Multiple Fragmentations: A Subnational Analysis of the Early Childhood Education and Care Workforce in Argentina

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Abstract

The divided nature of the ECEC workforce is widely acknowledged. While scholarship has focused primarily on the consequences of the education–care divide, few studies have examined the workforce’s fragmentation from a subnational perspective, particularly in the Global South. This article explores multiple fragmentations in the workforce, drawing on three provincial case studies in Argentina. The study included 17 interviews with national and subnational policy makers and three focus groups with ECEC workers. We explore ECEC workers’ heterogeneous conditions and experiences across three provinces and demonstrate how vertical and horizontal fragmentation combine to create multiple fragmentations. We argue that subnational approaches are critical for better understanding the ECEC workforce’s complexities and, ultimately, ECEC systems.

Keywords Early childhood governance · Federalism · Early childhood systems · Sectoralisation · Early childhood workforce

Résumé

La nature diverse du personnel de l’éducation et des soins aux enfants (ECEC pour son single en anglais) est largement reconnue. Cette recherche s’est principalement
centrée sur les conséquences du clivage entre l’éducation et les soins. Peu d’études ont examiné la fragmentation du personnel ECEC avec un point de vue infranational, en particulier dans les pays du Sud. L’article explore les multiples fragmentations des travailleurs de l’éducation et des soins aux enfants à partir de trois études dans trois provinces en Argentine. L’étude s’est appuyée sur l’information obtenue dans 17 entretiens avec des décideurs politiques nationaux et infranationaux et dans 3 focus groups avec des travailleurs de l’ECEC. Nous explorons les conditions de travail et les expériences hétérogènes du personnel de l’ECEC dans trois provinces et montrons comment la fragmentation verticale et horizontale se combine pour créer des fragmentations multiples. Nous soutenons que les approches infranationales sont essentielles pour mieux comprendre les complexités du personnel d’ECEC et les systèmes d’ECEC en général.

Resumen
La naturaleza diversa del personal de espacios de crianza, enseñanza y cuidado para la primera infancia (CEC) es ampliamente reconocida. Si bien las investigaciones se han centrado principalmente en las consecuencias de la tradicional división entre la educación y el cuidado, pocos estudios han examinado la fragmentación de las trabajadoras CEC desde una perspectiva subnacional, particularmente en el sur global. El presente artículo explora estas fragmentaciones basándose en tres estudios de casos provinciales en Argentina. La investigación incluyó 17 entrevistas con funcionarios/as públicos/as nacionales y provinciales y tres grupos focales con trabajadoras CEC. Exploramos las condiciones y experiencias heterogéneas de las trabajadoras en las tres provincias y demostramos cómo las fragmentaciones vertical y horizontal se combinan para crear múltiples fragmentaciones. Argumentamos que el enfoque subnacional es fundamental para una mejor comprensión de las complejidades de la fuerza laboral CEC y de los sistemas CEC en general.

Introduction
A considerable body of research agrees that the early childhood workforce plays a central role in ensuring quality early childhood education and care\(^1\) (ECEC) provision for all children (Oberhuemer, 2005; OECD, 2006). The complexity associated with providing ECEC services obscures the definition and description of the ECEC workforce. The ECEC workforce is composed of multiple professional and paraprofessional roles in different subsectors with different occupational profiles that work across various institutional settings (Cameron & Moss, 2007). Various scholars have explored the ECEC workforce’s heterogeneous nature through the notion of a split workforce (Cameron et al., 2017). If ECEC systems are split (typically between

\(^1\) We adopt Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) as the internationally accepted definition 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).
‘education’ and ‘care’), the workforce will be similarly fragmented. While early childhood teachers have attracted considerable scholarly attention in the education field (see, for example, Saracho & Spodek, 2007), other early childhood workers (often termed ‘care’ workers) have largely been explored from the perspectives of gender and care policy studies (see, for example, Cameron & Moss, 2007).

Several large-scale studies have ventured to provide comprehensive, holistic maps of the ECEC workforce (Oberhuemer, 2011; Urban et al., 2012), mostly at the national level. However, subnational differences within countries remain poorly understood, particularly in the Global South. Going beyond national approaches is particularly relevant to federal countries, in which subnational levels are intrinsic to the decision-making process and the district level plays a critical role in most policies, including early childhood (Neuman, 2005). Subnational political units have thus occupied a prominent place in the systems and policies of at least twenty-five countries worldwide, whose systems account for forty percent of the world’s population (e.g., Brazil, Germany, India, Russia, the USA).

