



Imaginaries of ECEC: A comparison of policies of access in early childhood education in Brazil, Finland, Hungary, Indonesia, Iran, Nepal, and Serbia

Maiju Paananen^a, Vera G. Centeno^b, Salla Fjällström^c, Devi Prasad Bhattarai^d, Gordana Jovanović^e, Juliene Madureira Ferreira^f, Zsuzsa Millei^g, Camila Rosa Ribeiro^h, Antti Paakkariⁱ, Narges Sadat Saijjadieh^j, Muchammad Tholchah^k & Jan Varpanen^l

^a Tampere University, corresponding author, e-mail: maiju.paananen@tuni.fi,
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1072-1923>

^b Tampere University, <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4886-5890>

^c Tampere University, <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8183-0342>

^d Tampere University & Tribhuvan University, <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0518-0958>

^e University of Belgrade, <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4271-4808>

^f Tampere University, <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8977-5982>

^g Tampere University, <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4681-6024>

^h Tampere University, <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7605-1731>

ⁱ Tampere University, <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6552-2366>

^j University of Tehran, <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8243-3894>

^k Tampere University, <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2323-2256>

^l Tampere University, <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7859-1926>

ABSTRACT: Increasing access to ECEC has been on the agendas of international organizations and many countries in different parts of the world. Despite the clear global interconnectivity, this article shows that contextual factors are essential to understand educational policy developments. The study examines reforms related to policies of access to ECEC in seven countries. Brazil, Finland, Hungary, Indonesia, Iran, Nepal, and Serbia. We show how access policies plug into the understanding of the

role of ECEC as producing future citizens. Even though the main idea of ECEC's role in developing future citizens is present in each national context, it takes different forms: the roles frame access policies as a way to strengthen either human capital via focusing on learning and skill formation, and/or the national identity of future citizens. They materialize in differing ways, for example, as coercive legislative requirements, fee policies, and knowledge production schemes. In addition, national access policies adopt different relations to the policies of international organizations, reflecting the socio-political context of the country. We argue that the concept of the imaginary is useful in allowing us to examine the interplay between the semiotic and non-semiotic aspects of policy. To further unravel the complexity inherent in such policies in terms of their local diversity, we suggest the usefulness of case studies and the examination of local-level policies in their full variety instead of only national ones, as these might be fruitful avenues for future research.

Keywords: *policy, comparative research, preschool*

Introduction

In a UNICEF Innocenti white paper, John Bennett (2008) laid down several international standards for early childhood services, one being access to services. There are three standards that consider access:

[1] Benchmark 8: The organization of early childhood services at local level ensures appropriate access for all children, with opening hours and adjusted fees to meet the needs of parents. [2] Particular attention is paid to the most vulnerable groups of young children, and to those at risk of discrimination. (Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2006 General Comment no. 7, p. 23). These children receive first call on services and to additional programmes and resources as necessary.

[3] Benchmark 10: At least 80 per cent of 4-year-old children participate in publicly subsidized and accredited early education services for at least 15 hours per week.

This was the first time that access to ECEC was put on the international policy agenda to such an extent. Bennett's white paper has been followed by a clear international policy trend aiming at increasing access to ECEC. Related policies have been on the agendas of international organizations ever since (Mahon, 2016). They use soft forms of governance – i.e., governance tools that are not legally binding or coercive but advocate or persuade in other ways, such as by providing information and comparisons or presenting 'good practices' – to influence local policies (e.g., Centeno, 2017; Penn, 2011; Rinne & Ozga, 2011) in this task. Consequently, earlier research has identified a clear drift of educational policy discourses across national boundaries (Ozga & Jones, 2006; Steiner-Khamsi, 2012).

However, despite the clear international framing of ECEC discussions and solutions, national policies continue to vary and, as we will show, access to ECEC does not mean the

same thing everywhere. This study focuses on the policies of access to ECEC in seven countries since 2008 – Brazil, Finland, Hungary, Indonesia, Iran, Nepal, and Serbia. It explores the keen focus on and the variety of access policies. Our research is situated within the growing research effort to problematize local policies as the outcome of global developments (Carney, 2009; Ozga & Jones, 2006; Kauko et al., 2018; Schriewer & Ramirez, 2004). Despite a clear ‘global interconnectivity’ (Carney, 2009), contextual factors are essential to understand educational developments and the outcomes of ‘contextual creativity’ (Centeno et al., 2018). Policy change, and especially the interplay between global and local in these changes, have been discussed through a variety of concepts, such as path-dependencies, translation, domestication, and hybridization (see e.g., Alasuutari & Rasimus, 2009; Paananen, 2017). These aggregative efforts seek to overcome the idea of national policy reforms as a consequence of global processes, while avoiding falling into the trap of country-bound territorialism, which might ignore the multi-layeredness that accounts for developments occurring in different contexts of action.

Education, including ECEC, has been part of the establishment of modern nation-states as a way of civilizing children as the next generation of citizens (Burman, 2008; Millei & Imre, 2016). Childhood institutions – such as families, kindergartens, and schools – reflect constructions of good early childhood education and future citizenry. National policies and legislation seek to enable the proper care and development of children to ensure the nation’s prosperity and its population’s health (Millei, 2020). Therefore, the idea of simultaneous policies related to enhancing and increasing access to ECEC being a result of the increasing and accelerating flow of ideas seems constrained (Enders, 2004). Convergence explanations – i.e. the idea of moving towards uniformity in solutions – tend to neglect or overlook important local variations and characteristics (Altbach, 2004; Carney et al., 2012; Deem, 2001; Kauko et al., 2018). What is deemed a ‘proper’ way of justifying a policy, however, is historically contingent. Studies show the controversies, resistance, and tensions between globalized ideas and local meaning making (White, 2017). Educational structures tend to reflect the local culture (Anderson-Levitt, 2003), and educational practices and actual policies mirror local socio-political regimes (Mahon et al., 2012; Waldow, 2014; West & Nikolai, 2013). Therefore, local histories, cultures, and socio-political contexts also play a pivotal role in shaping ECEC provision (Campbell-Barr & Bogatić, 2017).

In this article, we are thus interested in understanding how imaginaries of future citizenry shape ECEC access policies in Brazil, Finland, Hungary, Indonesia, Iran, Nepal and Serbia, and which roles do international organizations play in these imaginaries. Through this examination, we wish to make explicit country-specific imaginaries of ECEC related to access policies, while acknowledging the global-local interplay. Imaginaries are like

ideologies, as Jessop (2010) explains, which offer an understanding of the world by narrowing down its complexity and making sense of what is happening and what should take place to achieve certain aims. Jessop continues that if one wishes to influence how problems are perceived and addressed with a view to creating change, the first step is to make these imaginaries explicit.

We continue by first providing a conceptual discussion of imaginaries in understanding ECEC policy changes. Second, we describe how we worked with policy analysis in the respective countries to be able to describe the variation of certain imaginaries of ECEC across contexts in relation to the access reforms in all the countries analysed. The results section of this paper consists of three parts. The first two focus on two imaginaries that relate to building up future citizenry. Firstly, by using Brazil, Finland, and Nepal as examples, we illustrate the imaginary of ECEC as skill formation. Secondly, by using Hungary as an example, we illustrate the imaginary of ECEC as safeguarding national identity. In the third section of the results, we show how differently national access policies respond to international governance and discuss the role of local socio-political contexts in the formation of imaginaries. In this section, we use Serbia, Iran, and Indonesia as main examples. Finally, we conclude with a discussion of the importance of understanding the national socio-political context in examining policy reforms that at first sight might seem like uniform global trends.

Imaginary as a conceptual tool for understanding local reforms

In this article, we use the concept of imaginary for understanding access reforms. ‘Imaginary’ refers to the intertwining of different types of governance tools (non-semiotic aspects of policy) and discourses (semiotic aspects of policy) through which the importance and the content of governance tools are rationalized (Jessop, 2008; Jessop & Sum, 2013). It is a socio-material intertwining between 1) artefacts, i.e., different types of governing tools (calculation regimes, guidelines, etc.); and 2) discourses reified in these artefacts. Together, they have performative power as they form a system that guides collective calculation concerning the future and future actions (Jessop, 2010). In the context of policies of access to ECEC, and applying Lundgren’s (1990) work, non-semiotic (structural) aspects can be divided into three interrelated categories: 1) institutionalized norms, such as legislative systems; 2) economic steering, such as funding, fees, and subsidies; and 3) knowledge production systems, such as national and international reviews and evaluations. Semiotic (cultural) aspects refer to, e.g., interpretations of the situation, legitimizations of actions, and representations of phenomena. These can be representations of the problems policies of access are said to solve (see also Bacchi, 2012), e.g., lack of preparedness for school when considering children and families who do not attend ECEC services, and constructions of knowledge we have of the current situation

and of the connection between policy measures and desired outcomes. The semiotic and non-semiotic aspects can be separated only for analytic purposes bearing in mind that semiotic aspects are sedimented as part of their structuration (materialization) (Sum & Jessop, 2013).

