Bridging the Gap: Analysing the Discrepancy between Policy Design and Implementation in Georgia's Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC)

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Abstract

The years children spend in Early Childhood Education and Care significantly impact their social, emotional, and cognitive development, as well as their life-long success and educational outcomes. However, not only is the ECEC the least prioritised and funded policy field in the world, but also the least researched in many countries. In Georgia, the only available resources for analysing ECEC policy are reports from UNICEF, and local studies have never been conducted on ECEC in any municipality across Georgia. To close this gap in the literature and provide evidence for the Georgian policy-makers responsible for designing and implementing the ECEC policies, this dissertation aims to study the complex policy and governance landscape of early childhood education and care in Georgia. It explores how different levels of government and key stakeholders interact, coordinate, and address the policy processes and their accompanying challenges in Batumi, the second-largest city in Georgia. The dissertation also intends to study existing implementation and governance gaps in the ECEC and the impact of these gaps on policy outcomes. The results indicate that there is a stark contrast between Georgia's ECEC policy's design and its implementation in practice; that out of seven governance gaps discussed in the literature, five are present in Batumi: Information, Capacity, Fiscal, Objective, and Accountability gaps; and that the primary actors involved in Batumi's ECEC policy are unaware of most of these governance gaps and are reluctant to address the rest. Moreover, the lack of an independent regulatory body ensuring alignment of policy objectives and national standards with the implementation on the ground seriously hinders the successful implementation of the policy.

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Abbreviation	Definition
ECEC	Early Childhood Education and Care
ECE	Early Childhood Education
EPUE	Early and Pre-school Upbringing and Education
MLG	Multi-level Governance
OECD	The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development
UNICEF	The United Nations Children's Fund
UNESCO	The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
SLB	Street-level Bureaucrats

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Overview

The global learning crisis is reflected in millions of children entering schools and still being unable to read, write, or do basic mathematics. (UNESCO, 2013) According to UNICEF, this crisis has its roots in children's early years, as they are often deprived of quality early childhood education. The period from conception to the start of school, years in ECEC, is described as a "singular window of opportunity to shape the development of a child's brain" (UNICEF, 2017). This is a critical period in every child's social, emotional, and cognitive development and a catalyst for optimal brain development. Moreover, quality ECEC interventions benefit all, "children, families, education systems and societies at large." (UNICEF, 2020)

When analysing the practices from the world's highest-performing countries, Kagan and Roth saw a direct correlation between a solid pre-primary education and lifelong achievements and the well-being of adults (Kagan, 2020). The growing literature on the economy highlights the direct correlation between investing in ECEC and national economic growth (Knudsen et al., 2006). However, despite the consensus in the literature on the importance of ECEC, most countries fail to offer quality and universal ECEC services, and Georgia is no exception. The literature on early childhood education is very limited in Georgia. The available resources are mostly UNICEF reports, with the general research findings at the national level and limited emphasis on cities and regions. Considering this information gap, local policymakers struggle with evidence-based policy-making and potential policy learning.

1.2 Research Objectives and Findings

To close the existing gaps, this dissertation aims to analyse the complex policy and governance landscape of early childhood education and care in Georgia's context. It explores how different levels of government and key stakeholders interact, coordinate, and address the policy processes and their accompanying challenges. On the other hand, it intends to assess the impact of existing implementation and governance gaps on policy outcomes and the strategies and approaches for closing these gaps. The dissertation answers the broader research question of how early childhood education and care (ECEC) policies are implemented in Batumi, Georgia. This question entails the following sub-questions:

A) What type of governance has been linked to the implementation of the ECEC policies in Georgia?

B) What governance gaps, if any, are present with implementing the ECEC policies in Georgia, and what strategies and approaches are in practice to close these governance gaps?

The key findings of this research are that there is a stark contrast between Georgia's ECEC policy's design and its implementation in practice. Out of seven governance gaps discussed in the literature, five are present in Georgia: Information, Capacity, Fiscal, Objective, and Accountability gaps. The primary actors involved in Georgia's ECEC policy are unaware of most of these governance gaps and are reluctant to address the rest. Moreover, the lack of an independent regulatory body ensuring alignment of policy objectives and national standards with the implementation on the ground seriously hinders the successful implementation of the policy.

1.3 Research Structure

In terms of the structure, the research proceeds as follows. A literature review will be conducted, highlighting the findings from the key scholarly work on (a) ECEC policy; (b)Implementation studies, and the (c) Multi-level Governance Framework (MLG). This will be followed by the in-depth analysis of Charbit's Governance Gaps framework, the primary theoretical framework used in this dissertation. Next, the methodology chapter will illustrate and justify the key methodological choices made for conducting this research. The chapter will also describe the methodological limitations and strategies used to mitigate their impact on the quality of this study. Chapter four summarises the background of Georgia's ECEC policy to help better situate the case in the context. The final chapter will offer an in-depth analysis of Georgia's ECEC policy implementation and governance. Through zooming in on the ECEC policy implementation in Batumi, followed by a broader discussion on policy design and implementation in practice, the chapter will offer a holistic analysis of how specific governance models and stakeholder interactions in the context of Batumi lead to implementation gaps and hinder policy success.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Overview

Education policy, particularly early childhood education policy, is described as complex, interconnected, dynamic, and involving various actors at different levels of government (UNICEF, 2017). Hence, there is a need for a holistic analysis of policy in multiple contexts. However, the literature on ECEC policy and governance is limited. To respond to the research question of this dissertation and situate the case study of Georgia in the broader context, ECEC policy and governance literature will be described briefly in the first part of the literature review. Next, to understand and assess the governance of early childhood education in Georgia, analyse the relations among various stakeholders involved in the service delivery process, and measure the impact of the governance on policy success or failure, several other strands of literature will be discussed in this research.

The main focus of the literature review will be on the implementation literature, which is the primary theoretical approach used in this dissertation. The literature on policy implementation illustrates diverse explanations for the success and failure of policy implementation. These explanations incorporate everything from the character and the design of policy to governance models, organisational arrangements of the system, the political will of the policymakers and the capacity of those involved in implementation (Spillane et al., 2002).

Since the ECEC policy is highly decentralised in Georgia and involves various stakeholders and policy networks from different levels of government, another vital strand of the literature discussed in the literature review will be the Multi-level Governance Framework

(MLG). The MLG theory is a tool often used in education research, particularly in federal and/or decentralised education systems, since the framework allows for capturing and understanding the complex and multi-dimensional landscape of the early childhood education policy.

Finally, the primary theoretical framework used for this dissertation is Charbit's (2011) Multi-level Governance Gaps in ECEC. Charbit's framework relies on the argument that due to the lack of coordination mechanisms, several governance "gaps" emerge, often leading to a policy failure. The seven governance gaps are information, capacity, fiscality, administration, policy, objectives, and accountability gaps (Charbit, 2011; Charbit & Michalun, 2009). This theoretical framework combines the features of multi-level governance with the implementation process and demonstrates the role of various actors involved in the process. It allows for capturing the interactions and dynamics among these stakeholders in the context of policy implementation and governance. Hence, it is expected that it will help best answer the research question of this dissertation.

2.2 Early Childhood Education Policy (ECEC)

Considering the complexity and multidimensional nature of ECEC policy, various debates and discussions emerge in the literature. There is a big debate regarding the universal versus targeted approach to the provision of ECEC services, standards and the measurement of the quality of the ECEC, funding mechanisms for the ECEC services and whether the government should fully fund it or there should also be private contributions from the family. The academia is divided on what is the best governance methods to ensure ECEC policy coherence, efficient resource allocation, and collaboration across actors and sectors.

The research on the importance of quality pre-primary education heavily relies on equity and moral arguments (Zigler, 2006). There is also an emerging body of literature on the economic importance of investing in pre-primary education. In his research on The Economics of Inequality, James Hackman, a Nobel-prize-winning American economist, highlighted the direct influence of investing in early childhood development on the economy, health, and other social outcomes for individuals and society. He argues that "every $1 invested in quality early childhood programs can yield returns between $4 and $16" (Heckman, 2010, p.23). Edward Zigler, also known as the "father of Head Start," argues that besides improved readiness for school and better academic achievements, engaging in high-quality ECEC programs is associated with a significant decrease in school dropout and cost savings resulting from reduced needs for remedial educational services and justice system interventions (Zigler, 2006). Moreover, investing in pre-primary education and ensuring the high quality of these programs has higher returns in developing countries and is considered a promising policy instrument that increases equity and alleviates poverty (Heckman & Kruger, 2003).

Another debate in academia is on the positive and negative impact of decentralisation on education policy implementation. According to the OECD Report on the governance of public policies in decentralised contexts, a majority of OECD members stress too much importance on the question of "decentralise or not." According to the same report, instead, member countries should be concerned with how to "look at ways to improve capacity and coordination among public stakeholders at different levels of government to increase efficiency, equity and sustainability of public spending" (Charbit, 2011. p.5).