In this article, we explore the ECEC workforce in Argentina, a federal country in South America. Adopting a subnational approach, we explore the workforce’s multiple fragmentations drawing on three provincial case studies. We argue that the ECEC workforce expresses federalism in the form of multiple fragmentations. The article is structured as follows: First, we discuss sectoralisation as a crucial feature of the early childhood field, introducing federalism as a new layer of complexity to approach ECEC systems. Next, we present Argentina’s ECEC system; third, we describe the study’s methodological approach, including an introduction to the three case studies’ demographics. We subsequently examine the main results across the three provinces; finally, we discuss the multiple fragmentations before concluding with the implications of the findings for the early childhood field.

The ECEC Workforce Between Sectoralisation and Federalism

Despite the lack of consensus regarding what it means to be an ECEC professional, the professionalisation of the ECEC workforce has been a long-standing policy concern (e.g., Dalli & Urban, 2010; Miller & Cable, 2008). The situation is similar in many countries: the workforce is predominantly female (Van Laere et al., 2014), works under precarious conditions (León et al., 2019) and has limited opportunities for professional development and high drop-out levels (Thorpe et al., 2020). Conditions are often better for those in ‘education’ settings than for their counterparts in ‘care’ or unregistered settings (see, for example, Roberts-Holmes, 2013). Diverse scholars and policy makers have sought to unite the ‘care’ and ‘education’ workforce administratively, conceptually, and in practice. Workforce unity is associated with key benefits, such as conceptual coherence, integrated curricula, and a levelling of historic inequity between care and education workers (Kaga et al., 2010).

The workforce division is symptomatic of the sectoralisation that has defined the ECEC field for many years. As Robertson (2011) explains, sectoralisation permeates not only policy but also research and practice:
…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 (p. 293).

As a consequence of sectoralisation, studies (and policies) tend to work between the boundaries of what, on each side, is reclaimed as ‘the sector’—that is, the ‘education’ or the ‘child-care’ sector. Although many have systematically challenged silo mentalities (Adlerstein & Pardo, 2017; AUTHOR), sectoralised approaches continue to dominate the ECEC field, particularly in countries where ECEC provision is fragmented into multiple disconnected programmes under the auspices of disparate government departments and agencies.

However, education and care—or teaching, care and upbringing as Broström (2006) refined the concept—are inseparable in theory, policy and research. As we have argued elsewhere (AUTHOR), ECEC provision does not necessarily respond to the ‘education’—‘care’ binary. A similar argument may be (and has been) made regarding the ECEC workforce (Campbell-Barr, 2018). From the empirical and theoretical perspectives, ECEC workers deliver both education and care, even when these activities’ emphases and shapes vary considerably across contexts. It is thus necessary to analyse the workforce from an integrated and systemic perspective that transcends the boundaries of the institutional and discursive divides. This requires the consideration of not only the horizontal fragmentation between sectors but also the vertical fragmentation across different government levels (national, provincial, municipal). The vertical dimension of fragmentation has been extensively discussed in education research but has gone overlooked in the early childhood field, as Neuman (2005) noted. The author attributes this gap to the fact that, in the countries that produce the majority of the educational research, ECEC is not part of the education system but is rather under the auspices of social or health care.

The analysis of subnational levels (as well as the interconnection between the subnational and the national) is crucial in ECEC. First, ECEC is an inherently local phenomenon (Urban, 2012): even when governance is centralised, the local level is involved in ECEC in some way. Second, in most countries, ECEC provision, regulation and funding is delegated to subnational governments—both at the state and local levels (Neuman, 2005). Third, unlike primary education, in which national states have always played a dominant role, the ECEC provision has at least partly emerged from the grassroots level, with the state entering the picture later, primarily to regulate the existing ECEC landscape.

While this is probably true for all countries, it is particularly important in federal countries, in which the subnational levels play a critical role in decision-making processes. In federal countries, the provincial or district level is crucial in most social

\[ \text{In most South American countries, ECEC is recognised as part of the education system.} \]
and educational policies. Some scholars have argued that vertically fragmented governance might explain the limited support for ECEC from the national level in federal countries (Cohen, 2001). Subnational political units have occupied a prominent position in the systems and policies of at least twenty-five countries worldwide, whose systems account for forty percent of the world’s population (e.g., Brazil, Germany, India, Russia, the USA).

