

Más Que Palabras [More Than Words]: Chaos, Discourse, and Praxis in Ecuador's Early Childhood Policy

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Abstract

The Ecuadorian government's lackluster implementation of its Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) policies merits further scrutiny. Seeking to catalyze change, we explored the discourse surrounding ECCE in Ecuador, as represented in government (n = 22) and media documents (n = 110) as well as social media posts (n = 253) to unveil incongruencies between policy and reality. Utilizing Critical Policy Analysis and an ecological lens, our semiotic discourse analysis study uncovered promising ECCE conceptualizations, contrasting the dissonances between propaganda and implemented policy. In a country shaped by political chaos, ecological warfare, and narco-violence, ECCE is not immune to these forces, as reflected by policymakers' stances and implementations. Findings and recommendations are provided to guide future policies.

Keywords

Ecuador, early childhood policy, discourse analysis, GERM, critical policy analysis

Background

The Global Educational Reform Movement (GERM), with neoliberalism and standardization at its core, is a formidable force permeating education systems worldwide (Sahlberg, 2011). In emerging countries, nonprofit governmental (NGOs) and philanthropic agencies have been critical in spreading this movement (Yoon, 2024). Ecuador, a country rich in resources but drowning in political and economic turmoil and heavily reliant on the international community, is no-exception. Particularly in early education, these influences are just starting to take hold, despite the limited access that young children have faced in this country. In fact, only 22% of young Ecuadorian children attend early education centers (UNICEF, 2023). ECCE, as a fundamental part of the Ecuadorian education system, is still in its infancy (UNESCO, 2006).

With around 1.5 million children under 5 years of age (PAHO, 2016), public ECCE in Ecuador includes some initiatives designed for children from birth to 5 years old. As this study will analyze, the evolution of public policy in ECCE in Ecuador has been a continuous process influenced by political, social, and economic changes and limited conceptualizations of what ECCE could be.

Early Childhood Evolution

Since 1980, Ecuador's Ministry of Social Welfare (MSW) has been responsible for directly managing preschools, with the mission to "protect" children from the effects of poverty, including abuse and malnutrition. Conventional preschools were managed and operated by the MSW in its facilities for families regrettably

labeled “at risk.” At the same time, unconventional programs involved the community, where the State offered bonuses to caregiver mothers, and the community was responsible for providing care, making improvements, and supplementing nutrition. Families were also expected to be charged fees (Soria, 2017), restricting access to children in poverty.

Between 1988 and 1992, three key initiatives were implemented: Community Child Development Centers (CCDC), Recreation and Learning Centers (RLC), and Child Development Programs (CDP) (Ruales & Sanandr s, 2015). CCDCs were neighborhood-based facilities offering early education, nutrition, and health services to children under 6, while also facilitating parental training in child development, care, and preventive health (Gavilanes, 2008). RLCs focused on providing safe spaces for play and cultural activities (Gavilanes, 2008). CDPs combined home visits and group sessions to reach families in rural and marginalized areas, promoting early stimulation, parental education, and the integration of community resources into childcare (Ruales & Sanandr s, 2015). The implementation of any initiatives was limited by a lack of coordination between the public and private sectors, institutional weaknesses, and budget cuts, which hindered effective monitoring and implementation (Alarc n, 2019).

Chaos and Upheaval

Nir and Sharma Kafle (2013) found that political stability has a significantly greater influence on the quality of education than a country’s economic status, as indicated by its GDP per capita. This has been the case for Ecuador. In the span of a decade, this country saw seven different presidents take power, many serving for only a few days (U.S. Department of

State, 2018). In 1999, Ecuador faced a severe banking crisis, forcing many citizens to emigrate while others lost their life savings. The national currency, the Sucre, was hit by extreme inflation, leading the country to adopt the U.S. dollar as its official currency in 2000. In the decade before 2007, Ecuadorians ousted two sitting presidents through mass protests and saw 19 iterations of new constitutions (Perez, 2022).

This turmoil explained how different programs were launched during the late 1990s and early 2000s but lacked cohesiveness and follow-up. These programs were government initiatives focused on child protection, health, and nutrition and laid the foundation for developing and implementing the Good Living Child Center (CIBV) model in 2006 (UNESCO, 2006). The CIBVs, renamed Child Development Centers in 2016, are Ecuador’s primary public childcare service modality. These programs provided care and nutrition to children from vulnerable families up to age 6 in rural and urban areas. Generally, they operate in co-management with community organizations, civil society, and local governments. Importantly, the central government has full control over all aspects of these centers (Comisi n Econ mica para Am rica Latina y el Caribe, 2022; Soria, 2017).

