

Inequalities in Early Childhood Education and Care in Argentina and the United Kingdom (2010-2020)¹

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Abstract: Although there is a global agenda which tends to promote early childhood education and investment in early childhood, regulations and institutions are disparate between countries, and that does not seem to be tied to social welfare levels, exclusively. After studying existing evidence on educational inequalities in Argentina and the United Kingdom, in this article we present a comparative analysis of the education system's key components, i.e., legislation, public investment, coverage levels, professionalization, and characteristics of programs aimed at children, in relation with the per capita household income. The main findings are that schooling rates are higher in the UK than in Argentina, and social inequalities are somewhat lower. However, in both cases children who are not enrolled are concentrated in the most vulnerable households. In the UK, there is a more homogeneous and professionalized system, with official assessment and supervision, international quality standards, and notable progress in literacy, but the eligibility criteria for childcare funding does not prioritize the right of the child. Instead, it is based on parents' labor inclusion. On the other hand, Argentina is characterized by regulatory advances and free education. However, there is insufficient supply, and informal systems are widespread among vulnerable populations, which lack guidance and supervision, and virtually provide welfare aid rather than educational services.

Keywords: early childhood education; social inequality; right to education; institutional quality; Latin America; United Kingdom.

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1. Introduction: early childhood education as the first step in children's formative path

There is sufficient and robust evidence about the benefits of early inclusion of children in care and educational programs. Some of the most recognized examples are: High/Scope Perry Preschool Project and the Early Head Start Program in the United States, Effective Preschool and Primary Education (EPPE) in the United Kingdom, Integrated Child Development Service (ICDS) in India, and in Latin America, the Promise Program in Colombia, and the Comprehensive Child Development Project (PIDI by its acronym in Spanish) in Bolivia (Siraj-Blatchford & Woodhead, 2009).

An element which is common to these research efforts is that they all start from the implementation of child educational programs in vulnerable populations, and in all cases the impact assessments for the short, medium, and long terms were positive. As a result, we should highlight the importance of comprehensive and high-quality early intervention. Likewise, the above-mentioned studies recognize the window of opportunity that early childhood represents in achieving greater equality in the initial stages of life. In summary, the main findings supporting early childhood education include: (a) greater achievements, in terms of development of cognitive, and socio-emotional skills in children participating in the programs; (b) sustained achievements over time in performance indicators and subsequent educational paths, such as a decrease in the rates of dropout and grade repetition; and (c) early development of literacy skills.

Precisely, one of the indicators of educational outcomes that shows greater social inequalities and also correlates with early educational experiences is one that emerges from the PISA assessments (by its acronym in English that stands for Program for International Student Assessment). This test measures teenager's performance in some of the skills and knowledge that school subjects are meant to promote. One of these is the reading skill, which was divided into 6 proficiency levels. In 2018, 77.3% of 15-year-olds in Latin America only reached level 2 at best, while in OECD countries this percentage was 46.3%. When analyzing the data obtained for Argentina and the United Kingdom, we observed that the gap between both countries is considerable. In the former, the general average is below the regional average, and 8 out of 10 students in the above-mentioned age group had a performance equivalent to level 2 at best (Arena et al., 2019)², whereas in the latter, the average increased slightly from the 2015 measurement and is higher than that obtained by OECD countries, with 3 out of 10 students reaching level 2³ (Sizmur et al., 2019).

It can be easily noted that progress in human development within different populations responds to multiple factors. One of these factors is investment in early childhood development, which is strongly endorsed by several economic and social arguments around the future and the present of societies. This refers to the

² For teenagers, figures show that 52.1% are at level 1 or below, 25.7% are at level 2, 21.5% are in the two intermediate levels and only 0.7% are in level 5 or higher (Arena et al., 2019).

³ 17% are at level 1 or below, 23% are at level 2, 48% are at intermediate levels and 12% are in the two upper levels (Sizmur et al., 2019).

fact that launching early childhood education naturally requires labor inclusion in multiple sectors (teaching, supervision, assistance, administration, among others), and, at the same time, is essential to achieving greater equality and reducing social inequality in childhood.

Initially, the promotion of early childhood care and education was closely associated with the promotion of labor inclusion for women who are mothers, an ongoing challenge that has a positive impact on social reproduction in the most vulnerable households (Filgueira & Alicino, 2015). Progressively, advances have been made on an agenda that places the child at the center as a subject of law, with intellectual and socio-emotional skills that can be actively promoted from a very early age. However, progress is uneven not only between the countries compared in this article, but also within these countries. From an early childhood education perspective, we can recognize deep social inequalities in the distribution of resources (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977) and opportunities (Boudon, 1983) in societies with different possibilities in terms of building structures of opportunity (Kaztman, 2001). In the case of Argentina, although early childhood education includes education between the ages of 3 and 5 and daycare for infants 45 days and older, there are no equitable conditions when it comes to access and quality⁴ throughout the country (Steinberg & Giacometti, 2019). For the United Kingdom, while the level of investment in early childhood education and care is low, most children have access to quality education, albeit a few hours a week. Disparities appear to be mainly between children born to UK parents and children born to immigrant parents, who are highly vulnerable, and thus at a disadvantage when it comes to developing literacy skills⁵ (Dustmann et al., 2011)

While there is a global framework for promoting early childhood education, in many countries enrolment in early childhood education still depends on family decisions based on sociocultural, socio-educational, and socio-economic aspects that go beyond children's rights as subjects of law. It is, therefore, important to analyze the relationship between the development and welfare of different societies and early childhood education.