Despite the lack of consensus regarding whether the federalism’s impact on social policy is positive or negative (Haussman et al., 2020), it is widely accepted that federalism imposes an additional layer of complexity onto ECEC governance and, therefore, onto the ECEC workforce, implying that more actors and departments are involved in the distribution of the power to govern ECEC. In this article, ‘governance’ denotes the efforts of different governmental levels to provide, regulate and fund ECEC policy and services (Dale, 1997; Kagan & Cohen, 1997). Governance is thus the ‘glue’ that binds the disparate components of the early childhood system (Neuman, 2005). We focus on the governance of ECEC systems rather than the governance of early childhood programmes or services.

Inspired by the Bernsteinian conceptualisation of discourse (1999), we identify the vertical and the horizontal as two complementary axes that must be considered in relation to the structural fragmentation of the ECEC workforce and, ultimately, of ECEC systems. If the horizontal split concerns the consequences of the education–care divide for the workforce, vertical fragmentation concerns the differences derived from the distribution of responsibilities across different governmental levels. Echoing an emerging consensus around the need to introduce federalism and multi-level governance in the discussions, this paper examines the vertical fragmentation of the power to govern ECEC systems as a key variable with which to approach the ECEC workforce.

The ECEC System in Argentina

Argentina is a federal country, politically organised into 23 provinces and a Federal District that, in practice, has the same legal powers and status as the provinces. According to the Argentine constitution, the provinces are pre-existing units of the Nation and retain all powers not explicitly delegated to the federal government. They are autonomous political units with the power to dictate their own constitutions and political organisations, including the municipal regime that defines the operation of local governments within their territories. Since the decentralisation process that began in the 1970s, the provinces have assumed growing responsibilities oriented towards the provision of social services, such as health and education.

3 Early Childhood systems as a whole include a range of services for children and their families from pregnancy to primary school. These services not only include ECEC provision but also family leave, parenting programmes, income transfers, and healthcare. In this paper, we refer to ECEC systems and focus exclusively on ECEC programmes without losing sight of the fact that they are part of a larger system aimed at ensuring children’s rights and needs.
This decentralisation, however, lacked a corresponding tax collection process. The federal government continues to be the main tax authority, and revenue is distributed via a complex and outdated transfer mechanism called coparticipación federal (‘federal co-participation’). This mechanism tends to benefit less densely populated provinces, although it is known to have some redistributive power (Gibson & Calvo, 2000).

Federalism’s complexities permeate ECEC governance, regulations and provision and are partly responsible for the aforementioned horizontal and vertical fragmentation. The federal government’s responsibilities in relation to ECEC provision are fulfilled by two separate ministries: the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Social Development. The first is the application authority of the federal Law of Education (26.206 and its modification through Law 27.045), which states that early education is oriented towards children aged between 45 days (when maternity leave ends) and 5 years and compulsory for children aged 4 and 5. The law establishes the national and provincial states’ commitment to guarantee universal access to early education for three-year-olds. Thus, the Ministry of Education’s remit encompasses both nurseries (jardines maternales, 0–2) and kindergartens (jardines de infantes, 3–5) that are run by the state or private providers within the state’s regulatory framework. These settings may or may not be located within school premises (most are independent and have their own infrastructures) and are regulated by national and provincial curricular guidelines. Nurseries and kindergartens receive funding from the provincial state—100% for state-managed settings and variable contributions to cover teacher salaries in private settings.

Early education has a long-standing history in Argentina. The end of the nineteenth century witnessed the establishment of the first institutions that catered to young children, led by highly skilled professionals following Froebelian principles (Peralta, 2009). The effort was state-led, and the responsibility for its implementation fell to the national government. Argentina was the first Latin American country to institutionalise early childhood teacher education (AUTHOR), and thus, state involvement in early education is not new but rather has a 200-year tradition. The Ministry of Social Development is the application authority of Law 26.233, which regulates the functioning of early childhood centres (Centros de Desarrollo Infantil, CDI), which lie outside the official education system (unlike nurseries and kindergartens are) and cater to children aged 0–4. Early childhood centres target marginalised children and exercise greater flexibility in their organisation and functioning. CDI programmes tend to be more heterogeneous than nurseries and kindergartens: they are not subject to curricular guidelines and often offer community and family development activities. They are often managed by promoters and community agents, although recent efforts are intended to ensure that the workers in charge are certified teachers. CDIs can be run by provincial authorities, local authorities or civil society organisations and frequently receive monetary transfers per child from the state to support their activities.

