, cultural, and social systems) which, in turn, contributes to their homogenisation (Dale and Robertson 2009). Clear examples of this are references to the national German or Indian systems (both federal countries) where education and ECEC are not a national but a subnational matter. While these differences may be acknowledged in some research

outputs – often in the form of a caveat around the importance of context and/or the federal or decentralised organisation of a certain country – they are rarely a core consideration in educational studies (Dale 2005). As Chernilo (2011) argues, methodological nationalism is, in fact, a reductionist way of thinking.

Hence, methodological nationalism may act as a veil that conceals subnational disparities, and therefore the overall functioning of systems. Not considering diversity and inequality within countries might lead to over simplistic and even reductionist explanations and claims around countries' systems. Some have warned against the potentially 'misleading' nature of aggregate cross-national data and analyses (Fry 1996, 355). Subnational research addresses the district and local levels which, in contrast to the national level (and even the global), enables far more complex approaches, potentially leading to more meaningful comparisons and understandings.

Subnational levels gained presence in the policy sphere over the last decades, when countries in the Global South and North transferred and/or started sharing responsibility with the intermediate and local levels in many policy fields (Di Virgilio 2021; Brenner 2004; Eaton 2021), including education and early childhood. This process entailed a devolution of the political authority towards subnational political units (Giraudy and Niedzwiecki 2021); that is, the actors, institutions, and processes that operate within countries (Snyder 2001).

As Dale (2005) and others have noted, this shift does not suggest a dissolution of national states, but 'a developing functional, scalar and sectoral division of the labour of educational governance' (132). That is, a distribution of the responsibility to govern across various levels – the international, the regional, the national, the provincial/district, the local. While these levels are distinct, they are inherently interconnected and entangled (Giraudy and Niedzwiecki 2021); actors and institutions from one level shape and are shaped by other scales and levels.

On top of accounting for these recent policy changes, it is necessary to acknowledge that the nation state never 'did it all' in education or early childhood (Dale 2007). In federal countries, where subnational levels are intrinsically part of the decision-making process, the importance of such levels has always been manifest – the district level has continuously played a critical role in most policies, including early childhood (Neuman 2005). This means subnational political units have had a prominent place in systems and policies of at least twenty-five countries in the world, whose systems represent 40% of the world's population (e.g. Brazil, Germany, India, Russia, the United States of America).

Federal countries, albeit an unavoidable starting point, are not alone in shaping policy at subnational level. Other countries and areas of policy, too, operate through a decentralised structure. This phenomenon is particularly relevant in ECEC – as acknowledged by the OECD (2019), ECEC is more decentralised than any other level of education. Even in unitary countries, such as Albania or Lithuania, ECEC provision and funding may be a subnational matter (Rigby et al. 2004; Neuman 2005; Haddad 2016). Multi-level governance models are also in place in countries such as Denmark, Italy and Poland (Bertram and Pascal 2016). The importance of subnational levels is likely to be 'discovered' by researchers when they shift their gaze towards them, as I will illustrate with the examples from Argentina.

In early childhood, scholars and policy makers have argued for ECEC provision to be local, while not necessarily acknowledging its existing local components. After all, ECEC

is inherently a local phenomenon (Urban et al. 2012); even when governance is centralised, the local territory is involved in ECEC in one way or another. As opposed to primary education where national states played a major role from the nineteenth century onwards, in many countries ECEC was not a priority until the 1990s (Kamerman 2007). Part of the ECEC provision emerged from the grassroots level and the private sector, with the national state coming onto the scene only later, often to regulate what was already taking place in the ECEC landscape – see, for example, Townley (2018).

In countries with fragmented systems, ECEC is divided into a multitude of disconnected services under the auspices of different government levels (national, regional, local) and sectors (social welfare, education, health). In these systems, the State's involvement in ECEC is not cohesive; rather, it is full of vacuums, overlaps and parallel disjointed pathways. Even systems administratively integrated at the national level may show great variability at subnational level, such as, for example, the case of Brazil in Segatto (2015). As a result, some argue a 'polycentric, multiscalar, and non-isomorphic configuration of statehood has been created' (Brenner 2004) which, again, speaks to the importance of rethinking the scale of research in the early childhood field.