The Correa Years

Between 2007 and 2017, Ecuador, under President Rafael Correa, implemented substantial economic and institutional reforms. Social spending saw a twofold increase, with poverty decreasing by more than 41%. In comparison, the average annual per capita GDP rose by 1.6%, surpassing the growth rate of the previous 25 years by more than double, as the national debt grew due to the new spending and ever-expanding bureaucracy (Johnston & Vasic-Lalovic, 2023).

Part of that social reform included the National Decennial Education Plan: 2006-2015 (Ministerio de Educación, 2007). It proposed the universalization of Early Childhood Education for children aged 0 to 5, with specific goals such as designing the National Early Childhood Education Curriculum, a model for evaluating development and readiness, and standards for equipment, furniture, and teaching materials (Ministerio de Educación, 2007). This led to the proclamation in 2012 of Integral Child Development as a priority public policy for all children in the country (Ministerio de Inclusión Económica y Social, 2013a, 2013b). Ironically, Correa, a self-proclaimed warrior against neoliberalism policies, heavily leaned into the GERM, with myriad-protocols that emphasized standardization, accountability, and expansion of services under a rationale of restructuring educational institutions as sites for producing 'highly productive members of society'.

Furthermore, under Correa, Ecuador became increasingly polarized. While his charisma and substantial infrastructure investments boosted his popularity, he faced accusations of power abuse and press suppression (Leon Cabrera, 2020). Moreover, Correa engaged in significant corruption, involvement with criminal gangs, and unprecedented attacks on democratic institutions, including dissolving the Congress and restructuring the judicial system (Agence France-Presse, 2021). In the early years of Correa's presidency, Ecuador enjoyed an economic boom. Critics argue that the boom was driven by rising oil prices. When those prices dropped, the economy began to struggle (Leon Cabrera, 2020). Lenín Moreno took office in 2017, imposing austerity measures that led to a recession even before the COVID-19 pandemic. Within 2 years, poverty, inequality, and violence (Martínez-Pérez & Paz Enríquez, 2022) had

surged to their highest levels in more than a decade (Johnston & Vasic-Lalovic, 2023). Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic presented challenges in early childhood education as it imposed a focus on distance learning and revealed an unequal access to technology. By 2021, the proportion of children attending school before starting primary education decreased (SITEAL, 2024).

In 2023, a new government took power in the context of a critical surge of narco-violence that has triggered panic and migration. Daniel Noboa's government promised a "Nuevo Ecuador," including an overhaul in the policies regarding education at all levels (Ministerio de Educación, 2024). This overhaul incorporated the Development Plan for the New Ecuador: 2024-2025 (National Planning Council of the Republic of Ecuador & National Secretariat of Planning, 2024), which aimed to increase the net enrollment rate in education by 4%, compared to 2022. So far, nothing has been articulated or implemented, and no specific mention of ECCE has been included in this proposal.

Purpose of the Study

Limited literature has analyzed the Ecuadorian government's discourse regarding ECCE, with no research presented in peer-reviewed journals. Alarcon's (2019) thesis confirmed the constant failure to implement ECCE policies in Ecuador due to the continuous oversight of governance and lack of multisectoral collaboration. She found that centralization impeded a response to the needs of children in local contexts. Similarly, Tingo (2022) discussed the limited access and scope of ECCE public education in Ecuador. He concluded that ECCE policy, while conceived as the intersection of contexts and institutions, is still perceived as an instrument for developing

economic human capital (Tingo, 2022). Furthermore, no studies have attempted a comparative analysis of policy discourse and the reality on the ground in the Ecuadorian ECCE field. We aim to fill that gap in literature.

Beyond research goals, we call for repair and renewal, an appeal to the new government for action beyond traditional patterns of proposals and demagoguery. As evidence, we seek to unveil the dissonance between governmental stances and discourse and the reality we have seen and lived on the ground from 2007 to today. This study presents alternatives and recommendations that can catalyze advocacy in centering ECCE as a fundamental aspect of children's educational journey. These could be applied to any country facing political or social instability. We believe the new presidential elections present a unique opportunity and willingness from the government to hear our input. As such, our research questions are:

RQ1. How has the Ecuadorian government conceptualized ECCE?