The growing literature talks about the stakeholders who should play a central role in the ECEC, and parental engagement in the policy is critical (Desforges and Abouchaar, 2003).

The analysis of countries with the best ECEC policies demonstrates that there is a pattern in involving parents as the main actors in the policy. The cases of the world's most successful ECEC services further reinforce the idea that parental engagement as key stakeholders is critical (e.g., The Finnish ECEC, Early Headstart, The Norwegian preschool) (UNICEF, 2008b). The Norwegian Kindergarten Act, for example, requires early childhood education institutions to work closely with the guardians of a child. This includes quality interactions with all guardians and facilitation of their involvement in institutions' activities (Sønsthagen, 2020).

2.3 Implementation Studies

The study of implementation relies on the argument that not all policy decisions made by policymakers are successfully implemented. Hill and Hupe (2009:11) call this an implementation 'gap' – a difference between the expected policy outcomes and the actual policy outcomes. The literature on policy implementation illustrates diverse explanations for this implementation gap. These explanations incorporate everything from the character and the design of policy to governance models, organisational arrangements of the system, the political will of the policymakers and the capacity of those involved in implementation (Spillane, Reiser, Reimer, 2002).

Traditionally, the study of policy implementation suffered from the naïve assumption that all policy decisions were inevitably accomplished through the designated implementation system and that the outcomes of policy were as intended by the policymakers. Hence, the implementation literature for a long period was disregarded, and policy theorists mostly focused on the decision-making process, trying to offer ways to improve this process, assuming that a good policy would inevitably be successful. During this period, studies have observed

the results (outcomes) of the policy and compared it to the policy intentions formulated. Consequently, most explanations for policy and implementation failure talked about the poor formulation or ambiguity of the policy as a problem. Policies that do not have well-expressed and clearly written goals and objectives have more chances for poor implementation. (Mazmanian & Sabatier, 1981; Pressman & Wildavsky, 1974; Weatherly & Lipsky, 1977).

Talib Younis calls this approach a 'black box' (Younis, 2010). Hill and Hupe talk about the same black box and define it as an administrative process between the policy formation stage and the policy outcomes stage and argue that this is a critical process that needs to be evaluated to check if a policy is successful or not (Hill & Hupe, 2012). It was not until the 1970s that the implementation literature started studying this black box. This is the period when there was a shift in academia from a vertical orientation, where the links between intentions and results are questioned, to a more horizontal approach, explaining why policies fail (Hill & Hupe, 2014, p 132). In this period, a group of scholars attempted to open this 'black box,' look at each stage of the implementation process and analyse why policies failed or succeeded. (Cohen & Spillane, 1992; Porter, Floden, Freeman, Schmidt, & Schwille, 1988; Pressman & Wildavsky, 1974; Weatherly & Lipsky, 1977).

When studying the implementation stage - a relationship between policy formulation and policy implementation stages, there is a lively debate in the literature. This debate is known as the top-down and bottom-up approaches. The debate emerged when a group of scholars argued that developing a broad and general theory of policy implementation was wrong since there is a variation between policy issues, as well as institutional contexts, and one rule cannot apply to all.

Jeffrey Pressman and Aaron Wildavsky (1973) are known as pioneers in the implementation study and the founding fathers of the top-down implementation approach. They reviewed the failure of an urban employment plan in the United States, the Oakland project and defined the implementation stage as a matter of following guidelines and instructions once the policy formation stage would determine the implementation strategies (Hill & Hupe, 2022). According to them, a policy is a hypothesis containing initial conditions and predicted consequences. This hypothesis is then translated into the desired outcome through government actions, referred to as 'programs', and once the legislation in question has passed and funds are secured, the coming stage is called implementation. Hence, policy implementation is a process of interaction between the setting of goals and actions geared to achieve them" (Pressman and Wildavsky, 1973, p.xv). Once the policy formulation is done, it also sets up policy instruments and guidelines for execution, and the process of implementation implies non-political administrators following these technical instructions.

In contrast, the bottom-up theorists focus on target groups and service deliverers, or in other words, they study "what happens on the ground, in the ways policies are implemented" (Hill & Hupe, 2022, p.52). This approach suggests that policy implementation cannot be drawn directly from policy objectives. The implementers have to interpret and make their own judgements of the policy while deciding how to act in the process (Hill & Hupe, 2022). Elmore (1980) and Hjern and Porter (1981) were the first scholars who argued that due to the complexity of the implementation process, it is impossible to draw direct lines between the policy goals and policy outcomes. Instead of assuming a causal link between the two, implementation studies had to put more emphasis on what is happening at the ground, at the service delivery level (the 'bottom') and explore why things happen the way they happen from the 'bottom-up.' Elmore (1980) developed the term 'backward mapping', which is an analytical

approach for studying and revising the policy implementation process from the bottom. (Barrett, 2004).

In relation to education policy, the bottom-up scholars looked at schools and interactions that happened among teachers, principals, students, and parents. They analysed real interactions and decisions made within the walls of the school and argued that these daily decisions made at the school level were policies in themselves (Barrett, 2004). According to Michael Lipsky, the 'father of the bottom-up approach,' these are the key stakeholders in implementing the education policy, and they are called **'street-level bureaucrats** (SLBs).' Lipsky, in his prominent book titled "Street-Level Bureaucracy: Dilemmas of the Individual in Public Services," published in 1980, coined the term "street-level bureaucrat." The term was used to describe frontline public service workers who directly interact with citizens, exercise discretion in implementing policies, and through whom citizens 'experience directly the government they have implicitly constructed" ((Lipsky, 1980, p.xi). Moreover, Lipsky argued that "the decisions of street-level bureaucrats, the routines they establish, and the devices they invent to cope with uncertainties and work pressures, effectively become the public policies they carry out" (Lipsky, 1980, p.xii).

Oftentimes, these SLBs lack knowledge and skills, and they are not incentivised enough through salaries to work in ways needed for the policy implementation process. (Fullan, 1991; McLaughlin, 1990). Lipsky also argues that street-level bureaucrats frequently lack the necessary capacity needed to successfully fulfil their duties. "large classes or huge caseloads and inadequate resources combine with the uncertainties of method and the unpredictability of clients to defeat their aspirations as service workers." (Lipsky, 1980, p.xii).

Considering the new trend in public management and administration, where specialised public agencies are becoming the main actors in the policy implementation process, the study of policy implementation is more and more concerned with the capacity of these public agencies to meet governmental objectives (OECD, 2016). In other words, the vast literature on implementation analyses the ability of designated public agencies responsible for implementing a particular policy. The mistrust in public agencies derives from the fact that they are often perceived as "rule-bound and inflexible bureaucratic machines which grind on regardless of changing problems and circumstances, concerned more with their own procedures than with the public they intend to serve." (Barret and Fudge, 1981, p.3)

Spillan, Reiser, and Reimer, argue that education policy worldwide faces a similar policy challenge that local implementation is difficult. Their explanation for this shared policy concern is that agents' (policy actors') "sense-making with regard to reform initiatives is limited." (Spillan, Reiser, Reimer, p.388) According to them, policy-implementing agents constitute their own individual beliefs on what a policy means for them, and this belief is shaped through their existing cognitive structures (knowledge, beliefs, attitudes). Hence, these cognitive structures, which are different for all actors involved in the policy process, dictate their actions and how they interpret the policy, which might not be well-aligned with the initial idea of the policymaker. This is particularly problematic with decentralised policies like early childhood education. Considering that implementation of the policy strongly relies on SLBs, their interpretation of the policy might be completely different from the initial policy objectives. Hence, the importance of regulatory bodies should increase to ensure the alignment of SLBs' actions with the policy objectives.

2.4 Multi-level Governance (MLG)

Apart from the various explanations described above for poor implementation and policy failure, another challenge is the complexity of the policymaking, decision-making, and policy implementation processes. Since these are multi-dimensional processes involving multiple actors at different levels, a growing body of literature has emphasised the need to take into account multi-level viewpoints encompassing a range of different actors in relation to policy implementation processes. Indeed, policymaking is a complex process where power and authority are circulated across multiple tiers and among multiple stakeholders on national, regional, and local levels. (Hooghe and Marks, 2001) Hughe and Marks first used the term multi-level governance (MLG) in the European Union studies to describe a '' system of continuous negotiation among nested governments at several territorial tiers – supranational, national, regional and local.'' (Marks 1993, p.391)

According to Hooghe and Marks (2003), there are two distinct forms of multi-level governance mechanisms present in modern states: Type I and Type II. Type I can be observed in federalist systems, where a distinct hierarchy and discretion of power exist. In such systems, specific functions and responsibilities are clearly designated for each level of government within a structured framework. (Hooghe and Marks, 2003; Hooghe et al., 2001) On the other hand, Type II governance recognizes the interdependence of different actors and collaboration and involves intersecting memberships. This mode of governance promotes partnerships between different key stakeholders, not limiting itself to governments but also engaging public sector, non-governmental organizations, communities, non-state actors, and other supranational organizations relevant to the policy problem (Hooghe and Marks, 2003; Hooghe et al., 2001).