In this context, this paper offers a comparative analysis between early childhood education in Argentina, a developing country in Latin America, and the United Kingdom, a developed country. In 2019, field observations were conducted in one kindergartens in the city of London, England, as well as in-depth interviews with the headmistresses

⁴ Steinberg and Giacometti (2019) present evidence that around 90% of schools have classrooms for 4- and 5-year-olds, half of the centres have one classroom for 3-year-olds, and only 15% include a nursery for children under 3 years of age. While the deficit is higher for classrooms for 3-year-olds than for 4- and 5-year-olds, the most marked inequalities have to do with nurseries. Indeed, day care for babies under 3 reaches 34.8% in privately run schools and only 9.7% in state run kindergartens; 20.7% are in urban areas and 6.4% are in rural areas. There is also a high percentage of services with classrooms for 3-year-olds and high presence in contexts that correspond to socio-economic quintile 1 in the province of Buenos Aires and the City of Buenos Aires, among other jurisdictions, versus low supply of these services in contexts of high social vulnerability.

⁵ While England has a relatively small performance gap for children from immigrant families and parents whose mother tongue is not that of the school, the same cannot be said for those living in poverty, with a single parent, a teenage mother, or a mother with a low education level. More intensive efforts are needed to develop literacy skills (Dustmann et al., 2011).

of these kindergartens. An interview was also conducted with the Lead Adviser of the Early Years Team of a London borough - a public organization devoted to counselling and monitoring of children's institutions. In Argentina, observations were also made in early childhood education centers in the non-compulsory community-managed circuit, and two representatives from a foundation dedicated to vulnerable childcare in the City of Buenos Aires were interviewed. In addition, a triangulation was done between a vast dataset obtained from a thorough document review, and a statistical analysis based on the microdata from the Permanent Household Survey (EPH by its acronym in Spanish) conducted by INDEC (National Institute of Statistics and Censuses in Argentina) 2020 and Eurostat 2017⁶. That is, by using the primary data constructed and secondary sources, this article establishes a comparison between early childhood education services offered between 2010 and 2020 in Argentina and the UK, and main social inequalities in early schooling.

Although both countries have adhered to the global agenda for the promotion of early childhood education, there is a great deal of diversity in terms of offer, modality, coverage, compulsory, and free services, among other factors. Even though these differences may become indicators of the quality of educational services, a safeguard of the right to care and education, when it comes to exercising the right to early schooling, there are social inequalities in educational systems in both countries, although to a different extent, and within qualitatively different public policy frameworks.

2. Progress in Latin America and Europe: the case of Argentina and the United Kingdom

According to the international agreement reached through the Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNICEF, 2006), children are subjects of law, thereby States Parties «shall render appropriate assistance to parents and legal guardians in the performance of their child-rearing responsibilities and shall ensure the development of institutions, facilities and services for the care of children; the Convention also urges States Parties to take «all appropriate measures to ensure that children of working parents have the right to benefit from child-care services and facilities for which they are eligible» (Article 18, paragraphs 2 and 3).

The International Forum on Education for All (Fiske, 2000) committed to achieving by 2015 the goal of expanding and improving early childhood care and education, with a special emphasis on the most vulnerable groups. Based on this, the Forum's objectives envisage three key aspects: (a) achieving education for all; (b) expanding coverage; and (c) achieving quality and equality in care and education services. It also underscores the importance of guiding actions towards the education of parents and educators in the field of childcare (Art. 30 and 31)⁷.

⁶ We thank the Office for National Statistics for facilitating access to Eurostat microdata. Social Survey Division, Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency and Eurostat, European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions.

⁷ Statements made at this Forum were preceded by the World Conference on Education for All held in Jontiem, Thailand, whose declaration states that learning starts at birth (UNESCO, 1990, Art. 5).

At the same time, but in Latin America, education ministers met in Cochabamba and made a groundbreaking statement on the importance of providing early childhood care and education services. This document sets out goals for 2015, aimed at achieving the universalization of education for children between the ages of 3 and 6 and progressively expanding care and education services for children under 3. Additionally, it highlights the importance of prioritizing coverage for the most vulnerable populations (UNESCO, 2001).

The following year, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), which brings together most of the European Union countries, presented a document entitled «Small children, big challenges: Early Childhood Education and Care». It acknowledges the social conditionings and trends that make early childhood education particularly relevant. In other words, given the rise in female employment and in the number of children from single-parent households, there is a need for policies to reconcile work and family life and promote gender equality. This is why it promotes (a) expanding services to achieve universal access, (b) improving service quality through greater consistency and coordination between services and policies, (c) planning strategies to ensure adequate investment in the system, (d) improving staff training and working conditions, among other initiatives (OCDE, 2001).

The Educational Goals 2021 are very much in line with these ideas. Education for the generation of the Bicentennial of the Organization of Ibero-American States (OEI, 2010b) establishes a commitment to «increase the offer of early childhood education and enhance the educational nature of this stage», as well as to «ensure sufficient training for educators who are responsible for providing those services». In addition, in the declaration from the 20th Ibero-American Summit of Heads of State and Government (OEI, 2010a), the States committed to «increasing the supply of comprehensive care for early childhood and ensuring quality services».