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4 As well as various other settings that target different age ranges, such as childhood schools (0–5) and preschools (4–5).
Apart from the national umbrella laws, each province implements provincial legislation that regulates its ECEC provision. ECEC horizontal organisation is thus proliferated by each province’s method of organising its own ECEC provision, thus creating horizontal interprovincial fragmentation. Moreover, local governments increasingly assume key roles in providing both ‘education’ and ‘care’ facilities for children in their early years. This phenomenon follows distinct paths in each subnational jurisdiction, but the trend highlights municipalities’ increased involvement in the management of early childhood settings. This jigsaw puzzle is further complicated by an unknown but presumably vast supply of private-run facilities that are neither within the scope of education or social development regulations. In short, a three-year-old child may attend multiple different ECEC facilities: a provincial public or private kindergarten, a local kindergarten, a ‘care’ setting (run by the provincial or local government, or by a community-based organisation), or an unregistered private setting.

The heterogeneity of the provision, regulation and funding of ECEC settings meets an equally diverse workforce, not only in terms of their educational credentials but also in terms of salaries, working conditions, union representation and opportunities for professional development. These factors affect ECEC workers’ daily work, which translates into an impact on children’s well-being and development. Existing inequalities are thus compounded as less well-resourced workforces work in settings that target marginalised children (Kagan et al., 2008). Most CDIs operating today emerged during the 1980s, 1990s and early 2000s as community-led responses to major economic crises that impacted families’ ability to nourish and care for their children. These self-organised services grew and adapted their tradition in terms of daily routines, activities and the voluntary character of the workforce. This tradition was forged beyond any state protection or regulation, since the state’s inability to guarantee work, social security and basic services was part of the problem. The state (in the form of national, provincial and local authorities) arrived on the scene later, after these settings had begun to thrive. National and provincial governments invested considerable effort in regulating and strengthening CDIs while maintaining most of their original characteristics. The state’s late appearance created tension regarding the workforce, as the official regulation (i.e., that educators should have a higher-education degree) clashed with the reality of community-based educators who had worked in CDIs for several years or even decades.

The Study

This article draws on qualitative case studies of three Argentinian provinces. We used document analysis, semi-structured interviews and focus groups as the main data collection techniques. Each case is unique and embedded in its specific context, representing contextualised and localised social constructions and understandings. Thus, the cases are conceived of as free-standing-but-related (Urban et al., 2012). By asking similar questions, we constructed ‘structural equivalence’ (Burt, 1982) to analyse diverse findings within a common framework. The cases were chosen based
on criteria and convenience. We constructed a ‘purposive sample’ (Robson, 2015) of subnational states to provide useful variation across five dimensions of theoretical interest (Seawright & Gerring, 2008): region (Norte, Pampeana, Patagonia, Cuyo), history (old or young), population numbers, organisation of ECEC provision and extension of local governments. Furthermore, during the COVID-19 pandemic, convenient access to the cases became a key factor in guaranteeing the study’s feasibility. At the time of the study, several Argentinian provinces were experiencing critical epidemiological conditions (i.e., the province of Buenos Aires), ruling them out as potential case studies while local authorities were dealing with the emergency situation.

The first case is in the province of Córdoba in Argentina’s geographic centre. With more than 3.5 million inhabitants, it is Argentina’s second most populated province after Buenos Aires. Its capital city is home to 40% of the population of the province, and it is one of the country’s two largest urban agglomerations and one of the first subnational states created. Owing to its geographical location, demographic weight and long history, Córdoba is among Argentina’s most politically and economically important provinces. Its high population density and extensive territory are reflected in the administrative sphere: with 260 municipalities, Córdoba is the subnational entity with the most local governments. These municipalities are characterised by significant heterogeneity, both in terms of demographics and political autonomy, which impacts the complex configuration adopted by the ECEC institutions throughout the province.