Policy imaginaries are always interdependent with existing material realities, albeit this correspondence is necessarily partial. For example, in the case of access in ECEC, this could mean that even though we would say that lowering the fees of ECEC might lead to increased accessibility to ECEC and therefore greater equality between families and children, this would not apply in every situation. When there are other major obstacles to access good quality ECEC, such as not having enough ECEC places or enough qualified ECEC workforce, lowering the fees might not have any influence on accessibility. Furthermore, the content of the ECEC in a specific case might not be suitable for children of a certain age group, and therefore lowering the fees might not, in that case, increase equality even if the enrolment rate increases. Jessop (2010, p. 338) states that 'because the world cannot be grasped in all its complexity in real time, actors (and observers) must focus selectively on some of its aspects in order to be active participants in that world and/or to describe and interpret it as disinterested observers'.

The concept of imaginary calls for a shift from a semiotic/discursive analysis of individual policy texts to a concern with the interdependence of semiotic and extra-semiotic mechanisms that together shape the emergence, selection, formulation, and retention of imaginaries. By leaning on the conceptual work of Sum and Jessop (2013), we understand the formation of ECEC policies as a result of historical trajectories, local traditions, prevalent national political situations, and heterogeneous reactions to transnational developments that are materialized in policy texts and other governing instruments. Our approach leads us to ask what are the common semiotic features related to the access policies in varying country contexts, what kinds of non-semiotic forms they receive and how the role of international actors appears in access policies.

Data and methods

Brazil, Finland, Indonesia, Iran, Nepal, Hungary, and Serbia offer productive cases of comparison due to their socio-political diversity and different geographical locations (Schriewer, 1990). Hungary and Serbia are post-socialist countries where a state-funded full-time early childhood system developed during socialism. In Iran and Indonesia, NGOs and private providers play a large role in provisions. Brazil has been expanding public provisions. Similarly to Hungary and Serbia, Finland has a state-funded full-time ECEC system, but it was not founded on socialist but social democratic ideals. This constellation

of cases, together with the intellectual (and socio-political) positionalities of our project team, have the potential to challenge Eurocentric understandings leading to potential false interpretations of universalism and the convergence of national developments in the international comparison of access policies (see also Centeno et al., 2018).

In conducting a 'contextual comparison' (Steiner-Khamsi, 2014), we paid particular attention to local developments. The project team included at least one expert from each country, who was able to access and read the policy documents in their original language and context. The same experts identified those main national government policies (non-semiotic aspects of policy) that aimed at or are justified by its effects on increasing the access rates to ECEC services, and they selected and translated into English the excerpts that outline and justify these policies (semiotic aspect of policy). We adopted a collaborative approach (e.g., Lappalainen et al., 2015) based on processes of co-analysis and co-writing to prevent both translation mistakes and misleading interpretations.

In terms of data collection (sources listed in Appendix 1), 2008 provided a fruitful starting point for our examination for two main reasons: first, because Bennett's white paper (2008) brought the question of access into the international ECEC policy agenda more broadly, and second, because large-scale economic, social, and education policy interventions played a role in helping to mediate the global financial crisis of 2007–2008. Simultaneously, though apparently contradictorily, in some of the contexts examined in this article, the following era can be viewed as a new age of austerity (Farnsworth & Irving, 2015), as governments were forced to undertake far-reaching interventions to cope with the crises. For example, it was argued that the welfare state was under attack in the aftermath. Thus, this period was expected to bring to the fore tensions and variations in relation to the policies of access. ECEC policies are closely connected to historical developments, so in the next section, we begin from the earlier phases of the ECEC system in each country to provide relevant contextual information. Since the conceptualizations of childhood education differ considerably across contexts, we incorporated the widest possible definition of ECEC in this study. Therefore, when using this term in this article, we refer to all institutional arrangements that aim at organizing care and/or education for children younger than primary school age.

Smaller groups based on their contextual expertise were responsible for writing a draft analysis of the imaginaries related to the possible changes in access policies in their case country. At this phase of the analysis, non-semiotic aspects of access policy, such as compulsory enrolment, fees, restrictions in the access and establishing provision were examined in connection to the semiotic aspects of the policy, i.e., argumentation used for justifying the policy in their background papers. These culturally constructed arguments were related to, for example, enhancing preparation for school or strengthening

children's national identity. These draft analyses were discussed and juxtaposed, and similarities and differences were examined in several meetings. When case-study analyses are reflected on with others who do not have long-term experience of that same context and are therefore not familiar with local discourses, the possibility of new ways of interpreting the data arises and common-sense views can be questioned (Lappalainen et al., 2015). Based on the analysis, we identified multiple imaginaries present in access reforms in different national contexts. Semiotic aspects of imaginaries were related to, e.g., increasing the parents' labour force participation, supporting the everyday lives of families, and equality. Access policies seek to engage children in early education, offering care and facilitating the development and socialization of the next generation in each context. We decided to focus here on one element: semiotic and non-semiotic aspects related to the creation of future citizenry as this was an element shared in access policies by each country. Therefore, we examined the different forms this agenda received in different contexts – in what different imaginaries it becomes attached. We analysed how countries' socio-political situations might help us understand this variation. Before diving into these results, we will briefly introduce the historical trajectories of ECEC and their policies related to access in our seven countries. In this section, we will focus on the non-semiotic aspects of ECEC policies.

Trajectories of ECEC and policies of access in the seven countries

ECEC has been progressively institutionalized in all seven countries, yet differences in public provision, structure, and understandings reveal the embeddedness of institutional ECEC in the local trajectories (there is a succinct overview in Appendix 2). We can identify policy changes related to access to ECEC in all the countries examined in this study.

In Brazil, ECEC's fragmented service structure, with varying private and public services, reflects the development of institutional ECEC. In the 1870s, religious ECEC institutions emerged as basic welfarism for deprived children (Kuhlmann Jr., 2000), while private institutions progressively adopted North American and European kindergarten models aimed at higher-income families (Kuhlmann Jr., 1999). Family caregivers, nannies, and private institutions were the most common option until the recent expansion of public ECEC. After oligarchic, corporatist, and dictatorship governments, the 1988 Brazilian Federal Constitution recognized the educational value of ECEC. Under the municipalities' responsibility, universal access to free ECEC (1996) gained momentum with its inclusion in the National Core Curriculum (2009). ECEC (0–5-year-olds) was regulated as the first level of Basic Education, and its last year became mandatory in 2013. Some 74% of

Brazilian ECEC is publicly provided. Because of Brazil's geographic size, federal system, and great levels of diversity and inequality, there are differences in attendance between states, as well as between rural and urban areas (Rutanen et al., 2014). As a response to the lack of publicly provided places in many areas, the Federal Government decided to establish a system of ECEC vouchers.

Although located in Europe, Finland, Hungary, and Serbia have different histories that have shaped ECEC provisions and policies. Considered as an example of a Nordic social welfare state, the Finnish ECEC system has its roots in the 1960s/70s, when women's increased participation in the labour market caused societal demand for publicly provided full-time day care services (Karila, 2012). Finnish ECEC policy has also been based on the idea of freedom of choice, articulated as the parents' opportunity to choose between labour market participation with state-subsidized childcare and children's home care with cash-for-care benefits (Repo, 2010). In 2021, public provision made up about 75% of all ECEC provision. As in Brazil, Finnish ECEC regulation has undergone significant changes in recent years. National guidelines for ECEC have been set in the National Core Curriculum Guidelines (2018). All 0–6-year-olds have a legal entitlement to full-time ECEC services. Because municipalities have strong autonomy in organizing ECEC services, there is local variation in service provision. For example, the share of private services varies between municipalities depending on how the municipalities support private providers (Ruutiainen et al., 2020). There have been various recent changes that have aimed to increase (or decrease) access to ECEC, such as introducing a voucher policy (2009), making pre-primary education for six-year-olds mandatory (2014), lowering ECEC fees (2016 and 2020), restricting entitlement to ECEC (2015), then abolishing the restrictions (2019), and trialling a policy of extending pre-primary education for five-year-olds (2020).