The argument I wish to advance here is that, in the early childhood field, the national state is not sufficient to account for the complexities of the ECEC landscape. Subnational research has the potential to shed new light on ECEC policies and systems. Subnational approaches are 'a strategy of social science inquiry that focuses on actors, organisations, institutions, structures and processes located in territorial units inside countries, that is, below the national and international levels' (Giraudy, Moncada, and Snyder 2019, 7). Integrating the subnational in ECEC research may contribute to making diversity visible, as well as acknowledging and addressing inequalities.

Having said that, it becomes necessary to clarify two points. First, federal countries constitute paradigmatic cases and excellent entry points to explore the analytical potential of subnational units. In these countries, the distribution of political authority makes the presence and role of subnational levels in ECEC policy distinguishable and visible. However, the need for a shift extends, in one way or another, to the study of *all* ECEC systems. As Giraudy and Niedzwiecki (2021) argue, subnational research 'can be applied to every single place in the world, irrespective of whether these countries are unitary or federal, decentralised or centralised' (6). Thus, my argument points to the need to acknowledge the multiple territorial levels involved in policies and systems in order to integrate them into early childhood research.

Second, it is important to state that subnational approaches are not a new 'ism' in education research, drawing on a romanticisation of the local. The call for integrating the subnational spheres does not deny the importance of the national level – or the supranational, for that matter. It does claim, however, that given the nature, developments, traditions, and history of ECEC policies and systems, subnational levels need to be made visible in early childhood research. This entails rethinking research starting points, questions, conceptual underpinnings, and methods in the ECEC field in order to better understand ECEC policies and systems.

Subnational levels (local, district/provincial) may also be relevant starting points to reconstruct, upwards, the actors and levels of ECEC systems and their relationships. The subnational can be the starting point to search for the footprints of the different levels and actors of ECEC systems. Having said that, there is still a need in the ECEC field to

enhance national and international understandings of specific ECEC issues (e.g. workforce requirements). Some of these issues are yet to be located and analysed from a national, historical framework and context. Contextualised cross-national comparisons, along with subnational cases, may shed light on issues still unexplored in ECEC.

There are two major concomitant movements that are necessary for, and implied in, this downward rescaling. First, the movement beyond sectoralisation, that is, the tendency to address and interpret the system by considering only one of its pieces, usually 'education' or 'care'. If we are to understand ECEC systems at the district and local level, we need to include and recognise all the different components of ECEC systems through integrated systems approaches. Second, the movement towards territorialised policy analysis requires overcoming classic perspectives in policy analysis that focus on one or more phases of the policy process. Territorialisation moves from tracking policy phases to reconstructing policy footprints.

The pieces of the jigsaw puzzle: moving towards integrated systems approaches

Many countries around the world (e.g. Australia, Czech Republic, Peru) have evolved into fragmented ECEC systems (Neuman 2005). This fragmentation led to parallel, and often disconnected, traditions and identities in the field – often 'care' and 'education'. The administrative division usually responds to the age of the child, or it may follow the socioeconomic background of families, especially in countries in the Global South (Guevara and Cardini 2021). Although some countries (e.g. Brazil, Jamaica, New Zealand) have moved towards the integration of ECEC services over the last decades (Kaga, Bennett, and Moss 2010), the education and care divide continues in the field. Even ECEC, the acronym widely used in the English-speaking context, reinforces the existence of a binary distinction between education and care.

This divide is still recreated by policy makers and researchers alike contributing to sectoralisation. The tendency towards sectoralisation is one of the distinctive features of the early childhood field, as Robertson (2011) explains:

> … sectoralisation refers to a set of institutions and actors whose activities are bundled together […] and it is the […] bordering that defines what is inside and what is outside that which comes to call itself "the sector" […]. Bordering, boundary management and internal norm-setting and the reproduction of norms help to make visible who can be counted as a legitimate actor and who is to be excluded (293).

In turn, sectoralisation is a process of insulation that involves black-boxing (making invisible) whatever remains outside certain boundaries. Because of sectoralisation, research studies and policies tend to draw on what is claimed to be 'the sector' – the 'education' or the 'childcare' sector. Complex theoretical differences between the concepts of education and care have thus been translated into overly simplistic binary definitions. This simplification has resulted in a reductionist view of the system as comprising two opposing (or standalone) sectors. Other (more fragmented) configurations are rendered invisible by these binaries, as I discuss elsewhere (Guevara under evaluation).

