Acadamh Ríoga na hÉireann
Royal Irish Academy

Charlemont grant report

Recipient name:	Dr Jennifer Guevara
Discipline and subject area:	Humanities and Social Sciences; Education
Amount and year awarded:	€2,200 in 2020
Title of project:	Governance in Early Childhood Education and Care: the case of Argentina

Summary of findings:

In this project, I intended to address the map of ECEC provision in its complexity from a systems perspective. I explored the notion of borderlines as a theoretical tool to re-interrogate ECEC systems from a systems perspective, supported by an empirical examination of borderlines in the ECEC system in Argentina. I examine where and how borderlines are drawn in the institutional architecture, the discursive sphere, and the territorial landscape. The analysis shed new light on fragmentation and inequalities in ECEC systems, a pressing problem not only in Argentina but in South America.

My analysis showed that the concept of borderlines provides an analytical tool with which to embrace complexity from two aspects. On the one hand, it facilitates the study of the whole system without losing sight of each of its parts, that is, the pieces of the jigsaw puzzle. In this article, I endeavoured to account for the multitude of ECEC programmes in Argentina.

The empirical analysis revealed that fragmentation is a feature of ECEC systems that can no longer be disregarded. Rather, it needs to play a role in any ECEC policy analysis. ECEC programmes sit under the umbrella of unconnected government departments, but there are heterogeneous (even overlapping) programmes within the same sector. The institutional architecture of the system is the result of policy sedimentation, it reflects the political, historical, and economic reality of this particular city in this particular region.

Programmes that emerged decades apart, such as CPIs and CeDIs, coexist in the present landscape. It is clear that the ECEC jigsaw puzzle not only results from the divided history of ECEC services but also from policies that have been layered on one another and are not integrated into a system. The marks left by policy intentions and the history and participation of diverse actors in the policy process require more attention from the EC field.

The whole-systems analysis not only sheds light on the problem of fragmentation but also on inequalities. The article analysis revealed fragmentation is not separated from an analysis of power. In a region marked by longstanding inequalities fragmentation cannot only be understood as benign variation; diversity and inequality are sometimes ingeniously intertwined. Mapping the location of ECEC services in the city visualised a socioeconomic borderline that had hitherto remained invisible. Sectoralisation is not neutral, but it works to build and maintain the boundaries of power and vulnerability.

At the same time, whole-systems perspectives must examine systems through a magnifying glass. If the naked-eye view suggests that education services are oriented towards the middle and upper socioeconomic groups while social welfare programmes cater for the disadvantaged, a thorough examination invites us to abandon hope of any simple

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conclusion. The analysis revealed that social welfare services are inherently diverse and highly unequal. The borderline appears to have been drawn by policy sedimentation and to be more related to the context of emergence of each ECEC programme, rather than the government department or agency in which it sits.

On the other hand, traditional binaries in the EC field that separate education and care as two discrete sectors in research, policy, and practice. Following the analysis, I suggest that binary interpretations of ECEC systems (i.e., split versus integrated systems) obscure some pieces of the jigsaw puzzle. Unofficial services are an excellent example of this. Despite catering for many young children and their families, they remain overlooked by policy, research, and practice. It remains unclear what role they play in the system, and further research is required.

Furthermore, in the discursive sphere, the analysis suggests that the borderline does not stand between education and care but rather lies beyond them. It is within the 'education' sector that care is reclaimed as an ethical aspect. Nurseries ('education' services) not only uphold education as a purpose but also care. By contrast, CPIs and unofficial services ('care' services) do not define their role as a caring one but rather one that aims to compensate for deficits. On one side of the system, services are aimed at teaching, caring, and upbringing. On the other, their purpose is to compensate for (real or imagined) deficits. These variations in policy are strongly embedded in societal views of children and their families according to their socioeconomic strata.

Overall, it is clear that the messy reality of systems (Urban, 2014) requires further conceptual scaffolding that goes far beyond traditional binaries. In this article, I explored a powerful analytical aid, but further investigation is still required to strengthen the potential of EC research to disrupt the systems of power and injustice that lie hidden beneath the sectoralisation of the field.

Impact:

- Joint funding application between Centre for the Implementation of Public Policy for Equity and Growth (CIPPEC), Universidad de San Andrés (UdeSA) and DCU (Spencer Foundation, in preparation)

- Presentation at the Comparative and International Education Society Conference in April (abstract accepted) & at the Reconceptualising Early Childhood Education Conference in June (abstract under evaluation)

- Article in the International Journal of Early Childhood Education (under evaluation)

- Erasmus application for staff mobility exchange between CIPPEC, UdeSA and DCU (submitted)

Plans for continuing collaboration:

My plan is to strengthen the existing collaboration through: (1) staff mobility which, in the near future, could be complemented by student mobility and (2) joint funding applications.

Published work and publication plans:

Article "Borderlines in Early Childhood Education and Care: exploring fragmentation and inequalities from a systems perspective" submitted to International Journal of Early Childhood Education (under evaluation)

Dissemination and plans for future dissemination:

- Presentation at the Comparative and International Education Society Conference in April (abstract accepted)

- Presentation at the Reconceptualising Early Childhood Education Conference in June (abstract under evaluation)