In Hungary, ECEC is a universal kindergarten system for 3–6-year-old children. From the 1970s, most kindergarten-aged children have attended full-time, mostly public provided ECEC (Oberhuemer et al., 2010). The socialist past and related socio-cultural understanding of the kindergarten as an accepted part of children's upbringing might explain the comparatively early legislation (1993) of 3–6-year-olds' education as part of the education system, with universal full-time and government-funded eligibility, and mandatory attendance for 5–6-year-olds (Teszenyi & Heves, 2015). Openness to more liberal pedagogical ideas after socialism has led to an increased variety of kindergarten pedagogical programmes after 1989, which nevertheless adhere to the principles of the National Core Programme (1996). Historically, private institutional ECEC is unusual (in 2013, 9% of pre-primary education funding; OECD, 2016). Since 2010, the government claims that 16,000 new places have been established to fulfil the need for places in diverse geographical areas, but the number of children in villages is so low that they might miss

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kindergarten, as provision is not available (Katolikus közoktatási intézmények statisztikai adatai, 2021; Teszenyi & Hevey, 2015). Recent changes concern the extension of mandatory part-time ECEC to 3–4-year-olds (2012/2013) and the expansion of Church kindergartens, which today represent 9% of all institutions (Katolikus közoktatási intézmények statisztikai adatai, 2021; Teszenyi & Hevey, 2015).

Serbia shows both a socialist legacy and the adoption of recent capitalist developments in its ECEC policy. As in Hungary, the political and socio-cultural discourses have continued to highlight the importance of organized complete care for children as part of the integrated care and educational system. This relates to the predominance of public ECEC (with a public-to-private ratio of 8:1), public funding (with low fees paid by parents and exemptions for vulnerable groups), and social care policies. There is a constant strengthening of ECEC public institutions and growing attendance: the ECEC attendance rate of 3–6-year-old children was 63% (14.5% for under three-year-olds) in 2019 (European Commission, 2019). Nevertheless, the growth of more expensive private kindergartens seems to reflect the country's transition to a capitalist system (however, depending on the municipality there is a reimbursement policy for expenses in private ECEC institutions if no places in public institutions are available). Political discourses and legislative action ensure democratic principles, equal rights, and universal access to ECEC, but there are still differences between the participation rates in urban and rural areas, as well as between lower- and higher-income families (UNICEF, 2020). As in Brazil, Finland, and Hungary, local governments have the main responsibility of ECEC public provision (from six months to 6½-year-old children), but in Serbia they also offer a variety of programmes in consultation with parent councils. Aligned with the general adoption of the international knowledge-society paradigm and a growing reliance on psycho-pedagogical expertise, the free-of-charge preschool program became mandatory in 2006/2007 for children the year before primary school age. In addition, local government of Belgrade has announced a free of charge preschool care and education for all children in Belgrade, which starts in September 2023.

In contrast to the previous countries, Indonesia, Nepal, and Iran have heterogeneous ECEC services and a large share of private provision. In Indonesia, ECEC was initially influenced by the Dutch colonial government (Yulindrasari & Djoehaeni, 2019). After the declaration of independence in 1945 and the end of Dutch rule in 1949, ECEC was envisaged as a non-mandatory preparation for basic education. ECEC services were classified and attributed to various ministries. The variety of services and different ministerial responsibilities remained after the end of the authoritarian regime (1998) called the Reformation period. In 2003, committed to the United Nations Millennium Development Goals, new legislation classified ECEC providers under formal (4–6-year-olds), non-formal (0–3-year-olds), and informal (communal services) lines, and it recognized the Islamic kindergarten as a

private provider. The ECEC governance structure is complex due to the involvement of different departments and ministries (Sheng, 2017), but similarly to most countries presented in this paper, local governments oversee implementation (with the exception of Islamic kindergartens), while centralized bodies oversee the implementation on the national level. In the early 2000s, International Organization (IO) programmes were set up to strengthen attendance rates (Adriany, 2018). In 2006, the government introduced a project that established new early childhood education and development (ECED) services covering 3,000 poor villages in 50 districts. Privatization (96% of all ECEC provision) has recently increased considerably (Pangastuti, 2020) due to international franchises (Adriany, 2018). Since 2013, the government has allocated funding (per child) that is paid to the provider for covering the operational costs of kindergartens (Bantuan Operasional Pendidikan, BOP). However, this does not reduce the fees families pay.

In contrast to Indonesia, Nepali ECEC is recent. In 1962, the establishment of the Nepal Children's Organization enabled the expansion of services in urban areas and diversified private pre-school services emerged. After democracy was restored (1990), and against the backdrop of IOs' educational actions and programmes, extensive policy changes took place, including mandatory free-of-charge primary education starting at the age of six (1992) and the decentralization of ECEC provision to village development committees and municipalities in partnership with non-governmental organizations (NGOs), community-based organizations (CBOs), and local groups (1999). These policies resulted in three types of ECEC provisions: school-based pre-primary classes (PPE), community-based ECEC supported by NGOs and CBOs, and private centres. However, because of the country's tremendous geographic diversity, services in rural areas have been limited (UNICEF 2018). Further regulations integrated 0–5-year-olds' ECEC into the national system (2008) and recognized 4–5-year-olds' PPE as mandatory free-of-charge basic education (2016). Approximately 50% of services are provided by the private sector. Recent policies to increase access to ECEC aim at tackling the country's child undernutrition and related health and social challenges, and it has included expanding the training available for community educators (UNICEF, 2018; NPC GoN, 2020).

In Iran, similar to Indonesia and Nepal, private institutions provide a large share of ECEC and heterogeneous services mirror the country's internal vicissitudes. After the 1979 Islamic Revolution, the Iranian Women's Organization that supervised ECEC centres was dissolved, and the State Welfare Organization and the Islamic Council became responsible for regulating all ECEC. While ECEC for 0–4-year-olds remained under the State Welfare Organization, pre-primary education (PPE) for 5–6-year-olds was placed under the Ministry of Education. In the aftermath of international nuclear sanctions against Iran, a shortage of places in schools together with a lack of public budget led Iranian governments to stress the non-compulsoriness of PPE, reduce support to preschools

(2010), encourage PPE expansion through the private sector (2011), and separate preschools from primary schools (2012). The 2013 government showed a concern with primary education disparities across the country and provided financial aid to preschools in deprived areas. These developments have resulted in an unstable enrolment rate. First, the enrolment rate increased to 48% until 2004, but after that it decreased until 2010, when it was 38%. After that, it started increasing again, being 70% in 2019. The National Organization of Child's Education (2021, ongoing) oversees all providers, curricula, and teachers' education.

In sum, we can identify a variety of policies aiming to shape access to ECEC in all the countries examined in this study between 2008 and 2021. Some policies sought to establish provisions, some sought to remove financial barriers to access through subsidies, and others made enrolment compulsory. In Finland and Iran, we also identified policies that either restricted or hindered access to ECEC. In Finland, ECEC access was restricted to part-time for children whose guardians did not work or study full-time in 2016–2020. In Iran, ECEC funding has been cut from the ministerial budget due to economic problems.

When we examine the non-semiotic aspects of access policies, we can conclude that they include all types of steering instruments (see Lundgren, 1990): 1) the institutionalization of norms through legislative systems, such as making participation in ECEC mandatory; 2) economic steering, such as lowering the fees of publicly organized ECEC or subsidizing private providers, e.g., with vouchers, or setting up new infrastructures; and 3) knowledge production systems, such as adapting IOs' frames or taking part in international assessments including comparisons of enrolment rates. We can identify some similarities in the historical and recent trajectories in different contexts, such as the actions of tying ECEC to the educational or the private sector and actions to increase ECEC provision (Kampman, 2013). In all the countries examined, we can see reactions to international governance, yet these reactions vary depending on the socio-political context of the country. To understand the formation of access policies from this perspective, we proceed to examine the imaginaries of ECEC – combinations of semiotic and non-semiotic aspects of an ECEC policy that aim to harness the complexity of the world and guide collective action for achieving the desired organization of the society (Jessop, 2010). In more particular, we ask, how imaginaries of future citizenry shape ECEC access policies in Brazil, Finland, Hungary, Indonesia, Iran, Nepal, and Serbia and which roles international organizations play in these imaginaries.

Imaginarities of future citizenry shaping ECEC access policies

When examining the semiotic aspects of access policies, in this case, how the access policy is rationalized, we could recognize rationalizations that are prevalent in some of the countries but not in others, such as those related to solving the problem of malnutrition (in Nepal) and parents' labour force participation (in Finland). Examining these country specific rationalizations are left for further studies. We explore in more detail those imaginaries that are related to future citizenry as they exist in all the examined countries. We categorize these imaginaries according to the two main semiotic aspects underpinning them: 1) framing institutional ECEC as an intervention for skill formation and preparation for school; and 2) framing ECEC as an important avenue to safeguard and strengthen national identity. These two main semiotic framings take slightly different forms across the countries. For example, in Brazil and Nepal, the discourse on the purpose of ECEC, learning, and development is dominantly connected to school preparation, and in the discourses present in Finland and Serbia, these aspects are also more explicitly related to fostering the children's agency and democracy in the society. In Hungary, where mandatory ECEC has been in place for decades for five-year-old children, expanding the national policy to all 3–4-year-olds accompanied with the introduction of new elements in the curriculum, ECEC is reframed as moralizing all citizens and bolstering a stronger national identity. In Indonesia and Iran, we can also identify dynamic relations between the discourses of children's skill formation and the sentiments in the curriculum on strengthening national and religious identity. Although these imaginaries are constructed in relation to international organizations, this relation strongly varies according to the respective socio-political context. In some cases, international influence is more observable in actual policies, while in others they are only present in the rationalization of policy changes.