This configuration of the ECEC field has significantly impacted research, policy, and practice. The reinforcement of disjointed and siloed approaches has been challenged

by several scholars (Adlerstein and Pardo 2017; Urban et al. 2019). In early childhood research, this upholds disciplinary silos that tend to interact only with those within 'the sector' – 'education' researchers tend to focus on 'education' settings and overlook 'care' settings, while the scene is replicated in the 'care' sector. Thus, the production of academic knowledge is marked by a sectoral lens that, like blinkers, obstructs the visibility of the system as a whole.

Together with methodological nationalism, the construction of binary distinctions between sectors hampers our understanding of the system. Just as pieces of a jigsaw puzzle can only be understood when brought together, the ECEC 'sectors' cannot be understood in an isolated manner. When taken as separate constructs, the connections between the different sectors – and even the very existence of different pieces – may be overlooked. As a result, diversity and inequalities are rendered invisible to the researcher's (and the policy maker's) eye. It is only by addressing the whole system that we may be able to unpack its dynamics – see, for example, Giraudy and Luna (2017). This argument does not imply that all studies must engage with all the pieces of the system, since the complexity of systems may not allow it in most cases. What it means, nonetheless, is that pieces need to be contextualised taking the full jigsaw puzzle into account.

The strata of sedimentary soil: moving towards territorialised policy approaches

Alongside methodological nationalism stands a classic approach to policy analysis. Many studies in the early childhood field address policy analysis from top-down perspectives, targeting the different stages of the policy process – agenda setting, formulation, implementation, impact (see, for example, Onnismaa and Kalliala (2010)). These approaches are often guided by classic definitions of policy, such as 'a purposive course of action followed by an actor or set of actors in dealing with a problem or matter of concern' (Anderson 1978, 3). These definitions point to a course of action or the decisions taken by those responsible in a given policy arena as the object of study (Keeley and Scoones 2003).

While these approaches are important and useful, when referring to ECEC policies and systems, they have limited explanatory power. ECEC systems are not the outcome of one or even a distinguishable set of policies that can be traced from their formulation to their implementation. Rather, they result from a myriad of policies, programmes and initiatives that have been layered on top of each other over time, for example the coexistence of various types of ECEC settings that emerged in different policy contexts. This resulting scenario derives both from policy action, and from policy inaction, which can also be considered a form of policy (McConnell and Hart 2019).

With classic policy analysis, only one of the layers is visible, often the national layer. Thus, there is a risk of 'theory stretching' (Giraudy, Moncada, and Snyder 2019), that is, applying concepts and ideas developed for one policy level (often the national), to the rest of the levels of the system. This might lead to the interpretation of the subnational as territories of 'mere' implementation, rather than levels at which policies, programmes and initiatives are created and recreated in diverse and unequal conditions.

ECEC systems may resemble sedimentary soil, with ECEC policies, programmes and initiatives that emerged at different times from different levels and actors of the

system deposited on top of each other as sedimentary layers. Although the overall characteristics of the soil will be dependent upon the components in each layer, only the top layer is visible to the naked eye. To look beyond it, it is necessary to cut through the soil. Through territorialising ECEC policies and systems research, subnational approaches would allow us to better understand early childhood starting from the ground. We need to move from classic policy analyses to territorial policy analyses, which focus on the structures, processes institutions and actors (and their interconnections) within and across territorial units inside countries (Giraudy, Moncada, and Snyder 2019).

Territorialisation moves from tracking policy phases to reconstructing policy footprints. Shifting to a territorial approach may shed light over phenomena that the national (and sectoral) approaches are unable to conceptualise, let alone explain. Exploring ECEC policies from the local level may open the door to new and more complex understandings that take into account the different layers where institutions and actors shape ECEC systems. From this perspective, policies, programmes and initiatives are traced through the marks they leave in the ECEC landscape which, in turn, leads to a better understanding of ECEC systems. Instead of analysing national policies (and stretch that to understand the system), territorialisation enables an understanding, from the territory, of the various actors (state, community, private), levels (national, regional, local) and sectors (social welfare, education, health) in ECEC systems.

Dealing with puzzles and sediments: examples from Argentina

This section empirically explores the previous argument through examples and reflexions from research in Argentina. It illustrates the possibilities of subnational approaches, with a focus on what is revealed by this process of rescaling downward. I here draw on two mapping research projects I participated in. The first is the initiative *Mapa de la Educación Inicial en Argentina*[2], that developed a subnational map of ECEC (Cardini, Guevara, and Steinberg 2021). The aim of the project was to understand the configuration of ECEC provision, regulation and workforce at provincial level. The initiative followed a mixed methods approach that combined a documentary and statistical analysis of available data in the country's provinces and capital district, and a qualitative exploratory analysis of four provinces. Second, I draw on the project *Governance in Early Childhood Education and Care: the case of Buenos Aires*, which resulted in a local map of ECEC provision in the city of Buenos Aires. The research aimed to examine the distribution of ECEC settings in the city through a geographical mapping technique.