Hooghe and Marks' description of Type I and Type II governance illustrate completely isolated from each other models that have different characteristics. However, in reality, governance systems often combine elements of both types. Some governance systems feature elements of hierarchy and partnership, depending on the policy area, context, and stakeholders involved in the processes. Yet, the clear distinction between the two types of governance helps conceptualise different modes of governance and better understand the dynamics of decision-making, power, and cooperation in multi-level governance settings.

The idea of MLG is relevant to the studies of education policy and educational change. Michael Fullan (2007) demonstrates how to achieve the revolutionary system transformation in education through a tri-level reform at the local (school and community: teachers, principals, students, parents), district, and state or national levels. He argues that since the education policy's landscape is very complex and heavy with stakeholders, there is a need for two-way interaction among actors to achieve a large-scale and sustainable change (ibid.).

As Fullan argues, the majority of the problems related to educational change do not come from bad government intentions or the lack of will but rather from poor planning and coordination in a multilevel setting that engages thousands of people (Fullan, 2007). He claims that "educational change is a learning experience for the adults involved (teachers, administrators, parents, etc) as well as for children" (Fullan, 2007, pg 100) and hence, a critical factor resulting in successful implementation is how these actors involved in the process of implementation behave while carrying out their roles.

The main critique of multi-level governance, both as a theory and as a state organisational paradigm, is its complexity, lack of implementation practicality, and ambiguity in stakeholders' roles and responsibilities (Hooghe and Marks, 2001). Due to its nature and the need to coordinate decisions among various stakeholders at different levels, in practice, it often leads to coordination problems, which results in policy implementation problems. This becomes more problematic when the responsibilities of all stakeholders at different levels are not clearly defined and communicated. The overlap in roles, as well as the ambiguity regarding the responsibilities, results in governance problems. The MLG can also lead to bureaucratic red tape, an excessive administrative process hindering the effective and efficient implementation of policies. The concept of bureaucratic red tape was coined by Bozeman in 1993, and he described it as "a series of detailed rules, regulations, and procedures that must be followed to get something done." These practical challenges often lead to difficulties in achieving policy goals and policy coherence, as well as cause citizen dissatisfaction due to prolonged service delivery time.

Scholars also argue that there is a lack of emphasis on accountability mechanisms in multi-level governance. Gary Marks emphasised an accountability challenge associated with the MLG. He pointed out that it is difficult to hold decision-makers accountable in a system where authority is dispersed across various levels of government (Hooghe and Marks, 2001). The system could allow policymakers for blame-shifting in case of policy failure.

2.5 Conceptual Framework (Governance Gaps)

The primary theoretical framework used in this dissertation is Claire Charbit's Governance Gaps (Charbit, 2011). This is a policy evaluation framework developed by a prominent OECD economist and is a tool for capturing MLG challenges. It allows for identifying the main implementation-related problems in decentralised contexts. This framework has gained a high reputation in the academic literature since 2011 and has been used to evaluate various public policies, including public investment, water, and innovation.

Charbit, in her OECD Regional Development Paper, explains the experience of the OECD countries in relation to the governance of public policies in decentralised contexts (Charbit,2011). She argues that the main concern of governments should be to increase the local capacity of stakeholders and improve coordination mechanisms at different levels to ensure efficient, equal, and sustainable policy outcomes and public spending.

According to the same paper, an essential prerequisite to successful public policy is the identification of stakeholders involved in the design and implementation of the policy at all stages. Considering how interdependent these different stakeholders are, it is essential to "set-up an institutional mapping of their roles and responsibilities to clarify their relationships" (2011, p.15). Once there is a clear picture of who is responsible for what in terms of policy design, implementation, and monitoring, it becomes evident if the actors are overlapping in their functions with other actors or if one stakeholder depends on another. This overlapping requires effective coordination mechanisms from the government and a clear answer to the question of who retains responsibility in the MLG system for control and steering. Unfortunately, many countries are failing in successfully overseeing policies (OECD, 2021). This is particularly problematic in the context of the education policy since even in the most

decentralised system, there is a need for regular monitoring to ensure quality assurance of different regions and schools with national and international standards (OECD, 2012a).

Charbit classifies seven governance gaps that emerge from poor coordination and governance. These gaps are information, capacity, fiscality, administration, policy, objectives, and accountability (Charbit, 2011; see Table I).

Table 1: Governance Gaps in Multi-level ECEC System

Governance Gap	Description
Information Gap	The lack of access to quality information by local, regional, or central government. (e.g., critical data on ECEC institution performance, comparative data, and overall statistics) There is an information asymmetry on both sides – local versus central government, resulting in poor implementation of the ECEC policies.
Capacity Gap	The capacity gap occurs when any levels of governance lack the human resources needed for the successful implementation of the policies. (e.g., qualified teachers, school principals with leadership skills)
Fiscal Gap	The fiscal gap occurs when the local level strongly relies on the central government for financial resources to fund the implementation of education policies. The strong reliance on the central government for funding hinders successful cooperation. Similarly, a fiscal gap also occurs when the local government is fully independent of the central government but lacks resources for the successful implementation of the policy.
Policy Gap	The policy gap occurs when the policies initiated by the central government do not align with the local needs.
Administrative Gap	The administrative gap occurs when there is a lack of effective and efficient size for the administration to fulfil its responsibilities.
Objective Gap	When various levels of government involved in the policy processes do not communicate and coordinate the aims of the policy, an objective gap might occur. Actors at different levels might have different perceptions of policy priorities.
Accountability Gap	The accountability gap occurs when there is a lack of institutional monitoring, quality measurement strategies, and independent regulators for each level of governance.

Source: Adjusted from Charbit (2011, p. 16)

In summary, the literature review revealed that although the literature on early childhood education and care policy is fast and rapidly evolving, there are a few gaps where further research is needed. First, there is a vast literature on the design of ECEC policies but a lack of research on implementation challenges in different contexts. Literature names various challenges that exist in relation to ECEC policy implementation, including lack of financial and human capital, infrastructure, and parental involvement. However, there is a need to explore these implementation challenges in different contexts to understand the barriers and facilitators to successful policy implementation. Moreover, as ECEC policy often operates in MLG structures, there is a need to analyse the roles and responsibilities of various stakeholders and understand the impact of different governance arrangements on policy effectiveness.

The next chapter illustrates and justifies the methodological choices made for conducting this study. I will first describe seven methodological decisions made in this dissertation: the research philosophy, the research type, the research strategy, the time horizon, the sampling strategy, the data collecting methods, and the data analysis methods. Next, I will talk about the methodological limitations and explain strategies used to mitigate their impact on the quality of this study.

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1 Research Design

The goal of this dissertation is explanatory rather than confirmatory. The research objective is to uncover patterns, challenges, and opinions prevalent in the implementation of the ECEC in Georgia; hence an inductive, bottom-up approach was selected to ensure generation of a holistic picture and reliable conclusions from different individuals and interpretations of their observations.

The study will employ a qualitative approach, and the research design is a case study. The qualitative approach responds to the research objective, enabling an answer to the main research question of how ECEC policies are implemented in Georgia. The research aims to untangle the policy and governance system of ECEC by zooming in on the case study of Batumi. Several factors contributed to the selection of this research design. First, Georgia's ECEC policy is highly decentralised (UNICEF Georgia, 2020). Hence, to analyse how the policy is implemented at the lowest level and how centre-periphery relations and interactions occur in Georgia's political system regarding the ECEC, this study selected a specific municipality for a more realistic and detailed picture.

The case study of Batumi was chosen over other municipalities since it is the second biggest city in Georgia after the capital of Tbilisi (LEDP, 2019). Another major factor was the author's prior work experience in the municipality of Batumi as the Mayor's consultant on International Organization and Donor matters. As predicted, this enabled conducting this research effectively, as I managed to build a strong network of contacts in the local government. This would be my comparative advantage in conducting research, enabling me easy access to

primary and secondary data required for the dissertation, organising the field trip and arranging interviews and meetings. Finally, extensive research on ECEC policy and governance has never been conducted for Batumi. In informal discussions before deciding on my case study, policymakers from Batumi complained that planning and initiating new policies and programs for early childhood education is challenging, as there is no evidence and empirical data to ensure evidence-based policymaking. There is a lack of credible information on the city's challenges, needs, and opportunities for early childhood education services. Hence, my research will contribute significantly to closing this existing informational gap.

However, concerning my knowledge of the municipal processes and my previous work experience, I am conscious of the potential limitation of interpretivism in "meaning-making" (Beach, D., & Kaas, J. G, 2020). To mitigate this risk, I chose the policy field of ECEC since my previous work did not have any direct or indirect intersection with this specific policy field, and I was not aware of the local context before starting to work on this dissertation.