In what follows, we examine what kinds of varying forms these imaginaries receive in different contexts and how these variations are related to the respective socio-political context of the country. We will summarize and elaborate on the varying role of international actors in access policies in the next results section.

ECEC as intervention for skill formation

For an understanding of school preparation discourses in ECEC policy, we need to consider the idea of human capital. It originated during the Cold War, in which adversary superpowers sought to excel in scientific and economic competition from the 1960s within the context of the space race. Human capital theory is an economic argument claiming that income tends to correlate positively with education and skill levels, also

improving economic productivity, health, social mobility, and employment levels (Lightfoot-Rueda & Peach, 2015). The idea has been used to justify investment in the early phases of human life and skills formation. In this discourse, the role of ECEC is often entangled with the neuroscientific discourses of early childhood as a time when the brain development of humans is the most extensive and thus the educative interventions during early childhood are the most effective (Millei, 2015).

The discourse of ECEC as facilitating children's skill formation and preparation for school has been prevalent worldwide in both national and international policies, and it could be identified in one form or another in all the countries examined in our study. We use Brazil, Finland, and Nepal as examples, as they exemplify this discourse well. In all three countries, the discourse of building human capital has been used to deliberate and justify coercive access policy reforms – making ECEC mandatory for a certain age group. In this imaginary, ECEC is constructed as the first step in the education system that improves children's learning skills for school and increases educational equality by narrowing differences in learning. This imaginary underlines the needs of the 'knowledge economy' with a focus on individuals' capacities (see e.g., Campbell-Barr & Nygård, 2014). In Brazil, this discourse provided the rationale for the establishment of ECEC as part of the school curriculum and the mandatory registration by guardians of four-year-olds in ECEC. A similar policy development has taken place in Nepal, where ECEC for four-year-olds (in addition to 5–6-year-olds) has been made compulsory. In Finland, it has materialized as the policy of mandatory pre-primary education for six-year-olds and in the policy experiment providing two-year-long pre-primary education (ongoing from 2021).

In Brazil, the discourse focused on the learning function of ECEC and shaped two main documents guiding the implementation of ECEC as part of basic education – Law No. 12.796/2013 (Brazil, 2013), which made enrolment in early childhood education mandatory for children aged four and five years, and the Brazilian National Core Curriculum (Brazil, 2018) that defines objectives of ECEC. This development can be traced back to 2009, when Constitutional Amendment 59 defined early childhood education as the first stage of basic education, and ECEC was constructed as 'the beginning and foundation of the educational process' (BNCC, p.36). Together, these documents steer the implementation of changes that aim to align all three levels of education (ECEC, primary, and high school) and draw their justification from OECD documents and sustainable development goals.

The intention to increase ECEC enrolment by extending mandatory education to begin at four years old materialized in Constitutional Amendment 59. Following that, the National Core Curriculum was reformulated to include ECEC (Resolution n.5), and 'Quality Indicators in Early Childhood Education' were framed in 2009. These documents set the

pace for the progressive development of public ECEC. In that same year, the Ministry of Education (MEC) published the 'National Policy of Early Childhood Education: An Evaluation Report'. As the report mentioned (p. 7), the MEC and UNESCO prepared this report against the background of a broader evaluation of ECEC done by UNESCO in partnership with the OECD. In the report, the first result refers to the access to public ECEC (pp. 39–49). The report is in favour of children's earlier enrolment in institutional ECEC. This report, like other ECEC-related public documents (e.g., National Quality Parameters of Early Childhood Education, 2018), not only adopted IOs' terminology and guidelines, but was also written in cooperation with IOs. As Brazilian scholars observed, the ECEC legislation and guidelines are also couched in IOs language (Santos & Junior, 2017).

Nepal's Constitution, Local Government Operations Act (2017), Compulsory and Free Education Act (2018), and Children's Act (2018) contain legal provisions related to Early Child Development (ECD). In 2016, 4–5-year-old children's pre-primary education became mandatory, free-of-charge, and part of basic education (2016). The discourses of ECEC as facilitating skill formation accompanied with the policy of mandatory ECEC for 4–5-year-old children form an imaginary of ECEC as human capital-building. Expansion of the provision and the facilitation of skill formation through ECEC seeks to shape future citizens. When explicating the need for actions in relation to ECEC including the questions of access, the Nepali National Strategy for Early Childhood Development (NPC, 2020, p. 2) states:

According to various research on neurology, early childhood is an extremely important phase for children's growth and development, as the human brain develops at its fastest pace during these formative years of life. According to UNICEF (2016), a three-year-old child's brain is twice as active as that of an adult, whereas neurons form new connections at the rate of 700 to 1000 per second. These connections determine children's physical and mental health, their lifelong learning and adaptability to change, and also their psychological resilience.

When examining the case of Nepal, the role of international organizations in the formation of this imaginary is evident. The National Strategy for Early Childhood Development (2020) explicitly discusses the involvement of UNICEF by referencing its document 'Development of Improved Brains: New dimensions of early childhood development'. In this discourse, the role of ECEC is to improve children's learning skills for school and to increase educational equality by narrowing differences in learning. As in the excerpt above, the discourse often includes references to neuroscientific evidence and frames early childhood as a crucial time for children's brain development (Millei, 2015).

In Finland, human capital development arguments can be identified in some of the access reforms. The most evident example is the Finnish policy experiment of two-year pre-

primary education that started in 2021. Finnish pre-primary education refers to planned education and care provided the year preceding the start of compulsory education. In contrast to ECEC for under five-year-olds, pre-primary education is provided under the Basic Education Act (628/1998) and is free of charge. Municipalities have a statutory duty to organize pre-primary education for all their residents the year before compulsory education starts. Pre-primary education for six-year-olds was made compulsory in 2014. In the policy experiment that started in 2021, pre-primary education was extended to five-year-olds. It is deliberated by constructing pre-primary education to be more effective when also the five-year-olds attend (in addition to six-year-olds):

The aim of the pilot is to strengthen educational equality by, for example, increasing five-year-old children's participation in systematic education and learning activities, by developing the quality and effectiveness of pre-school, by obtaining data on the continuities between pre-school and primary school, families' choices of services, and municipalities' practices, and by constructing knowledge on the effects of two-year-long pre-school on children's chances of learning and development, social skills, and the forming of healthy self-esteem.

(Government proposal 149/2020)

The quote illustrates how ECEC is constructed as a service that fosters the learning and development of children. Therefore, it is suggested that it would be beneficial to expand it to all children of a certain age. This combination of coercive policy and human capital discourse reflects a change in Finnish ECEC imaginary.

The relatively low enrolment rate compared to the other Nordic countries reflects the history of ECEC services in Finland. The system was founded on a mixture of social democratic and agrarian and conservative values: gender equality, including enhancing female labour force participation, the emphasis on the family and aversion to state interventionism, the freedom to choose between domestic work and labour market participation, and the freedom to choose the form of childcare and early education (Anttonen & Sipilä, 2000; Nyby et al., 2017). The Finnish government has offered both generous child home care benefits and largely publicly funded ECEC services to enable the choice between labour market participation and caring for children at home. In recent years, the aim of increasing ECEC enrolment has forcefully entered the Finnish policy debate. When justifying the need for measures aiming to increase access to ECEC, references to the enrolment rate of the other Nordic countries reported by the OECD, and the EU level target of 95% of children above four years old attending early childhood education and care are frequently used as justification (e.g., Government proposal 149/2020). This change in access policies in Finland reflects a possible alignment with the human capital agenda promoted by international organizations.

In sum, by leaning on the discourse of individual development and learning, these examples illustrate the materialization of the human capital rationale for increasing access to ECEC (Campbell-Barr & Nygård, 2014; Lightfoot-Rueda et al., 2016). This imaginary focuses on children's learning as an important part of human capital accumulation. In this imaginary, ECEC is positioned as best facilitating human capital, and families are governed by often coercive policy tools – legislation and laws – to make sure that they enrol their children to ECEC.

ECEC as a safeguard of national identity

In other socio-political country contexts, the combination of coercive access policy and the related discourse of future citizenry take a different semiotic form. The access policy is justified by using arguments related to the need to preserve the future of the nation by maintaining its national traditions and values, thereby forming the national identity of children from an early age. This imaginary related to access policies can be recognized in Hungary. The introduction of 20 hours of compulsory kindergarten education in 2015 for all four-year-olds (including making child support contingent on the enrolment of children in kindergarten) and changes in the 2018 curriculum became a coercive tool for these purposes.