Our second case is the province of La Pampa, which has one of the smallest populations and the second lowest density, with fewer than 350,000 inhabitants; only Tierra del Fuego and Santa Cruz have smaller populations. Located in the centre-south of Argentina, its two largest cities (Santa Rosa and General Pico) are home to more than half of the population. The province is one of Argentina’s youngest, having attained provincial status as recently as 1951. The 62 Pampean municipalities have low autonomy. Centralisation responds to multiple factors, including the municipalities’ high political and economic dependence on the provincial government, the lack of permanent staff and economic and financial difficulties linked to the sparse population.

Like La Pampa, our third case, Río Negro, is a young and sparsely populated province in the south of Argentina: it was created in 1955 and has fewer than 800,000 inhabitants. Río Negro’s small population is distributed across an extensive territory in the Argentinian Patagonia. In contrast to La Pampa, Río Negro has considerable municipal autonomy. The provincial constitution empowers all municipalities to sanction their Organic Charter and—of the 39 existing municipalities—32 have availed of this provision.

We conducted fieldwork in these three provinces during September and November 2020. Owing to the COVID-19 pandemic, the fieldwork was entirely online. During this time, we gathered 25 relevant national and provincial documents (14 laws, 6 resolutions and 5 decrees); we conducted six semi-structured interviews.
with national state officials, 11 provincial state officials (five from Córdoba, three from La Pampa and three from Río Negro); we held three focus groups with ECEC workforce members (one per province). The interviews were one hour long and were designed specifically for each policy maker according to their role; all interviews covered the following themes: institutional architecture of ECEC (provision, regulation, funding), articulation between different ECEC programmes, profile of the workforce, working conditions, opportunities for professional development, union representation and impressions of the pandemic. The focus groups consisted of a 90-min-long conversation with six participants. To maximise the online environment, we initiated the focus groups using short anonymous polls as starting points for group discussion on each of the following topics: educational and professional background, working conditions, working environment (infrastructure, children per adult, activities), professional development opportunities, union representation and situation during the pandemic. Both the interviews and focus groups were conducted via Zoom. We sought the participants’ consent to record the interviews and focus groups, which were later transcribed and analysed.

We approached the documents and interviews using descriptive analysis to provide narrative accounts of the provinces and content and discourse analysis and compile a detailed picture of the characteristics of each case’s systemic conditions (Fairclough, 2005). Finally, we applied comparative analysis to recognise and document common elements, structures and strategies (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017). Through this process, we identified five core themes in the data: working conditions, pay, education credentials, professional development opportunities and union representation. While the results section follows a narrative logic, these five themes underpin the analysis.

The ECEC Workforce Through the Lens of Federalism

Although Argentina has 24 disparate and diverse educational systems, initial analysis of our results reveals that the recruitment, pay, education credentials, professional development opportunities and union representation of education workers are similar across the provinces. Focusing on Córdoba, La Pampa and Río Negro, the presence of a provincial teaching statute operates as an equalising element with respect to teacher education and recruitment. In the three provinces, virtually all ECEC workers in ‘education’ settings have teaching degrees and are formal employees of the provincial state. These conditions, stipulated in the three statutes, enable both social security and professional qualification for the entire ‘education’ workforce.

This does not mean that the workforce is entirely homogeneous. The first difference appears to be related to the characteristics of the local territory: in Río Negro, not only are the distances between the territory’s cities lengthy (four medium-sized
cities are distributed across 203,013 km\(^2\) but the cities are not connected by public transport:

We still have students working in kindergartens. Recently, a new teacher education institute opened in Catriel, but before that, in the region of Alto Valle, we had many workers without certification. (Policy maker, Río Negro)

In less densely populated large territories, such as La Pampa and Río Negro, the number and distribution of teacher education institutions impact the workforce’s credentials.

The salaries that early childhood teachers receive also differ across the different provinces. The above-mentioned fiscal imbalance between jurisdictions creates a gap in the resources available for education in each province. Thus, the amount received varies at the jurisdictional level: in June 2020, an early childhood teacher of ten years’ experience had a gross salary of USD 495 in Córdoba and La Pampa but USD 416 in Río Negro.