Regarding the time horizon, this study will look at the data collected at one point in time (cross-sectional). The field trip to collect the primary data took place between April-May 2023, and all interviews were conducted in person within this time frame. The secondary data used for this research are reports, legislation, and other government data, from 2016 onwards. 2016 is a baseline because this was when the Parliament of Georgia adopted the new EPUE Law. The cross-sectional time horizon approach was the only realistic approach considering the limited time for this dissertation project. Moreover, it efficiently responds to the research purpose since the goal is to look at the implementation of the ECEC policies at present, and there is no need to evaluate the change over time. Studying the evolution of the ECEC policies in Georgia could be an interesting, albeit different research project.

The literature discusses the challenges associated with conducting interviews with government representatives, particularly in Eastern Europe. For example, reaching out and receiving the confirmation of public officials for the interview is almost impossible, as there is this natural mistrust towards journalists and researchers are often labelled under the same category as journalists for no particular reason, as public officials assume they are affiliated with the opposition parties, aiming to showcase their work in the least attractive way possible (Drzewiecka, 2007). Moreover, government officials and elites rarely respond to emails from researchers (Richardson, 2014). I was aware of these potential difficulties before the field trip, and to limit the risks of not collecting sufficient primary data, I used the snowball sampling method, which is a technique in which one interviewee gives you the contact information of other potential interviewees (Naderifar, 2017). When contacting individuals nominated by previous interviewees, mentioning the name of their colleagues who participated in the interview increased the trust of the potential primary data source, enabling a more significant sample for the research. There were several instances during my field trip when I secured an appointment, showed up at the office of a public official, but could not conduct an interview since the interviewee was not in the office, or had an emergency meeting and postponed our meeting at last minute, without warning me, and never answering my phone calls and emails afterwards. Since I am writing this chapter after returning from the field trip and conducting all the interviews, I can confirm how critical the snowball sampling strategy was for achieving my research goal.

3.2 Data Analysis

After collecting the data through the methods described above, this dissertation envisions analysing the data through the case study method, using content and narrative analysis techniques. First, the primary and secondary data will be analysed based on their content. Information will be extracted and arranged based on themes. The interviews will be transcribed and translated from Georgian into English since the interview language was Georgian. Apart from content analysis, paying attention to the stories interviewees share, how they deliver these stories, body language, and intonations are all additional sources for narrative analysis. Often, narrative analysis can give a more unbiased and objective answer to the research question. This is particularly true with public administrators and government representatives, who might be inclined towards sharing specific information that showcases the government more positively. The literature describes them as ''professional communicators'' (Fitz & Halpin, 1995) who often dominate the interview process and negatively impact the credibility of research outcomes (Voldnes et al., 2014). However, analysing their narratives will illustrate patterns critical to drawing research conclusions.

3.3 Research Limitations

Although the research design was carefully selected and is thought to answer the research objectives best, some limitations still come with these methodological choices. The first limitation of this dissertation is the sample size. The sample size of 13 interviews might not give the most accurate results on the policy processes. There is a need to reach a more significant sample group to ensure that as many opinions and positions are represented as possible. However, due to the time constraint for this dissertation, it was impossible to increase the sample size. Hence, the research relies on primary and secondary data to mitigate this

limitation. The legislation, reports, and other documents are analysed to ensure that the data collected is sufficient for accurate research findings.

Bias is another concern with this research project. Most respondents are currently employed in ECEC services. There is a high chance that this influences their answers since they will try to showcase their work in the best possible way. This is particularly true with people who have leadership positions or work for the government. However, since the interviews were fully anonymous and the confidentiality of the conversation was guaranteed and explained at the beginning of each interview, respondents felt less exposed and more open. Surprisingly, the fact that this dissertation is being written in English, not in Georgian, led to some interviewees, especially teachers and the staff of the government executive agency, to be more open.

Moreover, this research uses content and narrative analysis techniques to analyse the data. The body language, intonations and pauses during the conversation, or topics they avoid or overemphasise in the interview, are all additional sources for analysis. Lastly, the in-depth interview method, though it might come with sample size and bias limitations, allows for capturing new beliefs and opinions that might not have been represented before. Most respondents mentioned that they had never been asked about their opinion on the ECEC, though some have been involved in providing ECEC services in Batumi for more than 25 years.

The next chapter will illustrate background information on Georgia's ECEC policy better situate the case in a broader context. Through analysis of the legislation of Georgia, policy documents, reports, and data published by the Georgian government, the chapter will describe the general policy landscape of ECEC in Georgia, as well as the implementation and governance processes.

Chapter 4: Early Childhood Education and Care Policy: Context for Georgia

Georgia, a post-communist state that regained independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, is a transitional country (UNICEF, 2017). Like other transition economies, it faces economic instability, high unemployment, inequalities, and corruption (World Bank, 2018). Surprisingly, although the literature on transitional countries demonstrates the higher financial returns to investing in education in these economies, compared to developed countries, transitional countries tend to invest the least in education (Flabbi, 2010). ECEC is particularly under-financed in these countries. Since individual municipalities allocate different funding for ECEC, there is no national and unified data on ECEC spending in Georgia. However, according to UNICEF Georgia's recent report, the quality of services is low due to underfunding (UNICEF Georgia, 2018).

In Georgia, education policy is highly centralised. All levels of education, except ECEC, follow strict national requirements and standards, the implementation of which is controlled by the central government and independent regulatory bodies. However, with ECEC, the government has fully delegated the policy implementation to the municipalities. The Municipalities are responsible for implementing the policy and are the sole financiers of the ECEC services in Georgia. The central government might provide additional funds only for infrastructural projects or teacher trainings.

There are 56 municipalities in Georgia, all of which define their own budget for early childhood education. This means that the financing of ECEC and its quality varies significantly across the country, depending on where a child is born and raised and how much that municipality prioritises early childhood education (UNICEF Georgia, 2018).

The main challenge associated with providing ECEC services in Georgia is low salaries for kindergarten staff and a lack of educational resources in institutions (UNICEF, 2018). As Figure 1 illustrates, most municipalities in Georgia spend less than 3 euros per child annually on educational resources like books, toys, and other materials necessary for a child's development. In Batumi, they spend approximately 6 euros per child annually on educational resources, significantly more than most municipalities. However, interviews with stakeholders in Batumi revealed that those resources are insufficient, and parents and teachers contribute by bringing and purchasing their own educational resources (Interviews 1,2,4,5,6,7,8,9,11).

Annual Budget for Educational Resources per Child According to Municipalities

Less than 10 Gel (3 Euros): 63%
10-20 Gel (3 - 6 Euros): 14%
20-25 Gel (6 - 7 Euros): 16%
More than 25 Gel (7 Euros): 7%
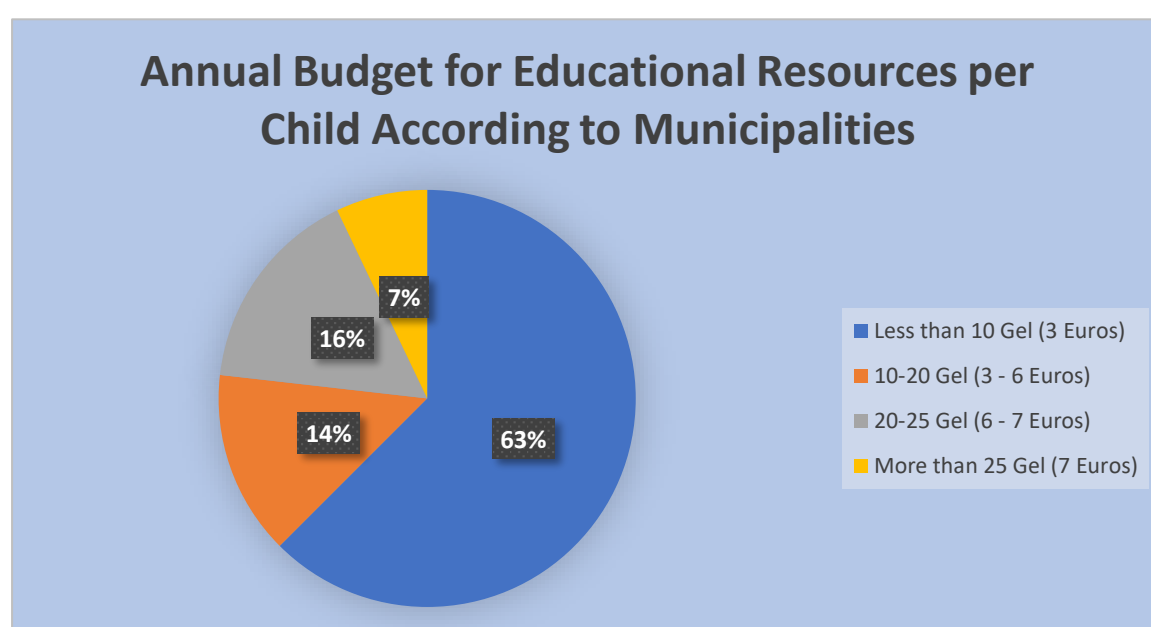
Figure 1: Adapted from the UNICEF Report 2018

Moreover, the salaries of ECEC staff are below the average salary in Georgia. As Table 2 illustrates, the average monthly salary of a full-time employed educator is 900 GEL, which is almost twice less than the average monthly income of the employed population of Georgia (1716.6 GEL). Moreover, there is no salary increase scheme yet to incentivise teachers. On the other hand, ECEC teachers in private kindergartens usually earn higher. There is no available

public data on salaries in each private kindergarten, but schools that provided us with financial information pay significantly more in salaries.