Argentina is one of the four federal countries in Latin America, the most unequal regions in the world. The country has a vast territory – it is the eighth largest country in the world – and a diverse and unequal societal structure. It is politically organised into 23 provinces and a federal district that, in practice, has the same status as the provinces. The provinces are autonomous political units which have the power to dictate their own constitutional and political organisation, including the municipal regime for the functioning of local governments within their territory.

Argentinian early education is regulated by the provincial ministries of education and oriented to children between 45 days (the end of maternity leave) and 5 years old. According to the National Law of Education, early education is organised in nurseries (0–2 years) and kindergartens (3–5 years); the last two years of kindergarten are compulsory. Both

nurseries and kindergartens are considered part of the education system, and may be run by the state or private providers within the state's regulatory umbrella. They receive funding from the provincial governments, 100% for state managed settings and variable contributions to cover teachers' salaries in private settings.

Another piece of the puzzle are the child development centres (*centros de desarrollo infantil*, CDI), which target marginalised children from 45 days to 4 years old. CDIs generally have fewer regulations, less resources and less guidance and supervision than the provision regulated by the Ministry of Education. They come under the auspices of the Ministry of Social Development and can be managed by the provincial social development authorities, local authorities, or community-based organisations. CDIs receive a monetary transfer per child from the federal Ministry.

The last paragraphs depict the national institutional architecture of ECEC in Argentina, drawing on national regulations and policies. The *Mapa de la Educación Inicial en Argentina* project was built on the assumption that, in a federal country..., this picture was oversimplistic. Although it was known that developments of ECEC were uneven in the different provinces, no subnational studies or comparisons had been able to demonstrate this empirically.

Our subnational approach revealed a picture that greatly differed from the national. The pieces of the jigsaw puzzle are more numerous and heterogeneous across and within provinces: the country displays 24 ECEC landscapes marked by different types of disparities. Apart from the national umbrella laws, the provision, funding and regulation of ECEC provision is a responsibility of the provinces; therefore, ECEC policy developments have followed diverse pathways in the different territories.

As a consequence, apart from nurseries and kindergartens (which are accounted for at national level), young children also attend a myriad of settings: compulsory preschools (for 4- and 5-year-olds), annex classrooms (extensions of primary schools for 5-year-olds), infant schools (independent from primary schools for 0–5-year-olds), and kindergarten nucleuses (five classrooms spread out across an area served by one principal team), among other possibilities. This heterogeneous architecture is the result of a wide range of subnational efforts and arrangements to provide ECEC in territories that are not only diverse, but also unequal.

These types of settings emerged as subnational responses to public demand and federal mandates. The responses not only illustrate the diversity, but also the inequalities across these subnational territories. For instance, providing compulsory preschools and annex classrooms is a strategy of some provinces to respond to national legislation that made kindergarten compulsory for five-year-olds in 1993 and for four-year-olds in 2014. In the 1990s, with the first legislation, five-year-old classrooms were attached to primary schools, to ensure the compulsory year in contexts of limited resources. In 2014, with further legislation, some provinces created compulsory preschools, as a way of expanding access for four and five-year-olds. At an aggregate national level, data only shows that the number of children enrolled in ECEC at four and five years of age increased dramatically. At subnational level, we are able to see how the provinces interpreted and enacted a national mandate in a context of already dissimilar ECEC provision.

Other responses focused not only on federal mandates, but also on local demand for the expansion of ECEC provision. For instance, infant schools were created in the better resourced provinces as a response to the demands of working mothers in the 1980s.

Although they continue to offer ECEC for children from 0 to 5-years-old, after ECEC became compulsory for five-year-olds, no new infant schools were created. The result is that a limited number of infant schools coexist with other types of settings that are exclusively for older children. When political priorities changed, the settings created prior to the compulsory ECEC legislation were not converted, but remained as an extra layer of the sedimentary soil.