RQ2. What are the differences between governmental discourse surrounding ECCE and what media (including social media) have reported as occurring on the ground?

Conceptual Framework

Critical Policy Analysis (CPA) guided our analysis. CPA proposes that policy is negotiated by different stakeholders as they make meaning of the impacts of policy (Diem et al., 2014). CPA, in particular, analyzes policy through a critical stance, highlighting the voices of the recipients of policies—in our case, Ecuadorian ECCE educators, children and families. Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory, which relates different environmental, social, and familial factors

impacting the learning and well-being of children, supports this framework. We propose that governmental policies directly affect all of the systems in a child's ecology. This framework guided our methods and data analysis and situated our findings.

Why Critical Policy Analysis?

CPA scholars have reshaped our understanding of educators and students as governed subjects (Ball, 2005; Ball et al., 2011) and, more importantly, of policy recipients who, under an often-inconsistent policy, offer possibilities for resistance.

Ball et al. (2011) notably argued that policy shapes its recipients through "a network of social practices infused with power relations" (p. 611). We sought to understand how early education educators, leaders, and families in the Ecuadorian early education centers have been influenced by those power relations reflected in government policies. By triangulating discourse found in different sources, we revealed the discursive struggles in which the language of organizational actors and policy subjects is examined. This allowed us to interpret the intentionality and meaning behind practices and communication (Fischer & Forester, 1993).

To guide our analysis, we relied on what Diem et al. (2014) identified as five recurrent themes in CPA scholarship, as presented in Table 1. We interrogated policy constructions, searching for deep patterns between policy discourse and policy recipients and among each policy recipient; hence, we layered our analysis with Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory.

Table 1

Five CPA Themes

Concern Regarding...	Application to Study
• The difference between policy rhetoric and practiced reality	• Contrasts between governmental discourse/understanding and reports from media
• How policy emerged	• Social and political events influencing policy creation and implementation
• The distribution of power, resources, and knowledge	• Resource distribution/equitable access to ECCE education
• Social stratification	• How policy discourse vs. implementation perpetuates inequities
• The nature of resistance to or engagement in policy	• Teachers'/parents' resistance to policies

Source: Adapted from Diem et al. (2014)

Ecological Systems Theory

An ecological approach (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) acknowledges the intricate ways that policies affect ECCE, teachers, and, ultimately, families. We explored how policymakers perceive system-level policies and their effects on various systems—micro, macro, meso, and exo—that influence children who attend early childhood centers in Ecuador. These systems operate within the broader context of societal culture and beliefs (macrosystem), creating a dynamic relationship that ultimately affects the child. The macrosystem encompasses cultural or societal values, including beliefs that shape perceptions of events and participants. We proposed that policies reflect broader beliefs regarding the role of ECCE in Ecuador, their personnel, and the families they serve. As Bronfenbrenner (1979) theorized, variables can influence systems reciprocally; in this study, policies (exosystem)

and societal beliefs (macrosystem) regarding ECCE could impact young Ecuadorian children, and vice-versa. This allowed us to explore whether policies have a trickle-down effect on the interconnected systems surrounding families and children, particularly low-income families facing barriers to equal-quality education, childcare, and economic stability.

Methodology

We critically explored the discourse surrounding early childhood education in Ecuador, as represented in government documents (n = 22), media (n = 110), and social media (n = 253), to challenge rhetoric versus reality and the actual effects on policy in the ecological system of young children in Ecuador. Discourse analysis is helpful in illuminating the politics of discourse and examining the connection between policy documents and their historical, political, social, and cultural contexts (Fairclough, 2003). We explored text with a semiotic outlook, recognizing that symbolic representations could potentially embody power and resistance manifestations, particularly in media and social media. We subscribed to Jones et al.'s (1998) view of policymaking as discursive and textual practices, which means our analysis positioned us as activists who must engage with discursive aspects of policy. Particularly, given constant political upheavals, we view 'policy work' as 'text work' (Jones et al., 1998, p. 169) and discourse analysis as policy activism.