Table 2: Monthly Salaries of ECEC Staff in Public and Private Kindergartens of Batumi

Position	Salary in Public Kindergartens in Batumi	Salary in Private Kindergarten in Batumi
Kindergarten Principal	1250 GEL (437 EUR)	2000 GEL (700 EUR)
Kindergarten Teacher	900 GEL (315 EUR)	1300 GEL (455 EUR)
Special Education Teacher	980 GEL (343 EUR)	1500 GEL (525 EUR)

Source: Documents provided by Kindergartens Association Batumi and Private Kindergartens

Although early childhood education and care is a complex policy field, it was not until June 2016 that the government adopted a specific law on Early and Pre-school Upbringing and Education (EPUE). The law regulates the legal bases of universal access, development and quality assurance of early and preschool upbringing and education in Georgia, the organisational structure of early and preschool upbringing and education institutions, and determines the rules of their establishment, functioning and accountability, as well as the obligation of their authorisation. This was the first law that defined the powers, obligations, functions and responsibilities of state bodies, municipalities and other legal entities and individuals in Georgia. Table 3 below summarises the distribution of power and responsibilities.

The Government of Georgia	The Ministry of Education and Science of Georgia	The Ministry of Internally Displaced Persons from the Occupied Territories, Health, Labour and Social Affairs
Establishes the Kindergarten Authorisation Rules; Approves the National Standard on Early Childhood Education and Care, as well as the National Standard of Teachers in Early Childhood Education and Care, and Revises the Standards every five years; Approves the Technical requirements for the sanitary-hygienic norms in Early Childhood Education and Care institutions; Approves the Technical requirements for food organization, meals and their nutritional values in the Early Childhood Education and Care institutions Approves the Technical requirements for infrastructure and material-technical base and arrangement of the buildings of the Early Childhood Education and Care institutions; Supports the development of Early Childhood Education and Care institutions Infrastructure;	Develops and submits to the Government of Georgia for approval the National Standard on Early Childhood Education and Care, the implementation of which is mandatory for municipalities; Develops and submits to the Government of Georgia for approval the National Standard of Teachers in Early Childhood Education and Care; Based on the principles of inclusive education, prepares a list of educational resources and methodological resources and ensures the availability of these resources to municipalities; Develops a monitoring system, carries out monitoring and evaluation and prepares relevant recommendations; Develops training modules for the professional development of educators and supports municipalities in teacher retraining; Promotes public awareness of inclusive Early Childhood Education.	Develops and submits to the Government of Georgia for approval the technical regulation to determine the rules for the observance of sanitary-hygienic norms in the institution; In cooperation with the Ministry of Environmental Protection and Agriculture of Georgia, develops and submits to the Government of Georgia for approval the technical requirements for food organization, meals and their nutritional values in the Early Childhood Education and Care institutions; Participates in the process of child protection from violence in accordance with child protection referral procedures;
The Municipality	**The National Food Agency**	**The National Statistical Service of Georgia**
Provision of ECEC services in accordance with National standards, and the provision of equally accessible and inclusive preschool care and education; Protection of the rights of children and their parent/legal representatives in the process of providing preschool education; Ensuring the engagement of the child's parents/legal representatives in the ECEC; Developing a monitoring, evaluation and reporting system to determine compliance with the National Standards; Preparation of the annual municipal program and financial plan, based on the needs of the ECEC institutions. Finances the management and delivery of the Early Childhood Education and Care Services	Monitors food safety in ECEC institutions according to the rules established by the legislation of Georgia.	Publishes statistical information received from municipalities on: - the number of ECEC institutions, - the number of children enrolled in ECEC, - the number of educators in the ECEC, - more based on special requests.

Table 3: The Division of Powers between the State and Municipalities in ECEC. Adapted from the law on EPUE (2016)

Since the provision of ECEC is decentralised in Georgia, and the municipality is responsible for implementing the policy locally, this dissertation zooms into the municipality of Batumi to study how the policy is implemented at the local level. Batumi, a tourist city located on the Black Sea coast, is the second-biggest city in Georgia and the second economically strongest municipality after the capital of Tbilisi(LEDP, 2019).

In Batumi, the municipality ensures the provision of ECEC services through the specialised governmental agency, the Kindergartens Association. It is a municipal organisation, a legal entity which acts as a primary executive body. The association was established in 2011, and before its creation, the municipality ensured the implementation of policy through the support of early childhood education institution directors. The public kindergartens had allocated budgets depending on their capacity to host children, and school directors were responsible for everything from the management of human and material resources and finances to developing evaluative mechanisms. However, with the creation of the executive agency, the association takes up every single role that the Municipality has according to the law on EPUE (Interviewee 3, April 2023)

Currently, there are two types of ECEC providers in the municipality: Public and Private. There are 34 public kindergartens that are completely free of charge for all children from 2 to 6 whose parents (at least one) are registered in the municipality as a resident. The free ECEC provides education and care five times a week, Monday through Friday, from 9 to 6, with three free meals for children.

Interestingly, the Kindergartens Association does not have information on the number of private ECEC institutions in the municipality. Until now, private ECEC institutions are not accountable to the government. The authorisation has not been required, and the Kindergartens Association has no power over private kindergartens. As the interviewee confirmed, „The professionalism of our teachers and quality of teaching in private kindergartens depends on the integrity of the founder. The National Food Agency strictly controls, however, children's nutrition and hygiene standards. This year, they also gave us an evacuation plan for fire safety and set standards that we must meet "(Interviewee 11). However, the new law on Authorisation has been adopted by the Parliament of Georgia in February 2022, according to which, by the end of 2029, all ECEC institutions in Georgia, both public and private, will undergo the authorisation process. The process envisions the establishment of a unified data system, where all public and private ECEC institutions will register and have to undergo authorisation. This will grant them the right to function for five years, after which they will have to undergo the authorisation again.

The next chapter looks in detail at the provision of ECEC services in Batumi, Georgia. It focuses on uncovering what type of governance model is associated with the policy, what key stakeholders are involved in the process, and how they interact with one another. It offers an in-depth analysis of how certain governance models and stakeholder interactions in the context of Batumi lead to implementation gaps and hinder policy success. The analysis will be followed by a broader discussion on policy design and implementation in practice.

Chapter 5: An In-depth Analysis of ECEC Policy Implementation and Governance in Georgia

5.1 Type I Multi-level Governance

Policy and document analysis, as well as interviews conducted in the scope of this research, demonstrated that Georgia's approach to implementing early childhood education and care policy is a top-down, vertical implementation at the local level. As Type I MLG envisions, the Georgian ECEC governance system represents a model where distinct hierarchy and discretion of power exist and is embodied in the law (EPUE 2016).

The division of powers and obligations between the state and municipalities is clearly described in the Law on EPUE. Table 3 in the previous chapter demonstrated their functions and obligations in the policy cycle. However, when it comes to the provision of services – financing, implementing, and monitoring - this is the sole responsibility of the municipality. This brings the primary executive agency, the Kindergartens Association, to the top level, resulting in top-down policy implementation but at the local rather than central level.

The MLG theory stresses the importance of effective accountability mechanisms to ensure that all stakeholders involved in the policy implementation process are involved properly and fulfil their obligations (Hooghe and Marks, 2003). Interestingly, this aspect of accountability is completely denied in the context of ECEC governance in Batumi. The interrelation of the actors involved in the ECEC governance model relies on mutual trust and willingness to cooperate, and there are no mechanisms in practice to keep stakeholders at different levels accountable. Document analysis and stakeholder interviews revealed that the

only accountability instrument was associated with the local government and International Organizations if their partnership envisions grants or financial contributions from the International Organization's side and there is a legal contract signed between the sides. Then, the donor organisations have specific requirements, and the donor-recipient, the local government, has to align with these requirements. Hence, sometimes, international organisations end up at the top level, bringing local government to the bottom of the implementation process, but only for specific projects and activities. All other forms of relations among key stakeholders involved in the governance of ECEC in Batumi rely on trust and an assumption that everybody does their job properly. This lack of effective accountability instruments results in various governance gaps, hindering the successful implementation of the policy.

The limited intervention of the central government in ECEC is more obvious when compared to the central government's involvement in primary or higher education in Georgia. Although schools have significant autonomy in Georgia, they must follow strict national standards regarding all components connected to education and teaching: national curriculum, national standardised exams and grading scheme, and more. Moreover, every school in Georgia has a board of trustees, which comprises representatives from the Ministry of Education and Science, the Student Self-Government, and the respective municipality. The board of trustees is responsible for the election of the school director, approving the school's annual budget, controlling the expenditure of school funds, and approving the school curriculum.