A few years later, in 2017, the OECD (2017) well-being and learning. Having timely, reliable and comparable international information is essential to help countries improve their ECEC services and systems. For over 15 years, the OECD has been conducting policy analysis and gathering new data on ECEC. For the first time, this report brings together all the key ECEC indicators in one volume. It presents an exhaustive overview of ECEC systems and provision as well as trend data and information on recent reforms. The report takes a hard look at issues such as access and governance, equity, financing, curriculum, the teaching workforce and parent engagement. Key challenges for improving the ECEC sector are identified. With around 45 charts and data for the 35 OECD countries and a number of partner countries, the publication also includes a great deal of new material. It offers new data on ECEC provision and intensity of participation for children under the age of three (based on an improved typology of settings presented a new document called «Starting Strong 2017»). The document acknowledges that Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) is beneficial to all children, provided it is high quality. It even shows that according to the results of the PISA 2015 assessment, in virtually all OECD countries, 15-year-old children who had access to ECEC performed better than their peers who did not attend early childhood centers. In addition, the report indicates that disadvantaged children benefit the most, so focusing on them would provide the best returns.

At the beginning of the 2010's, several Latin American countries converged into a demographic dynamic called the «demographic bonus» and advanced in the construction of comprehensive protection subsystems focused on early childhood, namely: «Chile Crece Contigo» (Chile grows with you), «Uruguay Crece Contigo» (Uruguay grows with you), «Cero a Siempre» (From zero to forever) in Colombia, «Primero Años» (Early years) in Argentina; among others. These subsystems of comprehensive childcare protection become a top priority in welfare systems. Through these systems, the States take responsibility in the provision of childcare and recognize the child as a subject of rights (Tuñón, 2015). In Argentina, these early childhood care and education systems account for almost one-third of the investment in early childhood, which in 2017 reached 1.9% of the country's GDP (UNICEF, 2019), i.e. approximately 0.57% of Argentina's GDP was geared towards early care and education.

In turn, the Education Committee of the House of Commons in the United Kingdom states that inclusion in early childhood institutions is essential to overcome childhood inequalities. They cite research conducted by the Institute of Education that asserts that State-run day care centers are in the best position to address the gaps; they are the most integrated with the community and with services to families, they have highly qualified teaching and management teams, and they have the highest quotas for vulnerable children. In 2015, 64% of the quotas were in the top 30% vulnerable areas in the UK (Allan et al., 2019). However, in the United Kingdom, public spending on education and care system for children between 0 and 2 years of age is equivalent to 0.1% of its GDP and 0.4% of its GDP goes to schooling between age 3, and compulsory education. In sum, around 0.50% of UK's GDP is earmarked for early childhood care and education (CEEDA, 2019).

Similarly, over the past decade, Argentina has made progress in recognizing children's right to care and education from an early age. So much so that the National Education Act #26206 gives early childhood education its own identity as a «pedagogical unit» and promotes a set of objectives linked to the human and social development of children. Although the legal framework promotes the inclusion of children between 45 days and 5 years of age, in 2014 education and care became compulsory as from the age of 4, and the national and provincial governments pledged to advance towards the universalization of education and care for children aged 3 (Law No. 27.045)⁸.

According to provisions in the Childcare Act, the public education system consists of three stages: primary, secondary, and higher education. However, one of the changes in this century is that, as from 2002, a clarification note was included stating that primary education refers to part-time or full-time education for children aged 2 and older, who still have not reached compulsory school age (Education Act

⁸ The compulsory nature of early childhood education is still relative because it depends on service offerings and the scope of coverage of the different jurisdictions in the provinces, given that Argentina has a federal education system, which is both decentralized and deregulated (Pereyra and Esquivel, 2017; Unicef, 2019). In many jurisdictions, insufficient State coverage is supplemented by privately managed services and community centres. Although in the inter-census period 2001-2010, the early childhood education enrolment increased by 45%, it is still insufficient (Sverdlick and Austral, 2013; Unicef, 2019).

1996, n.d.). In addition, the United Kingdom, as part of its commitment with the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals, has set as 4th goal achieving equality in education and promoting learning opportunities, giving access to high-quality education and extending coverage to 30 paid hours of child care to children at risk of exclusion (Gov. Uk, n.d.-f). In addition, there are so-called Sure Start Center (Gov.Uk, n.d.-c) that provide help and counselling on issues such as child and family health, parenting, money administration, training and employment. Some centers also provide early education and full-day care for preschool children. That is, the Sure Start Centers is a centralized comprehensive policy launched by the UK government mainly targeted at children in England.

In short, both in Argentina and the United Kingdom children have the right to early schooling and there are comprehensive care programs in place targeted at the most vulnerable populations. However, in Argentina the offer of early childhood education services does not seem to be enough to meet potential demand (Pereyra & Esquivel, 2017; UNICEF, 2019), while in the case of the United Kingdom there are sociocultural barriers that delay early inclusion, and specific issues such as migration (Dustmann et al., 2011)

3. Social inequalities in early childhood education enrolment

Boys and girls between 0 and 5 years of age are estimated to represent 6.4% and 6.7% of the total population in the United Kingdom and Argentina, respectively. Although citizen well-being levels differ between both countries, and they are clearly regressive in the latter -regardless of whether they are measured and compared against the Human Development Index (HDI), average income, or minimum wage-⁹ the participation of early childhood in the family's per-capita income structure is similar. That is, most children in both countries come from lower-income households (see Tables 1 and 2). However, it is quite clear that the chances of belonging to the top 25% high-income households, doubles in the United Kingdom if compared with Argentina (11.9% and 6.6%, respectively).