The kindergarten helps children to learn about the closer and broader environment, in which the Hungarian national consciousness, Christian cultural values, love for one's nation, and belonging to the national soil and family are the foundations.

(Magyar Közlöny, 27347 Kindergarten Education Basic Programme (2012) with 137/2018. (VII. 25))

In Hungary, education has been reclaimed as the national domain since the election victory of Viktor Orbán's right-wing populist party in 2010. In 2018, it was declared that Hungary was to be governed as an 'old-style Christian democracy'. The government's politics is pitted against globalization and liberal democracies, and it builds on the country's attachment to the 'Christian identity' and the rhetorical construct of distinguishing between the native people and its traditional culture from 'threatening' others, such as liberals and migrants. In the wake of these developments, ECEC becomes presented as the creche of 'Christian, traditional values' and builder of national identity, as the excerpt above exemplifies. ECEC has been considered a part of the educational sector from the time of state socialism, resulting in a sociocultural acceptance of the institution as part of children's upbringing. Therefore, contrary to the cases presented in the previous section, there is no need for arguments related to early brain development as justification. Recent changes concerning the extension of mandatory part-time ECEC to 3–4-year-olds (2012/2013) according to some observers is linked to the forced socialisation of the Roma population into the majority's values and norms (Rotas &

Kovacs, 2020), and it serves Christian nation-building by strengthening the national identity formation of the next generation by going back to age-old traditions, Christian values, and norms (Millei & Lappalainen, 2020).

In sum, by leaning on the discourse of preserving national identity, this example illustrates the materialization of the nationalistic endeavours via the same tool as seen in Brazil, Finland, and Nepal in the earlier section – only the justification differs. This imaginary focuses on the importance of the moralization and normalization of minorities: especially children belonging to ethnic minorities are expected to acquire the behaviours, values, and attitudes of the majority group and come to see themselves as members of the Christian nation. In this imaginary, a coercive policy tool – law – is needed to ensure that families enrol their children to ECEC so that the national consciousness will be sufficiently fostered.

Varying role of international actors in access policies

The seven examined countries demonstrate great variation concerning the relation between the national policies and international actors. In this section we systematize the findings connected with the countries used as examples in the previous section – Brazil, Finland, Hungary and Nepal – and relate them to Indonesia, Iran and Serbia. For a better understanding, as we elaborate on the varying role of international actors in the local ECEC access policies of these three countries, we also describe how the imaginaries analysed in the previous section materialize in these contexts.

In Indonesia, as in Nepal, Finland and Brazil, the use of international references emerges as a useful tool for justifying policy reforms. As described previously, our findings indicate that Finland has positioned itself as an eager complier with international governance (see also Rinne et al., 2004) and Brazil has a long record of partnership with IOs (see also Centeno et al., 2018). While in Finland the role of IOs is less perceivable, in Indonesia, as in Nepal and Brazil, the role of international actors is direct and explicit. These countries not only adopted IOs' terminology and guidelines, but some of the policies were written in cooperation with IOs.

In Indonesia, as in Nepal, beyond international references and knowledge claims, private and international funding also significantly contributes to the human capital-building agenda. Funding is bound up with ideas (Centeno, 2010). Dependability of international support typically implies dependability of accepting the import of 'external' models and ideas, that is, funding is conceded under the condition of accepting certain knowledge and actions (e.g., Jones, 2004, Steiner-Khamsi & Stolpe, 2006). In Nepal, the World Bank and UN have gained power by making large investments in Nepali education and child policy

(see e.g., Mundy & Menashy, 2014). In Indonesia, the role of international agencies – such as the World Bank and the International Child-Saving Organization PLAN – directing the imaginary of ECEC in access policies is evident. For example, in 2007, the World Bank, in collaboration with the Indonesian government, launched the Early Childhood Education and Development project, which has aimed to enrol more than half a million children in villages in ECEC. In addition, other development partners, such as the former colonial power of the Netherlands, have taken part in funding the programme. The pivotal role of international actors has been widely reported by previous studies, which show that the discourse related to policies of access are heavily human capital accumulation-centred (Adriany, 2018; Adriany & Newberry, 2021).

However, contrary to Finland, Brazil, and Nepal, the Indonesian policy tools for increasing access have not included any coercive policies for families. Rather, Indonesia has relied on increasing supply-side funding to various types of operators – i.e. providing public funds to fund the cost of operating the programme. Following this, the increase in private-sector providers has been vast. In this imaginary, techno-scientific discourse highlighting the role of ECEC as an intervention with an emphasis on investment in human capital is connected, on the one hand, to the idea of families' opportunities, willingness, and responsibility to purchase the service from the market. The market, on the other hand, in this imaginary, needs the state's monetary support to supply the service. The investment in human capital needs to be made by the family from the market but supported by the state and IOs.

In Serbia, as in Finland, the role of IO's is more indirect yet still visible. As explained previously, international comparisons and the targets set by the EU play a role in Finnish access policy reforms. The international comparisons of the OECD and targets set by the EU are used as sources of authority to justify policy direction in Finland. In Serbia, ECEC policies are also justified with psycho-pedagogical vocabulary, with a reference to the knowledge society, as is the case in Brazil, Finland, Nepal and Indonesia. Recent policy changes related to access have included similar types of coercive policies as reported in the cases of Brazil, Finland, Nepal, and Hungary: ECEC has been made mandatory for 5½-year-olds since 2006. Like in Brazil, Finland, and Nepal, the discourse justifying the access reform is related to overall development and the wellbeing of children. This, combined with the joint efforts of the government, European Commission, International NGOs, and additional funds from private donors aiming at increasing access to ECEC, reflects Serbia's position as an 'in between' or transition country.

Serbia and Hungary share a socialist legacy. As in Hungary, the political and socio-cultural discourse highlights the importance of organized full-time care and education. However, the justifications differ. In socialist Hungary, kindergarten education has been seen 'by the

state as a first step in transforming society through the character formation of its subjects' (Millei, 2011). In contrast, the Serbian laws on preschool education and upbringing (2010, 2017) regulate ECEC as part of a single system of education and upbringing in line with the ratified international convention on the rights of the child. These laws seek to address the developmental, educational, cultural, health, and social needs of children and families with preschool age children. Serbian ECEC aims at developing the potential of the child, but it also sees its goals as enabling the child to take part in the life of local, national, and international communities. The project of the 'Improvement of Preschool Education in Serbia' (IMPRES) conducted from 2011 to 2014 in 35 municipalities aimed at increasing the coverage of children in less developed areas through high-quality ECEC programmes for children aged 3–5 years. The justification of this policy initiative used deficit arguments resembling the ones presented in the case of Finland and Brazil, but with discourses that sought to create a multicultural nation with global ties, unlike Hungary. The problem as presented by policy makers is that half the children aged 3–5 years do not attend ECEC, and this is especially troublesome as these are mostly children from 'vulnerable groups' such as children from poor families, those living in rural areas, or Roma children. It is argued that diversified programmes would increase the attendance rate of vulnerable groups (Miškeljin & Sharmahd, 2018). In contrast to Hungary, Serbia shows, along with its socialist legacy, perhaps a stronger adoption of recent capitalist developments in its ECEC policy. This is visible, for example, in the increased provision of private ECEC.

In Iran and Hungary, the relation with international actors seems to be tensioned. In Hungary's socio-political context, the policy reform does not need to be justified with references to IOs; moreover, ECEC is diametrically set against their influence. This stands out from the policy discourse in Brazil, Nepal, Indonesia, Finland, and Serbia. We can identify a clear Iranian access policy change and unstable enrolment rate that relate to international actors. But, as in Hungary, the relation is founded upon points of friction, despite radical differences between the two countries' ECEC developments. In Iran, the development of access policies is tied to international policies related to nuclear sanctions and following national fiscal policies. In 2006, United Nations Security Council Resolution 1696 demanded Iran halt its uranium enrichment programme. As Iran did not comply with the resolution, Iran's government faced nuclear sanctions imposed by the UN Security Council. These sanctions took a toll on Iran's economy, and between 2006 and 2010 the Iranian government reduced governmental financial aid to preschools. As a result, in 2010, the whole preschool sector in Iran was relinquished to the private sector. The government was mostly silent about the changes, but in 2011 Iran's Education Minister declared that the 'Education Minister in Iran is responsible for education K1-K12 (for 7–18-year-old children) and based on the law, ECEC is not its duty' (ISNA, 2011).

These views and development differ radically from Hungarian universal kindergarten system based upon the socialist understanding of ECEC as an accepted part of state funded children's upbringing.