Moreover, there is a national school monitoring assessment tool and well-defined parties responsible for school monitoring. In addition, there are independent regulatory bodies that monitor schools' alignment with national standards. The National Center for the

Development of the Quality of Education is the primary external regulatory body, established in 2010. The Center comprises a group of experts in the field of education who ensure the quality assurance of schools all around Georgia. They participate in the authorisation process of schools and check schools' alignment with national standards and requirements throughout the academic year (Law on the Development of Education Quality, 2010). Interviewer 4, who is a schoolteacher in Georgia but participated in this research as a parent, confirmed that schools in Georgia are under pressure because of strict monitoring and wondered why early childhood education institutions are not facing similar monitoring measures.

The central government's lack of involvement in ECEC was further reaffirmed during the research trip for this dissertation. After contacting the Ministry of Education of Georgia for months, I never received an answer. A representative of the Batumi City Hall, in an interview, confirmed that "Central government never interferes in our job. We almost never have interactions or any kind of communication regarding early childhood education" (Interviewee 5, April 2023).

5.2 From bottom-up to top-down approaches at the local level

The decentralisation process of the field of early childhood education and care started in Georgia in 2005 when article 16 of the organic law "On Local Self-Government" confirmed the creation of early childhood education institutions and the approval of their charters, as well as the entire implementation of the ECEC policy as the competence of the municipality. Considering the limited expertise of the municipalities in managing the education sector, most municipalities decided to give full autonomy to kindergartens. However, the Mayor of Batumi

at that time, Robert Chkhaidze, proposed the establishment of a specialised agency, a governmental organisation that would be responsible for the implementation of the ECEC policy in Batumi. This coincided with the period when most of the local municipal organisations were established in Batumi in an attempt to ensure better provision of services. With the establishment of the Kindergartens Association in Batumi in 2011, kindergartens saw a decrease in discretion and autonomy. This change resulted from Now, instead of school management, school principals consider themselves as supervisors with limited responsibilities, limited power, and a limited desire to act for change.

> "I saw myself as a leader and a school entrepreneur before 2011 when I had responsibilities that mattered. My kindergarten always looked different and had a niche in the market. Now, all public kindergartens are the same. We receive similar toys, if we receive them at all, our school walls are painted in the same colour, carpets and curtains are the same, same meals are served across all 34 kindergartens in the city. There is no space left for my creativity. I feel more like a supervisor now, but I felt like an entrepreneur before 2011." (Interviewee 2, April, 2023)

Although the MLG theory sees the decrease in the autonomy and discretion of SLBs as a potential way to increase consistency, uniformity, accountability, and policy alignment at the local level, it also acknowledges the potential negative impacts it might have (add reference). Three main drawbacks from the MLG standpoint are the decrease in innovation, disregard of local needs, and responsive service delivery (add reference). These patterns emerged in Batumi since the creation of the Kindergartens Association. In the interviews, all three kindergarten principals noted that their motivation to be proactive and innovative decreased since the decrease in school autonomy.

5.3 Governance Gaps

According to the literature on governance and policy implementation, governance of public policies in decentralised contexts where various stakeholders are involved at different levels comes with challenges. The literature review part of this dissertation illustrates some of the most common challenges mentioned by scholars. There are various theoretical frameworks that capture these challenges and offer tools to solve governance-related problems. This dissertation uses Claire Charbit's Governance Gaps Framework (2011) to capture the main governance challenges that exist in Georgia with the early childhood education and care policy.

Charbit's framework unites seven categories under governance gaps: information, capacity, fiscality, administration, policy, objectives, and accountability (Charbit, 2011). Through exclusively developed interview questions, the research aimed to understand from the key stakeholders involved in the implementation and governance process what were the key challenges associated with the governance of ECEC policy in Batumi. The analysis of the interviews revealed that five out of seven governance gaps are present in Batumi: Information, Capacity, Fiscal, Objective, and Accountability gaps. The only two governance gaps that could not be detected in the case of Batumi were the policy gap and the administrative gap, meaning that early childhood education policies at the national level align with the local needs of the city, and the effective and efficient size for the administration is in place to respond to the functional areas of the policy (Charbit, 2011). Each category of the governance gap will be described below, explaining what these challenges are in the context of Georgia's early childhood education and care policy.

Information Gap

According to Charbit, Information Gap exists in the multi-level early childhood education system when there is an information asymmetry on both sides – local government lacks access to quality information about the policy, and the central government lacks information on the impact of a policy, resulting into poor implementation and outcomes of the policies. (Charbit, 2011) In the case of Georgia, the central government does not collect quality information from municipalities and ECEC institutions. There is no data on ECEC institutions' performance or any comparative data on the quality of the services or the needs. The National Statistical Service Agency of Georgia is required by law to collect and publish statistical information received from municipalities only on the number of public institutions, the number of children enrolled, and the number of educators in the ECEC. (Law on ECEC, 2016) This general data does not allow for generating comprehensive information on policy realities, needs, and challenges at the local level.

When asking the representatives of the local government in Batumi how often the central government contacts them regarding specific information or data on ECEC, the answer was universal – never. The interviewee from the Batumi City Hall confirmed that they are often asked to provide detailed information on other policy topics, mostly related to environmental policy and social policies, but never on ECEC (interviewee 5, April 2023). The representative of the Kindergartens Association, the main executive body of the ECEC in Batumi, reaffirmed that there is a lack of instruments for effective information-sharing among different levels of government. "We are not required to collect any data or submit it to anyone. Although, it might be interesting to have a platform where all municipalities share information regarding their implementation process. Maybe we could learn from each other since I am sure we all face

similar problems when it comes to (implementing) early childhood education policy"
(Interviewee 3, April 2023).

The lack of information leads to or accelerates various other challenges in the ECEC governance system; for example, it causes objective and accountability gaps. Moreover, it limits the prospects for improving the policy design, implementation strategy, and governance approach by reflecting on evidence from comprehensive data. This is particularly true for the case of Batumi, where the representative of the City Hall described the policy planning process as "chaotic and urgent". According to the interviewee, when initiating new policies or developing implementation strategies for the ECEC in Batumi, an evidence-based policy-making approach is not considered due to the lack of information, time, and human capital. (Interviewee 5, April 2023)

Capacity Gap

The capacity gap occurs when there is a lack of human resources at any level of the government required for the successful implementation of the policy (Charbit, 2011). With the ECEC policy in Batumi, it is important to analyse the capacity of both staff of the ECEC institutions and the municipal staff responsible for managing the policy.

To start with the ECEC staff, there is a lack of data on the professional qualifications of public kindergarten staff in Batumi. However, according to UNICEF's data obtained from 57 municipalities, 44% of educators are unqualified in ECEC institutions across Georgia (UNICEF, 2018). The capacity gap is a serious challenge in the context of Georgia's ECEC policy since here, more than in other fields, the policies are implemented daily at the level of kindergartens by teachers, kindergarten principals, and other staff. The quality of their work depends on their professionalism explained through academic background and skills, and this results in their capacity to translate policies into daily practices at work when interacting with children. Unfortunately, when interviewing the stakeholders in Batumi, all, excluding teachers, considered the "lack of qualified teachers in public kindergartens" as the main problem of the ECEC in Batumi today. This pattern was particularly visible when interviewing parents. Two parents mentioned that they decided to enrol their children in private after one year in public kindergartens since they believe teachers are more qualified in private institutions (Interviewees 4 and 7, April 2023). As Table 2 illustrates in the previous chapter, there are public and private kindergartens in Batumi, and later spend more resources to attract qualified staff. This is reflected in ECEC staff salaries, demonstrated in the same table.

As Lipsky argued, large classes and unrealistic workloads and expectations, in combination with the uncertainty of methods and lack of appropriate skills, result in poor performance of SLBs (Lipsky, 1980). Similarly, UNICEF Georgia's 2018 research on Georgia concluded that "overcrowded groups, long working hours, low wages, along with a lack of initial (university) education and continuous professional development, are the main reasons for the low quality of preschool education in Georgia" (UNICEF Georgia, 2018, p.14).

Moreover, the document analysis and interviews revealed that most kindergarten directors in Batumi do not have the skills and professional background necessary for the role. They also feel that they lack professional support. "When the new policy or regulation or practise is initiated, nobody is there to guide us, school directors. There is training available for our teachers, but nobody organises trainings for us. I sit in my office and read through the documents, trying to understand what it means, trying to become better," (Interviewee 2, April 2023) said the kindergarten director, pointing towards her office desk stacked with piles of documents.

As described in the Literature review chapter, the key stakeholders typically seen in the best practices of ECEC are qualified teachers, school leaders, and effective regulatory bodies that ensure that policy objectives are met in practice. Without these stakeholders who have the capacity to perform their duty as expected, even the best ECEC policy is destined to fail.