The enrolment rate in early childhood education, between 0 and 5 years of age is somewhat higher in the United Kingdom than in Argentina (56.1% and 51.7% respectively). But Table 3 shows that the most significant difference is recorded in the 2 to 4 years age group. It is worth mentioning that in Argentina kindergarten is compulsory for 4-year-olds, while in the United Kingdom it is still optional. However,

⁹ In 2019 the estimated gross national income in the United Kingdom was USD42,370 and in Argentina it amounted to USD11,200. See World Bank data in <https://datos.bancomundial.org>. In 2019 the minimum wage was estimated at 270 euros in Argentina, while in the United Kingdom it was 1583 euros. <https://datosmacro.expansion.com/>. Also for 2019, the Human Development Index (HDI) was estimated at 0.920 for the United Kingdom (position 15 in the global ranking) and 0.830 for Argentina (48 in the global ranking) http://hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/hdr_2019_overview_-_spanish.pdf. The Gini coefficient was 0.429 over total household income for Argentina and 0.347 for the United Kingdom, in 2019, while at the beginning of the decade it was 0.436 and 0.366, respectively. <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SI.POV.GINI?end=2019&locations=AR&start=2010>. In 2018, the birth rate was 17 per 1,000 inhabitants in Argentina, and 11 per 1,000 inhabitants in the United Kingdom, while in 2010, it was 18 and 13, respectively. <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/personalandhouseholdfinances/incomeandwealth/dat>

early childhood education enrolment levels are higher in the UK (12 percentage points higher).

Although inequalities in the likelihood of a child going to school, between the poorest 25% and the wealthiest 25%, is much greater for children in Argentina than in the United Kingdom (25.3 and 7.5 percentage points, respectively in the 2-4 age group), in the United Kingdom there is less differentiation between the middle-income strata and the top segment, and rates are higher among children in intermediate quartiles than in both ends. In Argentina, as per capita family income decreases so do the chances of enrolling children in early childhood education. On the other hand, there is more enrolment (schooling) in the top 25% in Argentina than in the United Kingdom, while in the rest of the quartiles it is the other way around (see Table 3).

In summary, in the United Kingdom early childhood education enrolment rate is higher than in Argentina; most notably, there is less inequality in the United Kingdom than in Argentina, as a result of a more equitable average enrolment rate in quartiles 3, 4 and 5 of per capita family income, and a greater differentiation compared to quartile 1. In Argentina, the gap, in terms of chances of enrolling in early childhood education, between children in the top income quartile and the rest is considerable.

According to official data from the UK Department for Education, 64% of children aged 0 to 4 in early childhood education attend formal institutions, and 33% attend informal organizations¹⁰ (Department for Education, 2019). In contrast, in Argentina, even though there are differences between jurisdictions, it is estimated that between 10% and 20% of children between the ages of 3 and 4 enrolled in early childhood education attend informal organizations (early childhood spaces and other community-based initiatives) (Steinberg & Giacometti, 2019).

Table 1. Data on relative poverty based on per capita household income by age group. *As a percentage of boys and girls between 0 and 5 years of age.*

	United Kingdom			Argentina		
	0 to 5 years of age	2 to 5 years of age	2 to 4 years of age	0 to 5 years of age	2 to 5 years of age	2 to 4 years of age
Under 60% of median	45.7	46.6	46.2	56.1	55.5	55.3
Under 50% of median	33.8	34.9	34.8	46.0	45.8	45.8
Under 40% of median	21.9	22.9	22.8	32.1	32.3	32.2

Source: Drafted by the authors of the paper based on EPH-INDEC (Permanent Household Survey - National Institute of Statistics and Censuses) 2020 database for Argentina and Eurostat 2017 for United Kingdom.

¹⁰ See section «Characteristics of early childhood care and education offerings and promotion modes and methods».

Table 2. Quartile distribution of boys and girls by per capita family income. *As a percentage of boys and girls between 0 and 5 years of age*

	United Kingdom			Argentina		
	0 to 5 years of age	2 to 5 years of age	2 to 4 years of age	0 to 5 years of age	2 to 5 years of age	2 to 4 years of age
Bottom 25% (Q1)	50.2	51.2	49.8	55.6	55.1	55.0
Low 25% (Q2)	23.4	23.1	23.2	24.7	25.1	25.1
Intermediate 25% (Q3)	14.5	13.7	14.4	13.1	12.9	13.6
Top 25% (Q4)	11.9	12.0	12.5	6.6	6.9	6.3
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: Drafted by the authors of the paper based on EPH-INDEC (Permanent Household Survey - National Institute of Statistics and Censuses) 2020 database for Argentina and Eurostat 2017 for United Kingdom.

Table 3. Enrolment rate in early childhood education (quartiles) by per capita household income. *In percentage of boys and girls between 0 and 5 years of age.*

	Bottom 25% (Q1)	Low 25% (Q2)	Intermediate 25% (Q3)	Top 25% (Q4)	Total
United Kingdom					
0 to 5 years of age	52.5%	60.2%	57.5%	61.8%	56.1%
2 to 5 years of age	63.0%	72.0%	66.0%	66.7%	65.9%
2 to 4 years of age	59.2%	68.9%	68.4%	66.7%	63.7%
Argentina					
0 to 5 years of age	49.5%	51.7%	52.3%	69.6%	51.7%
2 to 5 years of age	61.6%	62.6%	65.4%	82.5%	63.8%
2 to 4 years of age	48.5%	49.3%	55.0%	73.8%	51.2%

Source: Drafted by the authors of the paper based on EPH-INDEC (Permanent Household Survey - National Institute of Statistics and Censuses) 2020 database for Argentina and Eurostat 2017 for United Kingdom.