Finally, kindergarten nucleuses stand also as a local response to changing demands where the creation of fully resourced kindergartens posed extra challenges, for instance, in large territories with less resources and with rural or dispersed populations. The isolated classrooms are spread out in the territory, facilitating access for children and families. Only one principal team is assigned to up to five kindergarten classrooms; the principal and their team rotate across the classrooms during the week. This format brings to the surface how diversity and inequality shape very different ECEC provision landscapes in the provinces.

The puzzle is even more complex in the case of provision that comes under the Ministry of Social Development. CDIs, which are recognised in the national laws, take very different forms not only in the provinces, but also in the municipalities. They can be funded, regulated and/or provided by the provincial or local department of social development, or by community-based organisations. This creates a multiplicity of possible combinations, such as CDIs that are regulated by the national level, funded by the three levels, and provided by community-based organisations. The assemblage is so complex that in some provinces CDIs accommodate, within their premises, classrooms for three-year-olds regulated by the ministry of education. Considering this complex web of relationships between different levels and actors is key to understanding ECEC systems, and the possibilities for their integration.

Moreover, the subnational lens brought to the surface two other pieces of the jigsaw puzzle in Argentina that were obscured by the national picture. First, the existence of municipal early education provision in a country where education is a prerogative of the provinces. In the last decades, local governments in many municipalities in Argentina have become increasingly involved in ECEC, mainly due to the insufficient provision for children from birth to three years at provincial level. In a scenario where these non-compulsory years are dominated by private provision, some municipalities decided to create their own departments of education and founded their own municipal public nurseries. This current trend, revealed by our subnational approach, points to an ever-increasing complexity in ECEC governance, where all three levels of government are involved in the provision, regulation and funding of the ECEC system.

Second, our research found that the jigsaw puzzle is completed with an unknown, but presumably vast, supply of privately-run settings that are under the scope of neither education nor social development ministries (Cardini, Guevara, and Steinberg 2021). Unofficial or unregistered settings (*instituciones no incorporadas a la enseñanza oficial*) have received little attention from researchers and policy makers, probably because they are not included in official reports or statistics. Unofficial provision is comprised of privately run and community based ECEC settings that do not satisfy the criteria for recognition as official educational institutions by the Ministry of Education or as care institutions by the Ministry of Social Development. The lack of recognition can be attributed to various factors, from poor infrastructure conditions (e.g. security or sanitary issues, inadequate classroom space, or windows) to lack of compliance with curriculum

standards (e.g. alternative pedagogical approaches). Being 'unofficial' means they do not receive state funding; some may be recognised as businesses by the municipalities and, in practice, run as for-profit settings. Here again, a subnational approach reveals the existence of for-profit provision, a type of provision that, from a national perspective, is not officially recognised in Argentina.

These new pieces came to the surface as we, first, moved past methodological nationalism, recognising the subnational provinces as the unit of our analysis. That shift opened the door to a multiplicity of realities of ECEC in the different provinces, but also unveiled the diversity and inequalities across the provinces. Second, we embraced an integrated perspective that looked at ECEC provision as a whole, beyond its relationship with the departments of education or social development. That enabled us to unearth pieces of the puzzle, such as unregistered services, that were key to understanding the provincial system. Third, we territorialised our approach linking ECEC provision to the characteristics of the territories under analysis, which allowed new understandings of the multiplicity of formats that ECEC provision took in each province.

This exploratory subnational approach only started to unravel the complexity of the ECEC system in Argentina, and of ECEC systems in general. This emerging picture led to territorialising the exploration further, rescaling to the local level. In an exploratory exercise, I mapped the distribution of ECEC services in the city of Buenos Aires. This approach was not without complexity, since the available data is mostly national and sectoral. I focused on the city of Buenos Aires as the only territory with available information at the local level and made three sectoral data bases consistent in order to build a comprehensive map of the provision.

I pinpointed the location of all ECEC settings in the city for children from birth to three years (Figure 1): state-managed nurseries (indicated by diamonds), private nurseries (indicated by squares), CDIs (indicated by stars), and unofficial institutions (indicated by circles). Then, I layered that distribution with four urban socioeconomic scenarios constructed by Steinberg and Tofalo (2018). A clearly favourable scenario is found in the northwest of the city, an intermediate scenario in the centre, a clearly unfavourable scenario in the south, and a diverse scenario in the northeast.