With this in mind, the government documents we analyzed included all policy documentation accessible to the public from 2007 to the present. Media reports were uploaded from major newspapers and magazines in Ecuador and the region from 2007 to the present. We recognize that many media outlets were heavily influenced by political forces and restrictions, particularly during the

Correa years. Over 120 X posts, 120 Instagram posts, and 13 Facebook posts were included in the analysis. Social media were selected because of their potential to represent how different community members view and experience a phenomenon authentically. Curran and Kellogg (2017) explained: “Social media, such as Twitter, can serve as a conduit, removing the traditional structural silos surrounding stakeholders, connecting disparate groups that would otherwise not be able to engage in collective discourse” (p.648). Please see Table 2 for documents, inclusion and exclusion criteria.

Table 2. *Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria*

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria - Documents

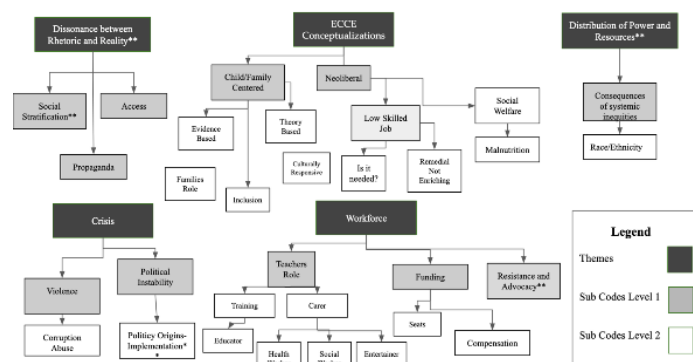
Type of Document	Inclusion Criterion/Keywords	Exclusion Criterion/Keywords
Government Documents Documents located in ec.gov sites Official Registry Archives	2007-Present Educación Inicial (ECCE) Educación Parvularia (Nursery) Educación Primaria (Elementary Ed.) Educación Infantil (Infant education) Young children ECE centers Profesores parvularios (Nursery teachers) General Education Plans Higher Ed documents related to ECE teacher preparation	Before 2007 Educación Secundaria (High School) Higher Ed documents not related to ECE teacher preparation NGO documentation
<u>Media</u> Documents Newspapers: El Comercio El Universo Hora Reuters Vistazo GK <u>Social Media</u> X/TwitterFac ebook	2007-Present Educación Inicial (ECCE) Educación Parvularia (Nursery) Educación Primaria (Elementary Ed.) Educación Infantil (Infant education) Young children ECE centers	Before 2007 Educación Secundaria (High School) Higher Ed articles not related to ECE teacher preparation Events not impacting

Instagram	Profesores parvularios (Nursery Teachers) Political events that may impact education decisions	ECE policy or implementation
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Data Analysis

We coded documents using deductive and inductive coding (Saldaña & Miles, 2013) via Dedoose software. Each type of document was analyzed separately. For each document type, the first coding round included CPA themes (see Table 1), and subsequent rounds included in-vivo coding to arrive at themes substantiating our findings. After four rounds of coding, we consolidated data, removed overlapping codes, and clarified constructs in our coding book using Saldaña and Miles (2013) suggested consolidation methods. Two peer coders arrived at coder agreement. We found 37 codes. The final step of analysis consolidated, compared, and contrasted the themes from all three types of documents. The final themes were: ECCE conceptualizations, Workforce, Dissonance between rhetoric and reality, Distribution of power and resources, and Crisis (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. *Codes and Themes Map*



** CPA Concerns

Findings

While government documents show ambitious proposals that often contradict their goals and scope, the limited number of concrete plans is more worrisome. Budgets, workforce training, and systems evaluations seem sparse, and most documents focus on policy statements without concrete implementation steps. Furthermore, policy discourse conceptualizes ECCE as a means to an end, with a clear neoliberal take at the end: a market approach using ECCE as an antidote for poverty. Despite many policies crafted by administrations refuting neoliberalism, the discourse shows incongruence, with no mention of democratic, character, or citizen goals as part of the field conceptualizations. Contrary to perceptions that emergent countries like Ecuador lack the know-how in specific educational ideas, theories, and best practices, our analysis revealed an understanding of developmentally appropriate practice as well awareness of culturally relevant pedagogy and play-based experiences, all critical in ECCE. Unfortunately, those guidelines are not applied in practice, according to our analysis of social media and media. Furthermore, we found how political and social instability has deeply impacted the conceptualization and implementation of ECCE.