4. Characteristics of early childhood care and education offer and promotion modes and methods

In the United Kingdom, there are elective family financial support systems covering childcare in formal and informal care and/or education centers. In Argentina, on the other hand, while compulsory early childhood education is free, depending on the jurisdiction, there is a wide range of privately-run organizations that provide coverage, especially for those age groups where State-run compulsory education centers are not enough to meet demand. There are self-managed community services that started in vulnerable social sectors and are now co-administered with the State and civil society organizations.

One of UK's outstanding programs is called «15 hours of free child care», which means that the State covers 15 hours of child care per week during 38 weeks for 2-year-olds whose families receive social benefits or meet other eligibility criteria (low family income, people with disabilities, immigrants, among others) (Working Families, n.d.); (Gov.Uk, n.d.-e). On the other hand, for children aged 3 and 4, there are no requirements other than living in the country and attending a registered center. Alternatively, children can take fewer hours for more weeks (Gov.Uk, n.d.-d). This benefit may increase to 30 hours for the 3-4 age group; if not all hours are taken and the authority of the facility agrees, coverage can be extended to 52 weeks. (Gov.Uk, n.d.-a). In this case, the requirement is for fathers and mothers to work.

In order to apply for 30 hours of free care, both single-parent and two-parent families are required to earn, on average, the equivalent to 16 hours of National minimum wage per week¹¹. In addition, self-employed people and those who are employed but are under zero-hours contracts may also apply if they meet the established income thresholds. However, admission is denied if one or both parents do not receive a salary; they are not eligible either if they study or train, unless they also have a paid job for which they receive, on average, the minimum wage threshold (PACEY, 2015).

This policy has not gone uncriticized. The Education Committee of the House of Commons (Allan et al., 2019), researchers at Sutton Trust (Archer & Merrick, 2020) and the Lead Adviser of the Early Years Team who was interviewed¹² argued that this plan deepens inequalities. Extended coverage has put more economic pressure on kindergartens because the funds the State allocates for each spot are insufficient, and this results in lower chances of having vacancies for eligible 2-year-old children who are more likely to come from vulnerable contexts. In addition, for the 3-4 age group, the problem is that in order to expand attendance, children are eligible provided they come from working classes; this establishes a deeper gap,

¹¹ This is currently £107 but should not exceed £100,000 per year. A household with an annual family income that amounts to £199,998 may also be eligible as long as each adult earns less than £100,000 (PACEY, 2015).

¹² The qualitative fieldwork was carried out during the month of October 2019 in London, and in 2020 in Buenos Aires. In-depth interviews were conducted with qualified key informants from the Early Years Team in one borough, and also in four formal kindergarten, located in another geographical area. Observations were conducted on the facilities and on the dynamic of the activities between children and teachers.

even more so if we consider that kindergartens prefer to cover their vacancies with students who receive support for more hours. However, it is estimated that about 90% of eligible children applying for extended rights funds end up getting a spot.

In the case of Argentina, another significant step ahead was the adoption of Law 26.233 on Child Development Centers, which provides for their promotion and regulation. Under this Act, a Child Development Centre is a «space which provides comprehensive care to children up to 4 years of age, and strives to instill, in families and communities, skills and abilities to promote and protect children's rights» (Article 2). Within the framework of this Act, the «Creciendo Juntos» program has been developed under the Ministry of Social Development and the Ministry of Education of Argentina. This program seeks to build, refurbish, expand, and equip early childhood care spaces throughout the country; and to provide training to those educators, mothers, caregivers, cooks, nutritionists, and professionals who work in schools.

In this context, it is worth mentioning the Community Child Development Centers (CDIs by its acronym in Spanish) present in different jurisdictions of the country, the Early Childhood Spaces (EPI by its acronym in Spanish), more active in the Greater Buenos Aires,¹³ and the Early Childhood Centers (CPI by its acronym in Spanish) in the City of Buenos Aires. These centers and spaces are targeted at the population of children between 45 days and 4-5 years of age, from the most vulnerable social segments, who for various reasons do not have access to State-run early childhood education. These Community Kindergartens emerged in vulnerable neighborhoods as an initiative promoted by social organizations during the 2001-2002 social crisis in Argentina. Although in principle they focus on childcare, they have progressively advanced towards the notion of schooling where they combine elements of formal and non-formal education. Buildings, resources, and staff are funded by the State, but maintenance is undertaken by civil associations. They started as community self-managed organizations (Gluz and Rodríguez Moyano, 2017). These care and education centers are part of the informal, partly deregulated services offered, so there are controversies around the quality of these educational and pedagogical services (Manrique & Borzone, 2012; Cardini & Guevara, 2019; Steinberg & Giacometti, 2019; Steinberg & Scasso, 2019).

In the Early Childhood Centers, the population is eligible according to the Social Vulnerability Index (SVI) that assigns a score to each household based on demographic, economic, housing, and access to education and health indicators. The higher the index value, the higher the level of vulnerability (UNICEF, 2019a). As one of the interviewees put it, there is no eligibility indicator concerning the work situation of the adults in charge of the child. However, Early Childhood Centers provide full-time, eight-hour comprehensive care intended to improve employability for the parents of those children.

It is easy to notice that in Argentina, care and education services involving children between 0 and 4 years of age are under different government and social institutions (Ministries of Education, social and community organizations, as well as

¹³ Many of these early childhood centres, under the shape of Community Child Care Kindergartens, are part of the Child Development Units Program (UDI by its acronym in Spanish) under the Ministry of Social Development of the Province of Buenos Aires.

entrepreneurs). These various institutions offer different care options (early childhood care centers, kindergartens, child development centers, etc.), but lack a common regulatory framework, so they fail to guarantee sufficient training for educators, and are also insufficient in terms of coverage to safeguard the rights of all children to care and education in their first years of life.