Fiscal Gap

A fiscal Gap, also called a funding gap, occurs when the budget allocated for the policy is insufficient for effective implementation (Charbit, 2011). Interestingly, in the interviews, none of the municipality's representatives and the Kindergarten Association staff did see the lack of financial resources as a problem in Batumi. "Our budget keeps increasing every year, and we have more than enough money thanks to the generous support of the local government." (Interviewee 3, April 2023) However, the literature on education in developing and transitional countries always emphasises that the lack of financial resources is the primary challenge in these countries (Psacharopoulos, 1986; Kissane, 2009; Berryman, 2000;). This inconsistency between the literature and the interviewees' answers was further tested through document analysis and additional interviews, and it was concluded that the fiscal gap is a serious challenge in Batumi; however, the decision-makers refuse to see it as a problem.

Indeed, the budget allocated for ECEC in Batumi has witnessed an increase in the past three years and has almost tripled (Batumi City Council Order, 2023). This is the case only in Batumi, and as the representatives of the local municipality confirmed, the role of individual leadership was critical here. Since the change of management in the Kindergartens Association in Batumi, the new managers tend to be proactive in communications with the mayor, persistently requesting an increase of funding (Interviewee 10, May 2023). The Table 4 illustrates the budget allocated for ECEC services in the 2021, 2022, and 2023 fiscal years.

Table 4: The Budget of Batumi Municipality on ECEC Services

2021 Budget	2022 Budget	2023 Budget
14 million Gel (≈ 5 million euros)	30 million Gel (≈ 10 million euros)	40 million Gel (≈ 14 million euros)

Source: The Batumi City Council Order on Budget Allocation

Financial documents provided by the Kindergartens Association Batumi demonstrate that the budget is spent on salaries for the staff, meals for children, and the material-technical equipment of schools. The biggest part of the budget is spent on salaries; however, the salaries are very low. As described in the literature review on SLB theory, low salaries decrease the motivation of employees and discourage new young professionals from entering the field. All teachers and school principals interviewed for the research confirmed the asymmetry between their responsibilities and their salaries. "Two of my best teachers left because they got a job offer from a private sector – with way less responsibilities and twice the salary. How am I expected to motivate the best teachers with such a low salary?"(Interviewee 8, April 2023) – mentioned the school principal and added that it is her genuine love for her job and her altruism that kept her in this position for a couple of decades now because the salary is very low.

Moreover, when it comes to the material-technical equipment of kindergartens, there is a serious problem with the lack of quality toys in kindergartens that will support children's development. According to the law, schools are not allowed to ask parents for any financial or material support. However, due to the scarcity of books and toys in public kindergartens, parents regularly contribute what they can (Interviewee 4, April 2023). Some teachers also mentioned in the interviews that they buy books with their salaries and bring them to the kindergarten since they don't remember when the last time the government purchased new books (Interviewee 1, April 2023).

The fiscal gap is also visible in the overcrowded groups in all 34 public kindergartens of the municipality. According to article 22 of the law on ECEC, early childhood education institutions should offer groups with the following maximum number of students: a) no more than 25 children in one group for children aged 2 to 3 years; b) No more than 30 children in

one group for children aged 3 to 4 years; c) No more than 30 children in one group for children aged 4 to 5 years (Law on ECEC). The group capacity determined by law is already above the international recommendations, which suggests that the number of children should not exceed 20 in any group of ECEC institutions, considering there is always one teacher for 10 children. (NIIER, 2014) In Batumi, however, as the Kindergartens Association confirmed, there are 35 children in each group, and they have only one teacher for 35 children. Teachers, despite their qualifications and knowledge, will be unable to ensure quality education and care for all 35 children who have different needs, not to talk about the importance of individual learning and teaching approaches for all children, recommended by various international organisations and NGOs (OECD, 2016; UNICEF 2016).

The remarks of the representatives of the Batumi Municipality and the Kindergartens Association – the principal executive body in the ECEC policy, that the lack of finances is not a problem in Batumi, while the teachers are concerned about low salaries, and the lack of educational resources in the kindergartens demonstrate that the primary actors involved in Georgia's ECEC policy are unaware of fundamental governance gaps. Their understanding of resources is limited and directly signals the under-appreciation of personnel – teachers and all educators involved in the provision of ECEC.

Objective Gap

Ensuring that different stakeholders at different levels of government have a shared understanding of policy objectives and their actions are aligned is a challenging task in multi-level governance. When describing the objective gap challenge, literature generally talks about existing obstacles to developing convergent strategies at different levels of government. For example, when due to political ideology, or any other reason, the local government decides to adopt a different strategy from the central government (Charbit, 2011). The case of Batumi is interesting, as it represents the misalignment of objectives between the local and central governments and the SLBs. This pattern emerged through the analysis of kindergarten teachers' and principals' interviews and was further reaffirmed in UNICEF Georgia's report on ECEC Policy, which highlighted that ECEC teachers are not competent in national standards and policy objectives (UNICEF Georgia, 2018)

According to the SLB theory (Fullan 1991, McLaughlin, 1990), teachers and school principals, referred to as SLBs, have discretion and autonomy, meaning that they make day-to-day decisions on the grounds when interpreting and adapting policies to unique classroom circumstances. Hence, it is essential that teachers, kindergarten principals, representatives of the local government and the central government have a shared vision of policy objectives with the local and central governments. However, interviews revealed that most stakeholders, including ECEC teachers, principals, parents, and municipality representatives, cannot describe the objectives of the policy. Moreover, all teachers and school principals interviewed believe that the purpose of their work is to take care of their children in the best way possible, and the education component is not as important. "Our job is to make sure children are safe, well-fed, and taken care of. Creating a safe environment for children from 9 am to 6 pm is the purpose of the kindergarten. Education comes in schools"(Interviewee 8, April 2023). The

representatives of the Kindergartens Association, on the other hand, believe that the main objective of the kindergarten is to educate children. *"Educated and smart children with social-emotional skills – this is the goal of our ECEC politics"* (Interviewee 10, May 2023). This obvious disparity in understanding the main objectives of the policy confirms that when making day-to-day decisions, kindergarten teachers and school directors will not act in alignment with the policy.

The SLB theory acknowledges the high chances of divergence from standards and policy aims by street-level bureaucrats as they might have their own perceptions and biases. For this reason, the theory highlights the importance of a regulator in order to address this divergence and ensure alignment between policy design and implementation in practice. The literature on implementation further reaffirms the concern with discretion and implementers' biases towards policy objectives and highlights the importance of effective monitoring systems (Spillan, Reiser, Reimer, p.388). Objective gaps and information gaps are correlated. We can assume that information asymmetry in the multi-level governance leads to an objective gap in Georgia's early childhood education policy, as stakeholders at different levels interpret policy differently based on their knowledge, expertise, and biases. If information about the policy is communicated well among all stakeholders across all levels of governance, the objective gap will decrease significantly. On the other hand, when there is still a lack of convergence between policy aims and implementation in practice, the existence of strong regulatory bodies can ensure convergence through sanctions and strong monitoring.

Accountability Gap

The accountability gap occurs when there is an ambiguity associated with responsibilities and the division of power among actors involved in the policy processes, and there is a lack of effective monitoring and evaluation mechanisms (Charbit, 2011). In the context of Batumi's early childhood education policy, with the creation of the Kindergartens Association in 2011, the roles were divided clearly. All actors know what they are responsible for and who to contact when there is an emergency. The digitalisation of communication in the public sector further supports successful collaboration since now, with only one clicks on a computer, school principals can request support from the Kindergartens Association. Despite the successful division of rules and powers, there is a lack of accountability measures, which results in serious problems of accountability and effective governance.

As the previous section on the objectives gap demonstrated, the interrelation of the actors involved in the ECEC governance model is interesting as it relies on mutual trust and willingness to cooperate, and there are no mechanisms in practice to keep stakeholders at different levels accountable. The only accountability instrument was detected with the local government and International Organizations if their partnership envisions any kinds of grants or financial contributions from the International Organization's side and there is a legal contract signed between the sides. Then, the donor organisations have specific requirements that the local government need to follow. All other forms of relations among key stakeholders involved in the governance of ECEC in Batumi lack effective accountability mechanisms.

As the MLG theory suggests (Hooghe and Marks, 2001), several implications of the lack of accountability mechanisms are present in the case of Batumi. First, the evasion of responsibilities as a result of the lack of clear accountability mechanisms leads to poor quality

of education. In the absence of control and monitoring, street-level bureaucrats are more likely to evade responsibility for their actions and inactions, hindering the successful implementation of the policy. Moreover, the lack of accountability mechanisms further translates into a lack of feedback and learning. It becomes impossible to reflect on mistakes, as well as catalysts for success, which hinders the process of improving policy design and implementation strategies.