Ecuador's Government ECCE Conceptualizations (RQ1.)

ECCE is still experiencing growing pains in the government's defining scope and conceptualization. The connections between policy and neoliberal stances are clear, as demonstrated by commonly contested dominant discourses such as "readiness," "childminding," "standardization," "accountability," and claims of "societal economic benefit." Policies from 2007 showed the government's focus on targeted approaches to "fix social and economic failings,"

often expressed in terms of a high return on "social investment" (Moss, 2015, p.226). Even under leftist governments that promised to lift Ecuador from "the long-neoliberal night" (Perez, 2022, para 9), neoliberalism is embraced. These policies are presented as a rationale for state support of "early childhood education" to achieve future returns and improve participation in the labor market and social productivity, which translates into better returns for economic inclusion.

A particular concern in the documents is the country's malnutrition level—an unfortunate trend despite plentiful agricultural resources (Ministerio de Educación, 2007). To combat malnutrition, the government mandated the creation of targeted centers and other programs reaching out to children and families, particularly in rural communities, with nutritional supplements and medical attention, in many cases sponsored by multinational NGOs. With these sponsorships, the vision of what can be done for young children is restricted to important yet measurable health outcomes (Tingo, 2022).

Given this outlook, it follows that documents establish ECCE as a right for all children, with some proposals even mandating it. In 2008, with the reform of the Ecuadorian Constitution, the universalization, permanence, no cost, and mandatory attendance of early childhood education were established (Constitución de la República del Ecuador, 2008, art 28). In stunning reality, later discourse conceptualizes ECCE as a duty of all families.

Initial Education is a priority and could be interpreted as "mandatory," but this is not as responsibility of the State to provide this service to families who request it—is the perspective of the State—that this is the student's obligation,

having completed Initial Education (preschool) to enter the first year of Basic [first grade]. (Brown, 2014, p.5)

Initial education is important, compulsory, and school-based, but not important enough for promotion. This “flip-flopping” is common in the policy discourse we analyzed. For example, the most comprehensive documentation regarding policy comes from 2007 and 2014, when Correa’s controversial government produced a series of policy handbooks outlining a vision for expanded services, mandating an increase in education expenses by 0.5% annually until 2011, or until it reached 6% of the country’s GDP (Ministerio de Educación, 2007). It also mandated universal education for children 0 to 5 years old—a revolutionary proposal. The objective of this plan was to

provide early quality and fair education for boys or girls less than five years old that respects their rights, diversity, and the national rhythm of growth and learning and develops fundamental values, incorporating them into the family and the community within the inclusion framework. (Ministerio de Educación, 2007, p.4)

Discourse analysis of these initial documents presented optimism for the future of ECCE. However, documents only show the establishment of targeted programs to support children living in poverty. This discourse clashes with the proposed “universality” of early documents, with no discourse surrounding options for low- and medium-income households. In that sense, the codes “social stratification,” “medical model,” and “malnutrition” are prevalent in all early documents.

For over two decades, Correa’s administration prolifically produced protocols

and policy documents. In the National Strategy for First Years (Ministerio Coordinador de Desarrollo Social, 2014), the discourse surrounding regulations and workforce preparation is first mentioned, without specific logistics for implementation. The same year, an ECCE curriculum to guide formal and nonformal education for children under five was published. This document emphasized developmental practices used in the field, as well as child-led classrooms, play, and hands-on, culturally relevant experiences for children (particularly Indigenous children) attending early childhood and care centers:

Generally, when considering the transition [from home to school] there are three essential elements: the child, the family, and the school. In the case of indigenous peoples, we must add the collective element: the community, and consider the extended family, in which elders and grandparents play an important role. Furthermore, nature is a fundamental element for indigenous peoples and nationalities. (Ministerio de Educación, 2014, p.34)

We also recorded that as each new administration began, documents were produced to introduce theory/evidenced-based approaches and policies through a multicultural early education model; however, by the midpoint, policies dried up. Given one-off documents with no follow-up on implementation, we concluded that these policy documents served more as propaganda than actionable policy.

After 2016, policy documents were sporadic and reflected the country’s social, political, and economic situation. Most of the discourse found was related to health and safety, digital access, and, more recently, safety and anti-violence protocols. Here, the theme “crisis” abounded to highlight the deep connection

between political, social, and economic instability and neglect in the field.