Indeed, early childhood education is offered by organizations with a combination of State, private and community management (neighborhood initiatives, church, or trade union movements), which fall under the Ministry of Education or the Ministry of Social Development (Quiroz & Pieri, 2011). They can also be differentiated according to the age group they serve, the management and teaching staff available, the organization of the classrooms (by age group or mixed), the length of the school day (simple, extended, or full day, i.e., 3, 6 and 8 hours, respectively), morning, afternoon, or evening hours, and whether they are autonomous or depend on primary education, among other considerations. Thus, throughout the country there are children attending independent start-up schools, equipped with their own infrastructure, and managed by their own team, in classrooms for children ranging from 45 days to 5 years of age. And also, although in smaller numbers, there are children attending a classroom for 5-year-olds attached to a primary school, with an early childhood education teacher, a management team and a building that belongs to the primary school (Cardini & Guevara, 2019; Steinberg & Scasso, 2019).

On the other hand, it is interesting to note the differences in the number of attendance hours, as well as the number of students per teacher. In the case of the United Kingdom, according to the headmistress of a formal educational center, children can attend a maximum of 55 hours per week, and a minimum of 10 hours per week (i.e., at least twice a week). Classes for toddlers up to 2 years of age are usually organized in groups of 12, and for preschoolers in groups of up to 20. In classrooms for children up to 2 years of age, there is 1 teacher every 3 children; for classrooms for children aged 2 and older, there is one teacher every 4 children, and for classrooms for 3-year-olds, there is one teacher every 8 children. Teachers always work together, and there is never only one teacher in the room, even when there is only one child.

In contrast, in Argentina it is estimated that over 90% of schools have, on average, less than 20 pupils per classroom in childcare centers, and one third of schools have less than 10 pupils per classroom. As for kindergartens, 75% have, on average, 25 pupils per section or classroom. In this case, only 14% of schools have classrooms with fewer than 10 pupils, on average. The situation of schools with 20 or more pupils per section in childcare, and/or 25 pupils per section in kindergarten, could be considered the most critical (UNICEF, 2019a). According to data from the interviews, community/social educational centers attended by the most vulnerable social sectors usually have one qualified teacher per classroom and one assistant teacher per classroom or every other classroom. There are heterogeneities in the composition of work teams, but they are usually interdisciplinary (nutritionists, psycho-pedagogical counsellors, assistant teachers, social workers, cleaning, and kitchen personnel, etc.). In fact, there is no mandatory professional staff, teams are put together based on the resources of each center. Formal State-run early childhood education offerings have smaller teams composed of a qualified teacher

per section and several assistants per shift, plus a Physical Education PE teacher and a music teacher.

In the UK, some formal educational institutions include pre-school and childcare centers for children aged 3 to 5, and classrooms for children aged 4 to 5 —i.e., child-care centers, special day schools, play groups, child caregivers, babysitters, breakfast clubs, after-school clubs, and holiday clubs. On the other hand, there are informal childcare services including those provided by relatives, friends, or neighbors. In addition, in the educational space observed in the city of London there are three music-related activities (singing, dancing, and playing different instruments), and Early Years Lessons, which focus on literacy and mathematics. There are extracurricular activities such as introduction to French, ballet, or yoga. There are also outdoor activities in the kindergarten, and parents are sometimes invited to play with their children.

In Argentina, formal State-run early childhood education offerings are mostly 3- or 4-hour days in which activities focus on cognitive and motor development, specifically reinforced with PE and musical education stimuli. These kindergartens usually offer a snack for breakfast or tea, depending on the shift. In turn, the community centers offer double shift days, where children have breakfast, lunch, and an afternoon snack at the center. In the morning, children usually carry out dynamic activities, and in the afternoon, they take a nap. Once they wake up, they do some more exercises until they are picked up to go back home. Occasionally, they go out to play in an open space or to a nearby square or park, subject to parent's authorization. Each classroom follows a plan in line with the goals of the year. These goals focus on motor and cognitive progress from a holistic developmental perspective, that is, they encompass the acquisition of habits such as potty training and hygiene routines, knowledge about comprehensive sex education, or interacting with peers or adults using spoken language¹⁴.

In addition, State-run early childhood education centers have a Toy Library Program, under the National Ministry of Education of Argentina, which falls within the scope of the National Education and Core Learning Priorities Act. This program offers a selection of games, toys and materials linked to the corresponding preschool objectives and content (UNICEF, 2013).

5. On the professionalization of care and education systems

The Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) (Gov.Uk, n.d.-b) is an independent, non-ministerial department established in 1992 that primarily assesses the teaching quality of formal or informal institutions and

¹⁴ Now, with the COVID-19 pandemic, Early Childhood Centers are handing out bags with snacks that children usually eat during their school day. This was the only measure put in place by the Ministry of Social Development. As lockdown continued, and indeed has extended for five months in Argentina, authorities suggested incorporating some resources to stimulate children at home. Thus, some Early Childhood Centres added resources to the goodie bags handed out to families with proposed activities to do at home, such as storytelling, song-singing, and game-playing. If the families have access to communication technologies, they communicate with teachers. Strategies are heterogeneous and depend on the initiatives of each Early Childhood Centre team.

organizations in the UK¹⁵, and grades them (inadequate/requires improvement/good/outstanding). It inspects education services and teaching skills at all levels, monitors child-care and oversees other child-related processes, such as adoptions, among others. Once the field work is completed, Ofsted publishes reports on the evaluation of formal institutions in order to improve the standards of the educational system and teacher professionalization. In addition, they are in touch with public officials to report on the effectiveness of these services. It is worth mentioning that Ofsted has a virtual map with the location and score of educational or childcare centers. Thus, before enrolling their children, families can access the reports that Ofsted prepares on each kindergarten or nursery (Find a good nursery, n.d. and Watchsted, n.d.).