Regarding professional development, early childhood teachers in the three jurisdictions access free in-service training provided by both provincial and national agencies (mainly early childhood education departments and the National Institute for Teacher Education). In public nurseries and kindergartens, continuous training is linked, through a scoring system, to the possibility of accessing better positions and institutions. This institutionalises promotion mechanisms that encourage continuous training for all early childhood teachers.

With regard to union representation, the three jurisdictions under analysis have teacher unions with specific representation. Teachers at private institutions are represented by the Union of Private Teachers (SADOP) in each province and those in state settings by the Union of Educators of the Province of Córdoba (UEPC), the Union of Education Workers of La Pampa (UTELPa)\(^7\) and the Union of Education Workers of Río Negro (UNTER). The education sector’s union culture enables institutionalised channels to articulate and channel demands for workers’ legitimised mechanisms to the relevant actors. In the three jurisdictions, the unions have considerable weight when it comes to influencing public policy decisions and compliance with labour rights sanctioned in provincial statutes and in the National Law of Education. They enable collective organisations to set infrastructure standards, establish salary grounds and achieve salary increases through \textit{paritarias docentes}\(^8\) and other instances of salary negotiation. Its key role means that even workers with critical views on unions are affiliated:

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\(^6\) Specific union representation is understood to be the union in an organisation that directly represents the teachers as such.

\(^7\) La Pampa also has the Union of Pampean Education Workers (SITEP), which has a significantly lower number of affiliates than UTELPa.

\(^8\) An annual update in teachers’ salaries reached through an institutionalised negotiation between the unions and the provincial governments.
I hardly participate in the assemblies. Even though sometimes I don’t feel represented by the union, I prefer to be there than in another group. It’s a very fighting union, I do not always agree. (Education worker, Río Negro)

I have been member since I started teaching, although I don’t believe much in unions. I think they are a necessary evil. Personally, I don’t have many benefits, since they are all focused on the bigger cities (discounts, medication, those things are not available in the towns). I always join the strikers, although sometimes I do not agree. (Education worker, La Pampa)

The scenario differs significantly in the social development sector. CDI workers’ experiences are more heterogeneous than those of their peers in the education system—the realities differ both across and within provinces. In Córdoba, CDIs are managed by community-based organisations (nongovernmental organisations, NGOs) in the capital and in the rest of the province by the municipalities, who are responsible for recruiting staff. Interviews with civil servants emphatically highlighted the substantial difference in the recruitment and employment systems between the two management types:

The employment modality varies depending on the hiring agent (NGO or municipality). We do not oversee that process. There is an abyss in the reality of the capital and of inner municipalities and huge differences between the municipalities and NGOs. NGOs rarely employ workers formally; municipalities have a variety of formal employment and self-employment. (Policy maker, Córdoba)

Are you asking me about the law or reality? In reality, NGOs work with volunteers and informal workers. We know there are workers who receive very low compensation, even highly qualified workers. Some have complained about this… (Policy maker, Córdoba)

In NGOs, workers receive informal wages as compensations, which do not allow them to access social security, health coverage or pensions. In CDIs managed by municipalities, working conditions represent a combination of informal payments, self-employment and formal employment. Given these poor working conditions, CDI workers perceive formal appointments as an endpoint that might only be reached after several years of precarious working conditions, unlike their peers in the education sector, for whom formal employment is secured from the beginning of their career path. Formal employment may be achieved within the CDI system (via the municipalities) or through horizontal mobility (moving to the education system):

After many years of work, I finally received a full formal contract in the municipality of Laguna Larga. Before that, my contract was renewed every six months within a framework law that enables that. Under those contracts salaries are low; we are under negotiation with the mayor to increase them. (CDI worker, Córdoba)

We have educators and auxiliaries who are absorbed by the education system, which is expected. They have a better salary there. Educators are from our [marginalised] neighbourhoods, very complicated areas. Sometimes they are
not hired because of the stigma of those neighbourhoods, but they try to leave the programme and join the education system. (Policy maker, Córdoba)

The interviewees reveal that poor (and unequal) working conditions create horizontal mobility whereby ECEC workers seeking formal employment must often leave the social development sector. This means that more qualified workers are less likely to work in CDIs in the long term:

The salaries in education are much higher than in the social development sector. The vast majority of workers with teaching degrees, when they have the possibility, go to the educational system. (CDI worker, La Pampa)