Workforce

As previously noted, much governmental focus remains on healthcare and social interventions rather than education, despite policies that provide robust education proposals. We found that 2014 documents citing requirements of teachers working in public early childhood centers clearly emphasized the role of health education and evaluation, with some mention of the curriculum:

A teacher with a degree in early childhood education, initial education, and related subjects, in charge of a classroom with a maximum of 25 children, will be selected through a competition. [The teacher] complies with mandates, monitors the growth and nutritional status of the children, and involves the family in the educational process. (Ministerio Coordinador de Desarrollo Social, 2014, p. 32)

Expanding on this perspective is the discourse on the first curriculum proposed, in 2014 as well as other subsequent documents highlighting a high level of pedagogical sophistication—for example, the idea of incorporating positive discipline into everyday interactions (Ministerio de Educación, 2022, 2023a). Such discourse, evidenced in the 2014 curriculum, stated:

Competent and committed professionals must offer a variety of opportunities for learning that invite children to get involved, think and do things for themselves, providing them with time to play and interact with each other and the materials. Likewise, they should know the interests of the children in their group, listen to them attentively, and encourage them. (Ministerio de Educación, 2014, p. 41)

Furthermore, the government defined the role of early childhood educators:

Consistent with theories, the teacher, in order to allow the child to explore, play, experiment, and create, must assume a mediator role in development and learning that enhances the capabilities of children. The most important form of mediation is to “talk to the children,” talk with them, use language to build bridges between what children know and what the teacher expects them to learn to enrich their understanding of the world. (Ministerio de Educación, 2014, p. 34)

Despite this robust educator conceptualization, later documents revealed contradictions. The early childhood workforce is often relegated to caregiver roles, despite holding credentials equivalent to those of their elementary school counterparts. Teachers’ roles in the discourse are inconsistent, if not contradictory. Our codes were equally divided seeing teachers primarily as healthcare workers, social workers, parent educators, and babysitters.

Overall, our analysis reflected an optimistic vision of what could be wishful thinking and knowledge of developmentally appropriate practices. Unfortunately, we also concluded that these documents served as propaganda rather than effective policy for implementation. Thus, ECCE has been used as a pawn for demagoguery under the guise of traditional neoliberal discourse; young children, family needs, and the ECCE workforce are exploited as tools to claim change without actually effectuating it.

The Dissonance between Reality and Policy (RQ2).

Given that we found sparse evidence of policies being implemented in the policymaker’s

discourse, we wondered about the extent to which they were implemented. Our document analysis highlighted the dissonance in discourse between governmental policies and reality on the ground. In fact, the theme “dissonance between policy and reality” was the most frequent in our analysis, along with the themes “distribution of resources” and “funding.” Specifically, despite a promise of funding and resources, news articles highlighted the lack of resources offered to ECCE centers, presenting a shocking incongruency, as exemplified by the newspaper *El Universo*:

For children from 0 to 5 years old to sleep, they only have a crib whose wooden supports are inclined. In addition, they have a thin mattress slowly losing its sponge and three mats with fabric torn into pieces. In a corner of one of the bedrooms, there is a broken-brown piece of furniture, and its springs are visible. (Las guarderías del, 2015)

Furthermore, protocols are written, but policies are not enforced. For example, Ministerio de Educación (2014, 2022) established a ratio of 25 preschool children per teacher, or nine children per teacher, if under 3 years old. The reality, as discussed by the media, is radically different: “The 12 teachers from El Calzado organize the classroom while caring for 322 toddlers.” (322 niños se, 2014).