Nonetheless, similarly to Hungary, arguments related to strengthening national identity can be recognized in the goals section of Iran's Educational Regulation of the Ministry of Education (2016). It states that one of the goals of the preschool programmes is 'to strengthen the children's interests in religious and moral values and national identity' (Educational Regulation of the Preschool Programme, 2016). At the same time, many targeted policies and programmes seek to support the children's skill formation. For example, there is a specific preschool programme for five-year-old children living in deprived and bilingual regions (Educational Regulation of the Ministry of Education, 2016). However, while the discourses of ECEC as an intervention for skill formation and ECEC as preserving national identity were present in Iran, they did not take the form of the coercive policy as in Hungary, Finland, Brazil, Nepal, and Serbia due to the relations to international actors. It seems that the imaginary of ECEC in Iran constructs ECEC as compensatory but at the same time important for supporting children's religious and national identity. Nevertheless, perhaps due to Iran's unique geopolitical and economic circumstances, ECEC is not funded from the government budget and thus, it becomes constructed as a private matter and, similarly to Indonesia, the role of the private sector has increased rapidly as a result of ECEC access policies.

In sum, in Indonesia, Iran and Serbia, the role of international actors varies and might even be seen as contingent in the formation of imaginaries related to ECEC access policies – creating the future citizenry. It seems that the imaginary of future citizenry in Serbia is a combination of the values of the socialist legacy (e.g., solidarity and fostering camaraderie) and more recent discourses prevalent in international policy arenas, such as the increased role of private actors. In Iran, international policies concerning the economic sanctions led the government to leave the tasks of ECEC to the private sector, while in Indonesia, human capital building is both trusted to and promoted by private funding and international organizations.

Discussion and conclusion

Our aim in this article was to understand how imaginaries of future citizenry shape ECEC access policies with the help of seven contrasting country cases. Enhancing access to ECEC has become an idea that has occurred worldwide within the last 15 years. This is visible in all the countries examined in this article: Brazil, Finland, Hungary, Indonesia, Iran, Nepal, and Serbia.

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An often implicit assumption in policy analyses refers to the observation of simultaneous occurrences of certain ideas as a result of globalization, which leads to convergence (for overview see Drezner, 2002). Within this line of argumentation, simultaneous policies related to increasing access to ECEC could be seen as the result of the increasing and accelerating flow of ideas across national borders, which in turn might lead to the convergence of national ECEC policies. However, even though we can see similarities in access policies in ECEC in different contexts, the combination of our methodological attempt to disrupt the Euro- and Western-centric focus in comparative research (see Sousa & Moss, 2022) and the inclusion of the historical overview and a socio-material approach to policy research led us to notice the remarkable variance in dynamics between local agendas and international policy streams. Therefore, our research drew on a wide body of research that shows how the relation between inter- and transnational policy discourses and local policies is dynamic (e.g., Alasuutari & Rasimus, 2009; Carney, 2009; Centeno et al., 2018; Kauko et al., 2018; Paananen, 2017). We contributed to this line of research by suggesting that the concept of ‘imaginary’ is helpful in the task of understanding how policy reforms are shaped in different country contexts. Comparative research, especially in the field of ECEC, has made very little use of the theoretical and conceptual tools offered by socio-material theories (for overview see Sousa & Moss, 2022). In this article we exemplify their application by examining both the semiotic and non-semiotic aspects of ECEC access policy reforms in seven different national contexts.

The analysis of national policy documents showed that the imaginaries of creating a particular future citizenry framed ECEC access policies (as expected, but to differing extents) in all country contexts. The semiotic form of these imaginaries could be divided into institutional ECEC 1) as an intervention for skill formation, and 2) as the creation and safeguarding of national identity. The first semiotic form underlines the investment in the next generation’s learning and development to secure the future health, productivity, and economic prosperity of the nation state. The latter semiotic form stresses ECEC as socialization that creates a citizenry for an imagined nation aligned with the respective government ideology. While they both relate to future citizenry and learning, in the first imaginary the role of the citizenry is implicit, and in the latter learning is implicit.

The first way imaginaries work is through institutionalized norms (Lundgren, 1990). For example, in the case of Hungary, the institutionalized norms around national identity are portrayed in a way that it becomes hard to question them. Learning one’s nation’s traditions and Christian values, loving one’s nation, and belonging to its soil expresses strong patriotic sentiments, a positive feeling many Hungarians might agree with without questioning. This imaginary constructs those children and families who are already marginalized, without a strong Christian moral ground, or a status on the fringes of society – such as many Roma families – as different from Hungarians with ‘proper’ norms and

values (Rotas & Kovacs, 2020). The imaginary related to the compulsory access law simply reinforces the common sense that Roma children must have the kindergartens' socializing influence to become real Hungarians, and that they are not considered as Hungarians even though they are citizens.

The second way imaginaries work is through economic steering, such as funding, fees, and subsidies (Lundgren, 1990). This was especially evident in Finland where the imaginary of ECEC as a learning intervention fuelled the policy pilot for free-of-charge ECEC for five-year-olds (2018–2021). This imaginary constructs ECEC as the first step in the education system that improves children's learning skills for school and increases educational equality by narrowing differences in learning. Within this imaginary, the problem related to the enrolment rate is presented to be the fees, even though before the policy pilot, families with the lowest income did not pay the fees at all. In addition, the pilot was targeted at five-year-olds, an age group where the enrolment rate was already high compared to the younger age group. The beneficiaries of the pilot were then mainly middle-class and high-income families who in the pilot were exempt from fees, and it was a policy reform that seemed to be easy to carry out.

The third way imaginaries are constructed is through knowledge production systems, such as reviews and evaluations, and national and international assessments. This is evident, for example, in the case of Brazil, where the IOs' evaluation of the country's ECEC system has been utilized in the formulation of national access policies. ECEC legislation and guidelines have been couched in the IO's language (see also Santos & Junior, 2017). Knowledge production systems do not operate with traditional hierarchical steering as two other forms of governance, but rather in the absence of command and control, and IOs are used to generate and supply information and legitimation to exert softer forms of governance.

Furthermore, by utilizing this approach, we could identify both shared policy solutions with varying legitimizations and divergent policy solutions with similar legitimizations. On the one hand, despite the somewhat contrasting socio-political and historical situations, similar ways of legitimizing policies aiming to increase access to ECEC emerged analogously in Brazil, Finland, and Nepal. Global interconnectivity (Carney, 2009) and synchronisation (Alasuutari, 2012) mean that educational discourses can operate in contrasting sites, such as ECEC access policies building on human capital arguments in Brazil, Finland, and Nepal. 'The construction of global visions' indeed frames or guides national policy discussions and solutions.

On the other hand, we could see seemingly similar policy solutions legitimized in varying ways, such as was the case in making pre-primary education mandatory in Finland and

making ECEC compulsory in Hungary. In the first case, the human capital argumentation and references to international comparisons were used, while in the latter, preserving national identity was the justification used. As Millei (e.g., 2020) has pointed out, childhood institutions – such as kindergartens, preschools, and schools – reflect constructions of future citizenry, and thus are inevitably of interest in national policies. Therefore, the analogous policies aiming at enhancing and increasing access to ECEC must not be seen as the result of increasing and accelerating globalization but rather as national projects that could even intentionally resist globalization. The ways in which the analogous policies become legitimized in each national context and the role international influences play is dependent on the local, historically constructed, socio-political context and the imaginaries that justify or make these policies common sense, including the ideologies of governments. The variation in ways of legitimizing policies and the various types of dynamics between international and local actors becomes more visible when selecting a constellation of countries that also go beyond the Global North and Western countries, as we saw well when exploring the cases of Iran, and Indonesia.

These findings are important as they show how semiotic and non-semiotic aspects of policies do not always logically align in policy reforms. Based on our findings, we argue that national endeavours, and ideals related to citizenry, are far more important in recent access policy reforms than the earlier research has identified (see also Burman, 2008; Millei & Imre, 2016) even though interconnected nature of nation states requires national policy decisions to take a stance in relation to the discourses promoted by international organisations. The structural form and justifications used for backing up and supporting policy reforms are contingent to socio-political context of the country.

As a side note, physical geography still matters in a globalized world. For example, in Nepal it is acknowledged that geographical variations pose challenges to equal access to ECEC. The country has tremendous geographic diversity: high mountains and tropical lowland regions. Ecological belts either privilege or constrain the access of children to ECEC: services in rural areas are limited. Nevertheless, local policy solutions recommended by international organizations seem fairly similar regardless of the locality– e.g., integrating 4–5-year-olds’ pre-primary education as part of mandatory, free-of-charge basic education.

Local variation is clearly more entrenched than we can show in this article. Imaginaries that do not focus on future citizenry but instead reflect local particularities, as well as the aims of equality and equity or good life in more general terms can also be found. In this study, the focus on the overarching imaginary of creating future citizenry and the various forms it takes on in the seven case studies allowed us to discuss the global-local nexus in dialogue with existing research in the fields of both comparative and international

education and early childhood policy studies. To further unravel the complexities inherent in such policies in terms of their local diversity, we suggest smaller scale comparisons and the examination of local policies instead of national ones as fruitful avenues for future research.