In La Pampa, the municipality manages recruitment for all CDIs. The level of formalisation of employment relationships is higher than in Córdoba, but again, workers are employed through different schemes, which vary across municipalities. In larger municipalities near the capital, workers are more likely to secure formal employment, while informal employment prevails in the inner municipalities:

Half of the workforce is formally employed; the other is not. When we organise professional development sessions, we can see the heterogeneity of profiles that derives from unequal working conditions. It is not the same to earn 3000 pesos informally as 25,000 with social protection. It is a complex issue because municipalities also have deficits, so we cannot demand that they invest more money. (Policy maker, La Pampa)

We have three types of hiring: the formal employees of the municipality, who have all the benefits; the day labourers who are not paid on public holidays, have two weeks of paid leave per year and the additional annual salary is paid monthly; and the technical assistants who work from March to December, in precarious labour conditions and, depending on the economic situation of the municipality, may or may not be paid the complementary annual salary. (CDI worker, La Pampa)

La Pampa and Córdoba share a common feature in the provincial governments’ lack of involvement in the recruitment and employment of CDI workers. The provincial government is more prominent in Río Negro, where 20% of CDI workers are employed by the provincial state, while the remaining 80% are employed by municipalities. In this province, most CDI workers are hired formally or are self-employed, which entitles them to social security, health coverage and pensions. Río Negro CDI workers thus find themselves in a much better position than their counterparts in Córdoba and La Pampa.

This multiplicity of employment conditions is associated with a significant salary variation, although the absence of public data on CDI workers’ salaries makes it difficult to reconstruct the scene (and for workers to claim equality in salaries). The interviews indicated that informal employees (predominant in less populous municipalities) can receive salaries up to eight times lower than those of formal employees (often in larger municipalities). In Río Negro, where CDI workers’ working conditions are less precarious than in the other two provinces, salaries are generally higher, although only slightly higher for those employed by
the provincial government. Río Negro’s superior remuneration and working conditions cannot be separated from a higher level of formal employment existing in the overall workforce in the province.

Concerning professional development, CDI workers are also worse off than their peers in the education sector, and in this case, the situation is similar across the three provinces. Research has highlighted that a third of the CDI workforce in La Pampa, Córdoba and Río Negro holds a post-secondary degree (tertiary education), and around 30% of the CDI has not completed secondary education (Vinocur & Mercer, 2020). Our state official interviewees identified this as a challenge and have increased continuous professional development (CPD) opportunities for CDI workers in recent years. In La Pampa, the Department for Children, Youth and Family works with the national Ministry of Education to offer CPD to CDI workers, with a focus on teaching, care and upbringing. The Department for Children in Córdoba and the Secretariat for Childhood, Adolescence and Family in Río Negro lead similar initiatives. However, they do not match the education sector’s system. With the exception of La Pampa, CPD is not in-service; that is, it does not take place in the CDI during the working day. Moreover, most of the CPD does not contribute or lead to certification or promotion and offers no support to CDI workers seeking better payment and working conditions.

Finally, CDI workers are more likely to be represented when formally employed by the province, the municipality or the NGO. Therefore, most workers are not affiliated to any union and must articulate their demands on their own:

If we have any salary demand, or any demand at all, we address the mayor. He is the one that gives us the last word. We all want to be formally employed, that is that first arises. We have created spaces where we can be all together as workers, spaces where we can share our experiences and demands. If anything comes up as a consensus, it is raised to the directorate and then the mayor. (CDI worker, La Pampa)

Even when they are represented, they lack specific representation: unions consider them general workers rather than ECEC workers. This contrasts with the education sector’s reality, whereby all early childhood workers are represented by teacher unions. Córdoba, which has the lowest proportion of formal employees, has the lowest level of union representation. Municipal CDI workers belong to different unions federated in the Federation of Municipal Workers’ Unions of the Province of Córdoba (FESTRAM), while the rest of the CDI workforce is outside the institutionalised channels for articulating demands. Formally employed CDI workers in Río Negro and La Pampa are primarily represented by the Association of State Workers (ATE) or the Union of Civil Personnel of the Nation (UPCN). Unions influence working conditions and help establish salary minimums for all represented workers. Unlike the education sector, union leadership lacks technical specificity and situated knowledge on the particular challenges these workers face.
Multiple Fragmentations

Our findings highlight that, in Argentina, the vertical and horizontal divides combine to create multiple fragmentations in the ECEC workforce. In a federal country where 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), the workforce is fragmented both horizontally (between ‘education’ and ‘care’) and vertically (between different levels of government).