However, the Lead Adviser of the Early Years Team who was interviewed mentioned that one of the difficulties is that there is little teacher professionalization because there is a misconception that taking care of young children requires no training. Ofsted is aware of this situation and works to advise kindergartens with qualified staff and people who work at home or at somebody else's home providing independent childcare (nannies, or the like).

On the other hand, in Argentina, there is no agency performing rigorous evaluation and monitoring of early childhood education. Formal State-run educational offerings are under the Ministry of Education of Argentina and provincial ministries, which govern and supervise the early childhood education system, but do not conduct public quality assessments. In the case of extensive non-formal early childhood education, there is no unified, standardized, regular monitoring and quality assessment system in place. There are no technical support or guidance protocols for the design of the pedagogical proposal (UNICEF, CIPPEC, FLACSO, 2019 to b). Although there is a National Registry for Early Childhood Centers (RENEPI by its acronym in Spanish), it does not provide information on the quality of formal or informal educational centers.

Finally, early childhood education offerings are characterized by their heterogeneity in terms of the professionalization of staff. On the one hand, there are State-run educational offerings, under the Ministry of Education, with early childhood education teachers in the classroom; those teachers have completed a 4-year non-university higher education course. On the other hand, there are self-managed community offerings, led by «mothers who work as caregivers», which may or may not be under the Ministry of Social Development, and have a mixed staff, in terms of professionalization¹⁶. It appears that teachers in community-based

¹⁵ For details on who are exempted from registering, visit the following link: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/exemption-notification-form-for-childcare-providers-that-operate-for-14-days-or-less-in-a-12-month-period>

¹⁶ In September 2014, the Province of Buenos Aires passed and enacted the Law on Incorporation of Community Schools into the Formal Education System (Law #79413/14). Article 5 of the Act stipulates that «early childhood community educators are those who provide education in early childhood community educational centers»; and Article 11 states that «in cases where early childhood community educational centers, which provide education and care for children aged 4 and 5, have community educators without a teaching degree, the Directorate-General for Culture and Education will adopt measures for those community educators to obtain the corresponding degree, by assessing and validating their experience and training».

self-managed kindergartens, who provide childcare solutions to the most vulnerable social strata of the population, perform this task without any formal training, have no employment contract or social security, and receive a minimum wage and/or a «symbolic» payment. However, for these women engaging in these activities is a way of stepping out of the household and into collective and solidarity spaces which lend them more autonomy and empowerment (Pereyra & Esquivel, 2017).

The so-called «mothers who work as caregivers» or «caring mothers» are non-teacher educators who are often recruited from vulnerable neighborhoods for their human values, their predisposition towards children and their role as mothers to several children. However, the socio-educational level of these «caring mothers» is often extremely low: many of them have been unable to finish primary school. Caring mothers exercise their role as caregivers/ educators making use of the knowledge they have built throughout their lives as students, girls, sisters, and mothers. Therefore, they lack essential pedagogical and educational resources to boost child development.

Borzzone and Manrique (2012) point out to the complexities that these caregivers, encounter when, for example, they read stories. These researchers refer to studies that recognize the difficulties that caring mothers experience in understanding the meaning of the stories they read. This is to be expected, because reading is an activity foreign to the immediate environment where these women and the children they provide care to are inserted.

The need for specific training to carry out these essential early childhood education activities, such as stimulation through language, is apparent. Borzzone and Manrique (2012) explain that the meaning of the text is built interactively, with the information provided by the adult through reading, story illustrations and a complex process called «intratextual speech». This process requires an adult with the ability to understand the text and anticipate the difficulties it may entail for children.

This weakness in the professionalization of human resources was also brought forward in a recent assessment conducted by the Early Childhood Spaces (EPI by its acronym in Spanish) in the Greater Buenos Aires. Indeed, the IDB study indicates that the average EPI score in language modelling falls into the middle-to-low range and that this is linked to the quality of the processes and the training of educators. There were also challenges in the development of language and pre-reading skills and, specifically, in the use of books, which reveals a fairly widespread absence of books as a resource and of reading activities (López Bóo & Ferro Venegas, 2019).

There is considerable consensus around the fact that community care and education centers targeted at the most vulnerable social sectors lack clear guidelines for organizing the roles, activities, and resources in institutions. In other words, the concept of «associated management», which engages other agencies or entities, should be redefined to provide a stronger framework in terms of objectives, resource management, day-to-day activities, wage allocation, supervision, among others.

On the other hand, in the kindergartens visited in the city of London, classrooms for young children have plenty of resources, stationery, technological devices and some musical instruments. Classrooms are spacious and are adequately staffed with teaching personnel. To illustrate Ofsted's job, the score given to the center in the public report was «good». Among other positive aspects, the report highlights that children

are closely followed-up by teachers and that they propose activities with parents so that they can actively engage in their children's learning. The only suggestion Ofsted made was that the teachers should plan an even wider range of activities for younger children to be enthusiastic about facing new challenges.¹⁷ In addition, the interviewee mentioned that the supervisor once paid a visit, gave feedback on what the center had to improve, and teachers received their training packages. Also, when asked what kind of comments they made about the kindergarten itself or the services offered, the headmistress replied that they had once recommended the day-care center to put fewer books at children's reach, because if there are too many books available, children may feel overwhelmed; whereas if there are only a couple of them, children are more likely to select one, sit and have a look at it. In turn, she told us that since this agency does not fund the center, teachers may or may not take their recommendations into consideration. Also the Lead Adviser of the Early Years Team that we interviewed made this observation.