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Appendix 1 List of the analysed national key policy documents related to policies of access in ECEC published after 2008.

BRAZIL

2009 'Política Nacional de Educação infantil: Relatório de Avaliação' (BRASIL, 2009b).

2009 Constitutional Amendment 59.

2009 Quality indicators.

2009 Resolution 05/2009. National Curriculum Guidelines for Early Childhood Education.

2013 Law 12.796/2013 amends the Education Law (LDBEN) No. 9394/96. Early Childhood Education compulsory for 4- and 5-year-olds.

2014 Law 13.005/2014. National Education Plan (PNE) includes assuring universal access to compulsory ECE.

2016 Law 13.257/2016. ECE established as a priority area for integrated public policies for early childhood; expansion and quality of public provision for 0–3-year-olds.

2018 National Core Curriculum (BNCC). Alignment of ECEC with primary and lower secondary education. Common regulations for public and private ECEC providers.

2021 Provisional Measure 1.061 of 9/8/2021. Regulates the programme 'Auxílio Brasil'. Deployment of vouchers. Eligible low-income families may qualify for vouchers if there is a lack of available ECE near their home or work.

2021 Decree 10.582 of 11/11/2021. [Further] Regulates the programme 'Auxílio Brasil'. Vouchers can be used with public partner profit and non-profit providers.

FINLAND

2008 Government proposal 37/2008. Revising participation fees to match index increments.

2009 Government proposal 20/2009. Deployment of vouchers. Municipalities were given the option of using vouchers as a means for utilizing private-sector providers.

2014 Government proposal 135/2014. Pre-primary education compulsory for six-year-olds.

2015 Government proposal 80/2015. Limiting universal access to 20h per week.

2016 Government proposal 205/2016. Revising participation fees. Reductions to fees of two- and three-person families.

2018 National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care. Finnish National Agency for Education.

2018–2021 Policy pilot of free-of-charge ECEC for five-year-olds in some municipalities.

2019 Governmental proposal 34/2019. Reinstating universal access to full-time ECEC.

2020 Government proposal 149/2020. Policy trial for extending pre-primary education to five-year-olds.

2020 Government proposal 198/2020. Lowering fees to abolish financial barriers to entering the labour market.

HUNGARY

2010 Government Decree 2010-1004 (I.21). Increasing nursery and kindergarten spaces appropriate to areas funded by the government and workplaces to enable equality between the genders.

2012 Government Decree 63/2012. (XII. 17.). Kindergarten programme. Church kindergarten is a public education institution. First church kindergarten funded by the municipality in Budapest (II).

2015 Government Decree 8. § (2). Kindergarten compulsory for 3- and 4-year-olds. No exemptions for 5-year-olds.

2018 Law 137/2018. (VII. 25.) amends the 2011 Law. Kindergartens' role to transmit values, Christian values, and national identity education must start in preschool.

2019/2013 Based on 2012 II. Law 247 § c). National check on enrolments, more than 11 days' absence yearly considered law-breaking: in effect from 2019.

INDONESIA

2006 Early Childhood Development (ECD) project supported by the World Bank.

2010 Programme on PAUDISASI. ECEC can be done everywhere and by everyone.

2013 Presidential Regulation 60/2013. Holistic and Integrative Early Childhood Development. Establishing a national cross-government task force on ECEC.

2014 Law 6/2014. Concerning Villages. Encouraging village governments to provide and finance quality ECEC services. Programme 'One village, one EC centre'.

2016 Ministerial Decree 2/2016. Technical Guide of the Allocation of Grant for ECEC (BOP-PAUD). Funding formal ECEC. If budget surplus, local governments may choose to allocate it to under 4-year-old ECEC.

2017 Ministerial Decree 4/2017 amends 2/2016 MD. Regulation and guidelines for costs allocation in both formal and non-formal ECEC institutions.

2020 Ministerial Decree 13/2020 amends 4/2017 MD. BOP-PAUD covers non-personnel operational costs.

2020 Ministerial Decree amends 13/2020 MD. In the pandemic era teachers' salaries can be allocated from the BOP-PAUD.

IRAN

2010 Reductions of governmental financial aids to preschools.

2012 Act of Assistant Directors Council, Ministry of Education, Manual of Style 710/16: Changing the structure of primary schools, preschools separated from primary schools.

2011 Substantial Act of Ministry of Education, Supreme Council of Cultural Revolution, and Supreme Council of Education, Fundamental Reform Document of Education (FRDE) in the Islamic Republic of Iran: Strategy of expansion of pre-primary education, especially in deprived and needy areas through the participation of the private sector.

2014 Circular of the Minister of Education, Instructions for Managing and Implementing the Preschool Duration No. 10 S/200/93/11/6, Government funding for preschools.

2014 Circular of the Minister of Education, Instructions for Managing and Implementing of the Preschool Duration No. 10 S/200/93/11/6, Targeted educational programmes.

2017 Budget Law, Funding for preschools in 'deprived and needy areas'.

2021 *Ongoing* Establishment of the 'National Organization of Child's Education': it should oversee the content, methods, curriculum, and teacher education in ECEC, and well as all nurseries, kindergartens, and preschools.

NEPAL

2008 Policy Review, Early Childhood Review in Nepal. Mainstreaming ECD; Legal provisions; Focus on 0–5-year-olds; ECD included in the education system, programmes within jurisdictions of local body (VDC, Municipality), separate budget.

2009–2015 Policy direction, School Sector Reform Plan. MOE's Collaborative planning with CBOs and I/NGOs to expand ECD and commitment to funding one year of ECD programmes for 4-year-olds.

2014/2015 Equity Strategy. Consolidated equity strategy for the School Education Sector. Expansion and redistribution of ECED services; Strengthening of institutional capacity for monitoring ECED access and participation.

2016 Development plan, School sector development plan, Ministry of Education.

2018 Law. Free and compulsory education act 2075. Ministry of Education, Science and Technology.

2018 Law. Children act 2074. Ministry of Women, Children and Senior Citizen.

2018 Action plan. Country program action plan 2018-2022. UNICEF & Ministry of Finance.

2019 Policy. National Education Policy. Establishing alternative ECED centres for children unable to attend school due to school distance, in coordination with local school and managed by the local authorities.

2020–2030 Strategy, National strategy for ECD, Ensuring 0–8-year-olds' physical, social, emotional, cognitive, and linguistic development by 2030.

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SERBIA

2010 Law on Preschool Education and Upbringing. Replaces the former 1992 Law on Social Care for Children. Preschool education acknowledged and considered a part of the integrated education system. Children's rights and needs. Parents' participation was set to 20% of economic price. Free of charge for vulnerable children. It kept the mandatory and free of charge one year of preparatory preschool education introduced in 2006/7.

2017 Law on the Foundations of the Education System and Upbringing.

2017 Amendments to the Law of Preschool Education and Upbringing. Former parents' participation was replaced by unspecified participation in the costs, covered to a great extent by the municipalities.

2018 and 2019 Amendments to the previous 2017 law; specifications about children with special needs.

Appendix 2 Overview of early childhood education and care (ECEC) in the seven countries.

BRAZIL	FINLAND	HUNGARY	INDONESIA	IRAN	NEPAL	SERBIA
State support for home care						
Maternity leave: paid 120 calendar days; optional 60 added if agreed with employer; 180 days for public servants.	Pregnancy leave: paid 40 working days Parental leave: paid 320 working days in total. If the child has two parents, 97 days allocated for each parent. Home care allowance: for under three-year-old child and their under school-aged siblings not attending formal ECEC. Can be supplemented by the municipalities.	Maternity leave: paid 24 weeks Mother support: one payment 225% of pension and 300% for twins Child-care allowance: for under three-year-old child; until child is six-months old, the parent cannot work.	Maternity leave: paid 3 months (calendar days), possible to extend with a medical certificate. Paternity leave: Maximum 1 month for public servants without affecting their rights to annual leave; at least 2 days for private-sector employees.	There is no state support for homecare.	Maternity leave: 14 weeks; only full remuneration for 60 days.	Maternity leave: paid 365 months (including pregnancy leave) Paternity leave: except for the first three months of a child, paternity leave can replace maternity leave Parental leave: paid 2 years starting from the third child.
Child ages: institutional ECEC; starting of mandatory and primary schooling						
ECEC: 0–5-year-olds Mandatory: 4-year-olds Primary: 6-year-olds	ECEC: 0–6-year-olds Mandatory: 6-year-olds Primary: 7-year-olds	ECEC: 0–5-year-olds Mandatory: 3-year-olds (20 hours), 5-year-olds full-time Primary: 6-year-olds	ECEC: 0–5-year-olds Mandatory: 6-year-olds Primary: 6-year-olds	ECEC: 0–6-year-olds Mandatory: 7-year-olds Primary: 7-year-olds	ECEC (ECED): 0–8-year-olds Mandatory: 4-year-olds Primary: 5-year-olds (primary education is included in ECED)	ECEC: 6 months–6½-years Mandatory: 5½-year-olds Primary: 6½-year-olds
						Table continues.