Overall, the results reflect the profound sectorality of ECEC systems. As scholarship has consistently demonstrated, early education workers have not only higher levels of education but also better pay, working and promotion conditions, professional development opportunities and more specific (and therefore more effective) union representation than their peers in the ‘care’ sector. In Argentina, this is evident from the three case studies. In the education sector, vertical fragmentation systems result in unequal remunerations across provinces. As early education is considered part of the education system in Argentina, the working conditions of early childhood teachers are equal to primary school teachers. In the social development sector, the situation is more heterogeneous, particularly in relation to working conditions and union representation, and vertical fragmentation also replicates within provinces and reaches the municipalities. ECEC workers’ realities thus differ not only across the country’s 24 provinces but across all 2247 municipalities. CDI workers may be formal employees of the province, the municipality or an NGO, self-employed or informal employees, a scenario that radically undermines the fulfilment of their basic rights as workers.

Federalism thus impacts more strongly the subsector in which the state’s role is more recent and less central. The state has played a central role in early education since its creation at the end of the nineteenth century, while in CDIs, state regulation is only *ex-post* the community origins and expansion of CDIs during and after the 1980s. Their emergence in the local context and their expansion outside any public regulatory system contributed to the workforce’s strong interprovincial heterogeneity. Federalism impacts an already sectoral workforce, multiplying experiences and creating diverse and disparate scenarios. While diversity is positive, inequality must be addressed. This effect is present in both sectors but stronger in the workforce’s most fragile part: social development workers. Their experiences are atomised to the extent that it becomes difficult to identify where and what the sector is. This has implications for policy, since integrating the workforce may be more difficult than previously argued. It also has implications for the workers themselves, making it more difficult to perceive themselves as part of a workforce and articulate demands for better conditions.

These multiple fragmentations take place in a country characterised by high inequality. When heterogeneous experiences and conditions are rooted in such contexts, disparities may reinforce pre-existing inequalities (AUTHOR). While the Argentinian federal system is designed to protect and promote diversity, the existing fragmentation perpetuates inequalities between sectors and territories. This is
as visible between ‘education’ and ‘care’ workers as it is between provinces and municipalities.

Conclusions

Our findings reflect the complexity of the ECEC workforce from a subnational perspective. Our article introduced vertical fragmentation of the power to govern ECEC systems as a key variable in approaching the ECEC workforce. Our approach combined horizontal fragmentation between sectors and vertical fragmentation across different governmental levels (national, provincial, municipal). The subnational perspective is particularly relevant to federal countries like Argentina, where these levels are crucial in decision-making processes. This implies that more actors and departments are instrumental in governing ECEC.

The results also highlight that federalism imposes another layer of complexity onto ECEC governance and the ECEC workforce. If governance is the ‘glue’ that holds the pieces of the early childhood system together, our findings indicate that federalism intensifies the fragmentation of Argentina’s ECEC workforce. The fact that the participation of different levels of government in the provision, regulation and funding of ECEC policy and services is not articulated around a central department/agency reinforces the existence of multiple fragmentations. Nonetheless, given the limited scope of this research, our findings cannot be extrapolated to other contexts. The study suggests the importance of subnational levels, a level where we argue that more comparative research is needed. While this paper focuses on the case of Argentina, subnational approaches are a promising stance in other federal or decentralised countries, where ECEC is also a responsibility of subnational governments. Subnational approaches can highlight diversity and inequality within countries and the relationship between these two forms of heterogeneity. Researchers will likely ‘discover’ the importance of subnational levels when they shift their gaze towards them.

The multiple fragmentations analysed herein have direct implications for the integration of the ECEC workforce and, ultimately, ECEC systems. If systems approaches are to be designed and implemented, more subnational perspectives that inform those policy intents are required. As discussed elsewhere (AUTHOR), ECEC must incorporate more bottom-up approaches into policy and research. Subnational approaches closer to the local territories may yield insights into ECEC workers’ heterogeneous experiences within countries and territories. Only then will the diversity and inequalities hidden by national borders fully come to light.

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Declarations

Conflict of interest  The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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