This analysis, firstly, revealed an uneven distribution of different types of ECEC services across different socioeconomic scenarios. That disparity has two dimensions: first, the distribution of 'education' (nurseries) and 'care' (CDIs) settings; second, the location of privately- and state- managed settings. On the one hand, the map empirically demonstrated, in the local terrain, a known fact: 'education' is a service oriented to middle- and high-income families, while the 'care' provision is regarded as a service catering for marginalised sectors. While nurseries are concentrated in the northwest (affluent) and central (intermediate) areas, welfare (CDI) services are located mainly in the south (unfavourable) and northeast (diverse). Nurseries, 'education' services oriented to children from birth to three years, both public and private, are concentrated in high- and middle-income areas as a result of both deliberate policy action and policy inaction.

Furthermore, the mapping exercise provided new insights on privatisation. Following the national statistics, the private sector explains half of the overall ECEC provision. However, with the introduction of unofficial settings (not included in those statistics) this number increases to almost three-quarters of the total provision in the city. Although not necessarily for profit, in practice unofficial settings operate as private provision. This

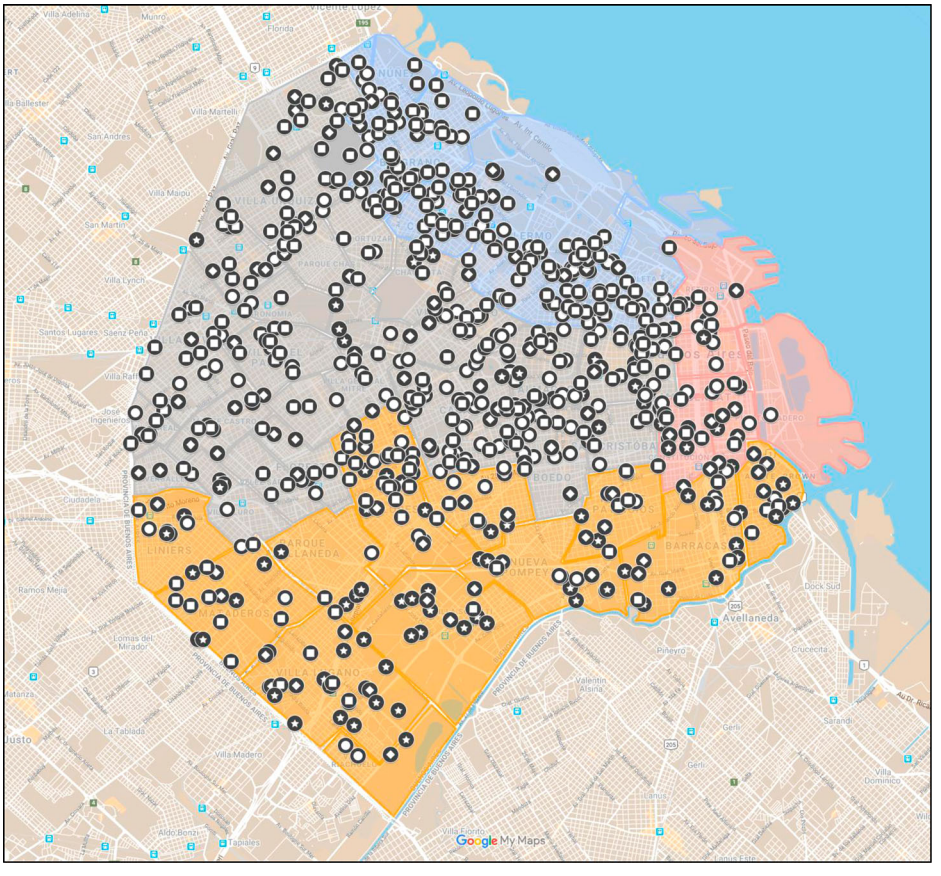

Figure 1. Territorial distribution of ECEC institutions in Buenos Aires, Argentina. Source: Prepared by the author, based on official data, 2018.

means that only a quarter of the services, and not half of them, are free-of-charge. Although the implications of this emerging finding exceed the scope of this article, this point illustrates the possibilities of subnational approaches to unravel local phenomena such as, in this case, the privatisation of ECEC.

This exploratory research exercise highlights the possibilities that await beyond methodological nationalism, sectoralism, and classic policy analysis. The comprehensive perspective enabled me to reconstruct the distribution of all settings for young children. The territorialised approach shed light over the dynamics in a particular territory. The trends that emerged are just the beginning of a ball of yarn that needs to be unwound.