Distribution of Resources

Media discourse seldom mentions public ECCE centers as places of learning; rather, they provide care and nutrition, consistent with the discourse found in many governmental documents. Interestingly, this finding is prevalent in all printed media documentation from 2007 to present, signaling also how the public understands ECCE as a place to solve social problems and access services

rather than belonging, education, and enrichment. Media documents citing learning and socioemotional support as the bases for preschool education are often related to private institutions (¿Cuáles son las, 2023; Educación inicial es, 2019), further signaling the gap in access to high-quality ECCE for low-income families who rely on public services

Crisis

Regarding ECCE, social and printed media discourse responds to aspects of social or political crises. Though varying since 2006, frequently discussed topics include child labor (including preschoolers and toddlers) (Gonzalez, 2023), access to childcare for families in extreme poverty (News Service, 2023), children living in prisons (318 niños aun, 2008), and numerous incidents of school violence and abuse perpetrated by narco-gangs, parents, or teachers (En Ecuador se, 2024; Padres creen que, 2016). For example, despite multiple handbooks published by the government on positive discipline, newspapers reported shocking statistics about ECCE students: “7% of children said they were hit (in 2010, the figure was 11%) and 4% said they were insulted and mocked by the teacher (in 2010 it was 7%)” (Padres creen que, 2016). The theme “crisis” is more prevalent in social media than in any other data source, as represented by this X post by a-child advocate:

Children’s Day in Ecuador:

- 600,000 children (from 0- 5 years old) outside of initial education, health, and child development services.
- 51,235 reports of sexual violence against boys and girls (2018-2023).
- 370 thousand children working. (Maldonado, 2024)

News reports and social media posts revealed a need for a deeper understanding of pedagogy and child development, which contrasts with the aforementioned governmental handbooks. Further, while the ideas of child-led instruction are included in government curricula (Ministerio de Educación, 2007), they are not frequently present in news reports and social media posts, where suggestions for workbooks and product-based assignments dominate (Educando se aprende, 2011; La animación parvularias, 2015). In analyzing social media posted by education authorities (Ministerio de Educación, 2020, 2021), we found many instances of young children engaging in worksheet/workbook exercises, contrary to what the curricula promoted. Play is also depicted in social media, mainly through gross-motor activities, lacking structure or intentionality (Ministerio de Educación, 2021).

Workforce as Seen by the Media

From media, including social media discourse, the teachers' role in the ECCE system is amorphous but also considered a low-skilled job. Furthermore, the ECCE teacher is often relegated to the role of entertainer, as several newspaper articles have reported (Festejos con niños, 2007; Rondas infantiles, 2021). Facebook posts titled "With Early Childhood we provide families with support so that 3- and 4-year-old children develop their skills through play" (Ministerio de Educación, 2021, 2023) depicted teachers wearing costumes and pantomiming. The tone of the discourse was maternalistic, and credentials and professional preparation are often overlooked (Ministerio de Educación, 2021). Surprisingly, in this context, the code "resistance and advocacy" was infrequent, signaling the need to organize different stakeholders, including teachers and parents, to benefit children. In a country with robust labor protections, we found the irony that during this

time, unionization was threatened by Correa's socialist movement as the "Ecuadorian government pursued public policies that systematically discouraged social organization. Any social control over governmental authority was suspected of threatening the government's project" (Peralta et al., 2019, para 13). This again exemplifies the dissonances and GERM tendencies found across policy and ECCE implementation in Ecuador.

Overall, we found a stark contrast between the government's vision of ECCE and what is happening on the ground. The government's promises remain unfulfilled, reducing the ECCE system to meet some social needs of a country in crisis, rather than the long-term needs for the educational, socioemotional, and cognitive growth of its population. While policies and know-how exist, they are not applied in praxis; as a result, educators lack the preparation and expectations needed to effectivize those policies, and children and families do not access high-quality education and care, a place and space to belong. Using an ecological lens, we found that neglecting the ECCE system affects centers, parents, teachers, and, ultimately, children.

Discussion

Where does ECCE fit in the discourse of a country in crisis? With so many fires to put out, can any country focus on ECCE? These essential questions apply to many nations in crisis. Under this premise, we contest that, as Maslow (1970) considered sustenance and shelter as essential for a child to thrive, ECCE is similarly essential to nurture children's souls, particularly in times of crisis. Here is our concern, however: as governments consider embracing ECCE policy, it must be conceptualized holistically, with the ultimate

purpose of teaching and learning to cultivate the whole child's development.