As they plan their curriculum following the standards set up by the EYFS (Early Years Foundation Stage), proposed by the United Kingdom, they teach literacy skills to children since they are babies and until they turn 5. . Literacy for infants involves using a variety of graphic and auditory resources. They follow certain steps, but also pay attention to each child's individual interests and skills. In some cases, English is their second language and they started day care later than other children, so they acquire literacy skills more slowly. First, they focus on personal and emotional development. They start from an early age with books, songs, photos, and images that children are asked to recognize. With preschoolers, aged 3 to 5, they work particularly with phonetics. The results are really good because those who graduate from the kindergarten start school knowing how to read and write.

6. Conclusions

Amidst global regulatory and institutional advances in comprehensive care and early childhood education systems, recommendations to extend coverage, introduce earlier schooling, and improvements in the quality of educational offerings and professionalization at this educational stage are particularly relevant. Against this backdrop, considerable quantitative and especially qualitative disparities can be recognized in early childhood care and education systems. Those disparities were to be expected, given the prevailing contrast between the United Kingdom and Argentina, in terms of citizen well-being and educational achievements.

The progress made in terms of rights in Argentina is remarkable; Argentina has indeed overtaken the UK's regulatory framework development, when it comes to thresholds for compulsory early childhood education, which in Argentina starts at age 4 whereas in the United Kingdom it starts at age 5. Also, Argentina has promoted early childhood education as a right for children starting at 45 days old, and free education, although it has not succeeded in galvanizing the necessary institutional advances to guarantee the supply of those services. In the UK, on the other hand,

¹⁷ Ofsted's report is not cited to ensure the anonymity of the people interviewed and the institution they work for.

childcare systems have been especially targeted at vulnerable sectors by way of eligibility criteria, quality service offerings for these social sectors and some weekly school hours restrictions. In the United Kingdom, eligibility criteria still focus on parent's labor inclusion. This criterion undermines the notion of children as subjects of law, entitled to State policies designed according to the specific needs of children per age bracket. In contrast, in Argentina, the eligibility criteria targeted at vulnerable populations, are not limited to parent's labor inclusion.

Statistical estimates revealed that, on average, in the UK, compared to Argentina, enrolment rate for children aged 2 to 5 is higher, there is less social inequality but also less coverage of low- and middle-income sectors. It is also worth mentioning that enrolment rates among children in higher income groups is lower in the UK, than in Argentina. This challenges early childhood care systems and education services for households in the top 25%. The hypothesis is that part of these more well-off families have shifted their «investment» in culture and have opted for care and education alternatives outside of the formal system.

There is international consensus on a set of quality parameters for early childhood education for which this paper provides some comparative evidence. On the one hand, we wish to highlight the quality assessment of early childhood education done and made publicly available by Ofsted in the UK. In Argentina, there is no such thing. On the other hand, it is recognized that staff stability and professionalization, group size, number of children per adult, and the presence of a second adult in the room are essential for early childhood education (Canetti et al., 2015, 2015; Lopez Boo, 2019).

Regarding these basic albeit essential quality criteria, it should be noted that community/social, and/or mixed management care and education centers, which in Argentina serve the most vulnerable social sectors, do not give work stability. These centers offer precarious working conditions, a situation which greatly differs from the more stable conditions promoted in formal education and even more so in the United Kingdom.

International recommendations stipulate that particularly among children under 3 years of age, there should be at least one adult every three to five children. It is also recommended to have groups of 8 to 10 children per classroom. The rationale behind those recommendations is that they facilitate a stronger teacher / child bond, a caring environment, emotional availability, and more flexible management. Also, the presence of a second adult (assistant) is extremely relevant in terms of quality of care and education, and protection of the rights of the child (potential witness). These parameters are present in educational offerings in the United Kingdom, but are far from being applied in Argentina, where formal and informal care systems coexist and show uneven levels of institutional organization and management. It is easy to notice that a significant part of the educational offerings aimed at the most vulnerable social sectors are characterized by low quality, lack of supervision and guidance, and a strong focus on welfare aid, rather than on education itself. How paradoxical is it that the school level that should promote greater equality at the beginning of life is one of the most fragmented in terms of care and educational offerings. In the United Kingdom, progress on quality offerings aimed at the most

vulnerable seems to be a mark of recent decades, with significant achievements in the field of early literacy.

Professionalization of staff in early childhood care and education organizations also poses a significant challenge in both developed and developing countries. However, in a developing country such as Argentina, with child poverty and low levels of citizen well-being, there is lack of training, particularly among the care and education staff working in these vulnerable social sectors. Specific training on child development is required, as is recognized in Argentina, where education professionals coexist with «caring mothers» who lack sufficient training and whose contribution is based on personal experiences that do not always prepare them for the required role or give them the skills needed to recognize developmental problems and communicate them to parents. Although, in the beginning, these self-managed care centers, which stemmed from grass-roots sectors to solve problems based on skills and accumulated social capital, were pondered as an instrument to bring cohesion and empowerment to women, now we could argue that such capital has been exhausted. Care and education offerings in grass-roots sectors have not been sufficiently accompanied by investment policies in infrastructure, human resources, and training, and are experiencing «social isolation», which does not translate into better development opportunities for children.

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