Overall, therefore, the organisation of ECEC services in Argentina differs dramatically from what is visible at the agregated national level. In a country where the complexities of federalism permeate ECEC's governance, provision, regulation, and funding, provincial and local approaches seem not only useful but extremely necessary. What is more, the local exploration of a local territory, in this case the city of Buenos Aires, suggests that the importance of subnational research goes far beyond federal countries. As I have argued above, federal countries can be considered a necessary stepping stone to a wider shift that needs to permeate ECEC policies and systems research in all countries.

Final thoughts

This exploratory article is intended to open a conversation around a movement beyond methodological nationalism that rescales downward to subnational political units. I tailored the argument to the particular characteristics of the early childhood field, where the case for integrating the subnational seems to be more urgent. The history, traditions, and nature of ECEC – with a strong presence of subnational levels in most systems – suggest we, ECEC scholars, have only captured a part of the picture.

The case for integrating subnational levels entailed a call to overcome sectoralism and move beyond classic approaches to policy analysis. I suggested that, in order to rescale downward and integrate the subnational spheres, we first need to be sensitive to how ECEC provision is organised (owned, provided, regulated and funded) in the different territories, both in the district and the local levels and how sectoral borderlines are drawn. That entails expanding our horizons to understand the grounded dimension of ECEC provision. Otherwise, integrating subnational levels will not be enough to unpack the dynamics of ECEC systems.

Moreover, I argued there is a need for re-examining our approaches to ECEC policies. Territorial analysis may reframe policies, programmes, and initiatives as they inhabit the ECEC landscape and connect (or not) to each other. Integrating territorial approaches may shed light over phenomena that the national (and sectoral) approaches are unable to conceptualise let alone explain. It is a means of linking policies back to the subnational context where they are embedded focusing on the structures, processes institutions and actors (and their interconnections) within and across territorial units inside countries.

The examples from subnational research in Argentina give us a glimpse into potential directions for research on ECEC systems. It is evident that subnational territorial units do not mimic what is stated at the national level. Rather, at subnational levels, ECEC has a different institutional architecture, comes from a particular history, and follows a unique pathway. This is highlighted in federal countries, such as Argentina, but waiting to be 'discovered' in all countries.

Subnational research, along with a more integrated and territorialised perspective, is a tool to embrace complexity and address the 'messiness' of ECEC systems. The subnational presents us with a reality where horizontal borderlines ('education', 'care') and vertical divisions ('national', 'provincial' and the 'local') are intertwined and entangled. Understanding those connections is key for both research and policy, and therefore for comparative studies.

While in the ECEC field there are valuable contributions to be made from cross-national comparisons, there is a pressing need for integrating subnational differences in ECEC research. Education policy is increasingly based on promoting global claims inferred from cross-national studies of pupil performance, such as global best practices or world class systems. These developments take us even further away from the realities of the local, and reaffirm the importance of engaging in subnational research.

Subnational research is particularly important, but not exclusive, to federal countries. This step forward implies dissolving the illusion of methodological nationalism and readjusting our research lens to look beyond the national. This means re-envisioning research problems, questions, methods, interpretations, and analysis; first, to integrate subnational realities into the research; second, to avoid reductionist ways of thinking and provide careful interpretation of results, especially in federal or decentralised countries.

The necessary shift I have argued for in this article implies a change in our theoretical perspectives and methodological starting points, but it also entails a political positioning. The nation state as the sole unit of analysis contributes to the homogenisation of territories and traditions, and therefore to masking injustices. Methodological nationalism contributes to perpetuating systems where diversity is not recognised and inequalities are not tackled. Integrating subnational levels into ECEC research may open a door in that direction. Understanding the reality through transformative eyes is the only possible pathway to disrupt systems of power and oppression. This shift of perspective may offer a space of resistance and a steppingstone to reimagine early childhood education and care policies and systems.

Notes

1. I adopt Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) as the widely accepted definition in the English-language of systems that include all arrangements for children from birth to primary school age regardless of setting, formality, funding, opening hours, or programme content (OECD 2001) to make the article accessible to an international readership. However, it has been argued that this acronym ECEC recreates the borderlines within the early childhood field since it builds upon a reductionist understanding of the notion of 'education' and needs to be re-examined (Guevara under evaluation; Broström 2006).
2. Part of the data used in this document was produced under the project *Mapa de la educación inicial en Argentina*, a partnership between UNICEF-Argentina and CIPPEC directed by Cora Steinberg, Education Specialist at UNICEF and Dr. Alejandra Cardini, Director of the Programme of Education at CIPPEC.

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