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BRAZIL	FINLAND	HUNGARY	INDONESIA	IRAN	NEPAL	SERBIA
Types of acknowledged ECEC						
Nursery/day-care for 0–3 years; Pre-school for 4–5-year-olds; Common regulations and guidelines.	ECEC centres Family day care Open ECEC (part-time). No formal age-based division (all services can cater for 0–6-year-olds). Separate regulations and guidelines in relation to staff-child ratio and staff qualification requirements.	Nursery for 0–2-year-olds, includes institutional nursery, mini nursery, family nursery, and workplace nursery; Kindergarten for 3–5-year-olds. Separate regulations and guidelines.	Non-formal line: 0–3-year-olds (playgroup, daycare); Formal line: Islamic kindergarten, 4–6-year-olds (TK B) in public kindergarten); Informal line: communitarian services (integrated health service centre, childcare units). Separate regulations and guidelines between public (under ME*) and Islamic kindergartens (Ministry of Religious Affairs); Under ME* separate regulations according to children's' age group.	<i>Since 1998</i> Private nurseries/kindergartens: no fixed ages, 6 months–5 years Preschools: 5–6-year-olds Separate regulations <i>Ongoing change 2021</i> 1 st Childhood period: 0–3 years, family's duty 2 nd Childhood period: 3–6 years, state's responsibility.	Early Childhood Development centres: 0–8-year-olds; Private early-child-education development centres for 3–5-year-olds (play group, Montessori, Nursery, Lower and Upper Kindergarten); Community-based early childhood education development centres for 3+- to 4+-year-olds; School-based pre-primary classes (PPE) for 4–5-year-olds; Common ECD programme, but separate regulations for 3–4-year-olds and 5–8-year-olds.	Nursery: 6 months to 3 years; Kindergarten: 3–5 ½-year-olds; Preschool preparatory programme: 5 ½–6 ½-year-old Separate regulations and guidelines for educational groups in relation to staff-child ratio and staff qualification requirements.

Table continues.

BRAZIL	FINLAND	HUNGARY	INDONESIA	IRAN	NEPAL	SERBIA
Legal entitlement to public ECEC and fees						
For all 0–3-year-olds: 20 hours, but full-time may be granted upon request; For all 4–5-year-olds: 20 hours mandatory, but full-time possible upon request; There are no fees in public ECEC.	Full-time for all children (centre-based or family day care); Fees are based on the income and the size of the family. Maximum 288 and minimum 0 euros/month per child.	All entitled to public ECEC. Fees based on salary and mostly for meals or extra-curricular activities.	All entitled to full-time planned ECED. For all 4–6-year-olds: 4 hours/day. In urban areas private kindergartens provide longer services, fees vary. ECEC institutions can receive local government grants (BOS) based on the number of children; these institutions cannot charge fees.	For 5–6-year-olds: Full-time and part-time possible. In private preschools fees are determined by the State Welfare Organization; There are no fees in public preschools. <i>Note: ongoing changes 2021.</i>	All entitled to full-time planned ECED. For all 3–4-year-olds: curriculum and learning materials planned for 4.30 hours/day; For all 4–5-year-olds: public and community-based PPE classes; Theoretically no fees, but in practice institutions charge small fees, amounts vary.	For all children from 6 months to 6½ years; Funded mostly by local governments, fees paid by parents differ, on average 30%; reimbursement for costs in more expensive private kindergartens if there is no place available in public kindergartens; free of charge for vulnerable children. For all 5½– 6½-year-olds: 4 hours/day, no fees, mandatory.
						Table continues.

BRAZIL	FINLAND	HUNGARY	INDONESIA	IRAN	NEPAL	SERBIA
<i>Governance and public provision</i>						
<p>- National governance: ME* legislates, sets national core curriculum, quality parameters and assessment; collection and allocation of resources</p> <p>- Municipalities: management and provision of all public ECEC services.</p>	<p>- National governance: ME* sets national policies, core curriculum, quality parameters.</p> <p>- Municipalities: management and provision of all public ECEC services; monitoring of private ECEC together with Regional State Administrative Agencies.</p> <p>- Funding: Public ECEC provision funded by the municipalities supplemented with central government transfers.</p> <p>- Quality assessment: mostly self-evaluation. Regional state administrative agencies monitor the implementation of national regulations at the local level.</p>	<p>- National governance and provision: ME* sets national policies, core curriculum, quality parameters and assessment, collection, and allocation of resources.</p> <p>- Municipalities and central government provision and funding of 84% of ECEC costs; 8.8% given to the church ECEC institutions</p>	<p>- National governance: ME* oversees the formal line, sets national policies, national core curriculum, quality parameters, and assessment.</p> <p>- Local government and Educational Council are responsible for ECEC implementation.</p> <p>- MORA (which unlike ME* is a centralized institution) oversees and manages all Islamic kindergartens across country.</p>	<p><i>Since 1998</i></p> <p>- National governance and partial provision: State Welfare Organization is responsible for monitoring and licensing nurseries/kindergartens; ME* regulates licensing, national guidelines, book content; sets programmes and evaluation of preschools; provision and funding of preschools, particularly in rural, bilingual, urban marginal, and tribal areas.</p> <p><i>Ongoing change 2021</i></p> <p>Establishment of the 'National Organization of Children' that should oversee all ECEC.</p>	<p>- National governance and partial provision: ME* sets national policies, curriculum, materials, and learning tools; for 3–4-year-olds, mandatory PPE and primary education.</p> <p>- Municipalities and Village Development Committees: ECEC provision for 3+- to 4+- year-olds in partnership with NGOs, community-based organizations and local groups.</p>	<p>- National governance and provision: ME* legislates, monitors, and sets quality parameters and assessment.</p> <p>- Local governments: provision; funding together with the Ministry for Family Care and Demography (maternity leave, parental leave, parents, and children's allowances).</p> <p>ECEC institutions define programmes in consultation with parents' council and local community; There are regular programmes and diversified (special and specialized) programmes.</p>

Table continues.

BRAZIL	FINLAND	HUNGARY	INDONESIA	IRAN	NEPAL	SERBIA
Providers and participation rates (two decimal round-up percentages)						
<p>- Public (74%) and private, both for and non-profit (2020 census).</p> <p>- Attendance rates for 3-year-olds is 67%, 4-year-olds is 90%, and 5-year-olds is 99% (OECD, 2021).</p>	<p>- Public (75%) and private, both for- and non-profit.</p> <p>- Attendance rates for under 3-year-olds is 35% and among 3–5-year-olds between 85-89% (OECD, 2021).</p> <p>- Total enrolment in institutional ECEC: 77% (THL, 2020).</p>	<p>- Public and private, both for- and non-profit.</p> <p>- Attendance rates for 3-year-olds is 83%, 4-year-olds is 98%; 5-year-olds is 96%, and 6-year-olds is 64%; In general, 91% of available places are used. (Hungarian Statistical Office, 2019/20)</p>	<p>- Formal line providers under the ME* (76%) and Islamic kindergartens.</p> <p>Under ME*: publicly (4%) and privately funded providers.</p> <p>Islamic kindergartens: 100% privately funded.</p> <p>- Attendance rates in providers under ME*: 95% in private providers.</p> <p>- Total attendance rate in providers under ME*: 74% (2019 national data).</p> <p>- Attendance rates for 3-year-olds is 35%, 4-year-olds is 73%, and 5-year-olds is 100% (OECD, 2021).</p>	<p>- Nursery/kindergarten: only private (both for- and non-profit). Preschool classes: public (21.8%) and private classes (both for and non-profit).</p> <p>- Attendance rate in preschools: 42% (Statistic Yearbook of 2021).</p>	<p>- Both private and public run PPE (3–5-year-olds);</p> <p>Community-based (3+ and 4+) and school-based PPE (4–5-year-olds) are only public.</p> <p>- Attendance rates: total in PPE is 86%; Community-based and school-based PPE 50% and private ECD/PPE 50% (Government of Nepal, Flash Report 2019/20).</p>	<p>- Public and private.</p> <p>- Attendance rates in public institutions almost 8 times higher than in private (2020), but attendance in private is rising quickly.</p> <p>- Total enrolment in institutional ECEC: in general 63%; in pre-school year 97% (Statistical Yearbook 2021).</p>

*ME – common abbreviation for National Ministries in charge of public education: in Brazil and Finland, Ministry of Education and Culture; in Hungary, Ministry of Human Capacities; in Indonesia, Ministry of Education, Culture, Research and Technology; in Iran, Ministry of Education; in Nepal, Ministry of Education Science and Technology; in Serbia, Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development. Complete list of sources at the end of the article.

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