Fajardo-Dack (2016) found that “after seven years under the so-called ‘educational revolution’ (proclaimed like this by the [Ecuadorian] government and its political party), there is no significant evidence of a fruitful change” (p.82). Our analysis not only confirms this, but also confirms that in Ecuador, the GERM is infecting the nascent field of ECCE, conceptualized under the narrow lens of “social welfare,” rationalizing policies through a neoliberal view of return on investment. Most worrisome is the standardization of policies in a country as diverse as Ecuador. Small in its geography and history, Ecuador's social needs vary according to location, region, and local governments. Data on students' academic performance differ significantly between students in the highlands and those on the coast or in urban and rural areas (SITEAL-UNESCO, 2021). Resource allocation and initiatives have been standardized to justify public funds expenditure rather than to allow local governments to create context-based interventions that respond to the specific needs of each community (Peralta et al., 2019).

Ironically, these shiny new policies are propaganda tools by each government, both from the left and right. In this pendulum of ideologies, our findings revealed that politicians often fail to understand or choose to neglect the needs of families and educators, resulting in inadequate resource allocation after elections. National headlines reveal the frequent allocation of national funds to organizations and projects that waste these funds, justifying their actions on technicalities rather than on the actual outcomes in the ECCE context (Perez, 2022). There are no sustainable action plans to withstand the tides of different administrations, presidents, or local elections. Thus, every layer

of the ecological system of Ecuadorian children and families is affected (Schady, 2011). Future research should investigate pathways to sustainability in countries with a tradition of democratic instability.

Our study also found tremendous potential for what can be accomplished in Ecuador. Leaders and academics possess the expertise to guide this country toward a model of ECCE expansion that rivals other systems worldwide. The lack of the system's institutionalization can be an opportunity; it may now be fitting to conceptualize ECCE through a holistic approach, avoiding the pitfalls that GERM has brought to countries like the United States or the United Kingdom, and looking instead towards countries like Finland. This study should serve as a call for action to achieve a specific vision. We urge the Ecuadorian government to consider:

1. Codifying ECCE as a right implemented through an independent, nonpartisan organization funded directly by oil and shrimp exports. This would guarantee sustainability regardless of politics.
2. Multigenerational holistic models like Head Start, where social services, inclusion, and parent participation are central to a program's mission. Another important component of Head Start is its federal funding, yet it is implemented locally, thus respecting the cultural/ social contexts of the children and families attending these services. Future research should focus on unveiling possibilities for sustainable models that combine healthcare, nutrition, socioemotional and cognitive development.
3. Ecuador, like many South American countries, is a multicultural and multilingual nation. Extending services to all

young children should appeal to the parents' cultural contexts. We urge the implementation of multicultural and inclusive centers that respect the cultural diversity of families.

4. Sahlberg (2012) proposed: "The best way to avoid infections of GERM is to prepare teachers and leaders well." (para. 6). Believing in this perspective, we recommend features of teaching and learning that are typical in Finland: high confidence in teachers and principals as high professionals; encouraging teachers and students to try new ideas and approaches, in other words, to put curiosity, imagination and creativity at the heart of learning; and purpose of teaching and learning is to pursue happiness of learning and cultivating development of whole child. (Sahlberg, 2012, para. 7)

Moreover, the allocation of funds for higher education would allow universities to support coursework on leadership, advocacy, and methods that use the curriculum through a developmental approach. We must refine what an ECCE educator should be, beyond the tropes of babysitter and entertainer that prevailed in our analysis, to empower preservice teachers to advocate for themselves and the children and families with whom they work. Leijen (2023) described the relevance of developing teacher agency as a way to prepare future educational leaders equipped to face challenges, resist mandates, and propose solutions.

5. Mavrides Calderon & Kohn (2025) found that fair compensation is essential to developing leadership stability and mentoring future educators as ECCE expansions occur. We recognize that educator and leader compensation must be a core component of the system's successful and sustainable expansion. We urge governments across the globe to

consider parity between ECCE and their elementary education counterparts.

Conclusion

ECCE must be a right for all children, especially those living in countries experiencing chaos. Our study revealed a country immersed in violence, political instability, and uncertainty; a country that could benefit from ECCE centers where families and children find a place of belonging and safety. Unfortunately, governments have long prioritized self-serving propaganda and focused on health outcomes, which are more "visible" and supported by NGOs. As researchers and Ecuadorian mothers, we grapple with moving the needle away from GERM tendencies and toward real action.

We advocate for ECCE policies that first situate young children as subjects who construct reality with their own discourse, rethinking their contribution to capital and human development. We urge a recognition of young children's potential for future democratic transformation and citizenship. Our study serves as a call to action for what can be done as Ecuador enters a new chapter in its history.

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