5.4 Conclusions

A comprehensive analysis of Georgia's Early Childhood Education and Care policy through the case of Batumi demonstrated a stark contrast between the policy design and the implementation in practice. Georgia's ECEC policy is state-of-the-art in its ambitious objectives, clear description of all key stakeholders and division of power among institutions, and it is overall aligned with international standards and best-practice (OECD, 2022; Follari, 2015; Cottle, M., & Alexander, E, 2012). For example, decentralisation of early childhood education has always been encouraged by scholars and international organisations like World Bank and the EU. Moreover, the literature encourages establishing specialised agencies responsible for education policy implementation as a tool for bridging the coordination and capacity gaps (Charbit, 2012). The Kindergartens Association, the executive agency responsible for the Early Childhood Education and Care Policy in Batumi, Georgia, was in its design the main way to mitigate coordination and capacity gaps, but in practice, it reinforced them even further. This happened because an essential component that all best-practice ECEC policies worldwide share - strong institutions, skilled teachers, and effective monitoring mechanisms - is missing in Georgia's ECEC policy landscape (OECD, 2022). As a result, the execution of the policy falls significantly short on the ground.

With other levels of education (Schools, Universities), there is an effective national monitoring assessment tool and well-defined governmental organisations responsible for monitoring. Moreover, there is an independent regulatory body, the National Center for the Development of the Quality of Education, that controls and ensures schools' alignment with national standards. However, monitoring early childhood education institutions is not incorporated into the independent regulator's job. This signals that early childhood education policy is not a priority area within Georgia's education policy as a whole. While the government contends with administration capacity issues in this policy area, as in many other transition countries (Kissane, 2009; Berryman, 2000). an independent regulator would go a long way towards addressing problems of monitoring, implementation, and evaluation.

Looking at this case through the lens of the generic policy cycle and its stages, we will see that the agenda-setting, policy formulation, and legitimation phases were successfully achieved with Georgia's early childhood education and care policy. The policy was built on a solid foundation of research on best practices and international standards. However, the study revealed an asymmetry between policy objectives and resources allocated for implementation, especially at the local level. The Law on "Early and Preschool Education" and the national ECEC standards, as well as technical regulations developed on its basis, require additional financial resources, new knowledge, and skills for implementation. After the decentralisation of ECEC, when municipalities took over the management, financing, and implementation of the policy fully, early childhood education as a policy field was already in an appalling condition. The central government could not ensure quality services to children, and municipalities had to respond to various challenges without adequate preparation, knowledge, or finances. This, in addition to the difficult socio-economic situation of the population, the

limited experience of municipalities in managing the field, especially the educational component of the policy, the absence of accountability and monitoring mechanisms and the mandatory national standards resulted in severe governance gaps, which hinder the successful implementation of the policy.

The governance gaps detected through the analysis are Information, Capacity, Fiscal, Objective, and Accountability gaps. Particularly problematic is the accountability gap, which is caused to the lack of policy evaluation and monitoring. The evaluation stage is completely missing from Georgia's ECEC policy cycle, which is critically important for making decisions regarding policy maintenance, succession, change or termination. The absence of a feedback loop makes policy learning impossible, which is a critical stage for reflecting on what works and what doesn't work in the policy design and implementation strategy. Consequently, policymakers and policy-implementers have no information about the barriers on the ground connected to successful implementation. Finally, the study also demonstrated that primary actors involved in Georgia's ECEC policy are unaware of most of these governance gaps and reluctant towards addressing the rest. Only by acknowledging these governance gaps and actively implementing effective initiatives to close this divide between policy design and subpar implementation can Georgia unlock the full potential of early childhood education policy.

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Annex A - Interviewees

	Title	Role	Date (2023)
1	Interviewee 1	Public Kindergarten Teacher (Batumi)	20 April
2	Interviewee 2	Public Kindergarten Principal (Batumi)	21 April
3	Interviewee 3	Kindergartens Association Representative (Batumi)	25 April
4	Interviewee 4	Kindergarten Child's Parent	25 April
5	Interviewee 5	Representative of the Batumi City Hall	26 April
6	Interviewee 6	Public Kindergarten Principal (Batumi)	27 April
7	Interviewee 7	Kindergarten Child's Parent	27 April
8	Interviewee 8	Public Kindergarten Principal (Batumi)	28 April
9	Interviewee 9	Private Kindergarten Director (Batumi)	28 April
10	Interviewee 10	Representative of the Batumi City Hall	1 May
11	Interviewee 11	Private Kindergarten Director (Batumi)	1 May
12	Interviewee 12	Public Kindergarten Teacher (Batumi)	2 May
13	Interviewee 13	Kindergartens Association Representative (Batumi)	3 May

Annex B – Thesis Report

The global learning crisis is reflected in millions of children entering schools and still being unable to read, write, or do basic mathematics. According to UNICEF, this crisis has its roots in children's early years, as they are often deprived of quality early childhood education. Increasing investment in early or pre-primary education benefits all, "children, families, education systems and societies at large." (UNICEF, 2020) Moreover, UNICEF's Early Childhood Development report describes the period from conception to the start of school as a "singular window of opportunity to shape the development of a child's brain." (UNICEF, 2017) This is a critical period in every child's social, emotional, and cognitive development and a catalyst for optimal brain development.

When analysing the practices from the world's highest-performing countries, Kagan and Roth saw a direct correlation between a solid pre-primary education and lifelong achievements and the well-being of adults. (Kagan, 2020) Growing literature from the economy highlights the direct correlation between investing in pre-primary education and national economic growth. (Knudsen et al., 2006) Hence, investing in pre-primary education and ensuring the high quality of these programs is a promising policy instrument that increases equity and alleviates poverty. It has a tremendous impact on a country's development. (Heckman & Kruger, 2003) However, preschool education often receives the minor support from the governments in many countries, including Georgia.

In Georgia, the provision of pre-primary education is decentralised, and it is a responsibility of a municipal government. Municipalities are exclusive providers of public pre-primary education. (MES Georgia, 2021) Hence, the cities are responsible for managing, funding, supporting, and monitoring public kindergartens, but the central government has no

accountability mechanisms to monitor their work. Unfortunately, since most cities in Georgia have limited access to financial and human resources, there is a severe gap between the implemented projects and the real challenges of the pre-primary education institutions. Policies related to pre-primary education are made without proper evidence and empirical data. My research will aim to reduce this informational gap by analysing the needs of public kindergartens in Batumi, Georgia.

The main objective of this thesis will be to untangle the puzzle connected to pre-primary education at the local level. Selecting the city of Batumi as a case study, this thesis will aim to answer several key questions: What are the significant challenges in providing pre-primary education in Batumi? What should be the main objectives of pre-primary education institutions, and what are European best practices? What should be the balance between the provision of care and education? How do we incorporate social-emotional learning into the curriculum? What can public kindergartens learn from alternative kindergartens like Montessori? What will be the best use of the city's limited resources to improve the quality of pre-primary education? How does Covid-19 show the imperfections of the private kindergartens in Georgia? Overall, this research will assess the current best practices in providing pre-primary education, investigate the challenges in the city, and suggest policy recommendations. This research aims to support the municipal government in designing and implementing policies that respond to the children's needs and helps them develop their full potential.

I decided to limit the scope of my research to one city for specific reasons. First of all, Batumi is the second-largest city in Georgia, with 33 public kindergartens. (Batumi Public Kindergartens, 2022) Since the context for public kindergartens is very similar across the country, the research findings can be generalised and used by other cities to plan their educational programs. Moreover, I was born and raised in Batumi; I know the context of the

city, me and my family members all attended public kindergartens here. Furthermore, I have worked at the Batumi City Hall's Municipal Policy Department for the past two years. Our department was in charge of planning policies for the public kindergartens, and we were in constant communication with the governmental organisation "Kindergartens' Union," which is in charge of implementing policies and monitoring the public kindergartens in the city. This work experience and the connections I developed throughout those years will help me succeed with this research project. It gives me easy access to political documents and allows me to enter public kindergartens without requiring permission, avoiding bureaucracy.

Moreover, I already have access to the contact information of all officials, teachers and administration of all 33 kindergartens in the city. Finally, there is strong political will and support from the current City Administration of Batumi. They hope to use the findings of this research to plan future policies on pre-primary education. This will be a valuable advantage for collecting data and conducting the research without further barriers, as well as a strong incentive, knowing that the research will have a practical impact.

Key concepts that will guide the thesis and approach/theoretical framework

The main objective of pre-primary education is to catalyse a child's optimal development. However, what exactly is development? This is a complex process, and there is much controversy regarding its definition. It encompasses the child's characteristics, the environment he is part of, as well as the time. To respond to the complexity of this phenomenon, I will consider several theoretical frameworks on human development.

Most scientists agree that development is a complex process and implies systematic change. Several key themes emerge in relation to development that scholars have heavily debated. One such topic of discussion has been whether development is determined by our

genetics or environment and externalities. In other words, is it nature or nurture that determines the optimal development of a child and a person? Nature in this context refers to biological factors and genetic inheritance, while nurture refers to all external factors, including a child's experiences, upbringing, parenting methods and more. The idea that the course of a child's development dramatically depends on the environment and externalities is a driving force for all early childhood interventions. If one does not believe that development is strongly influenced by nature, they do not believe in the importance of early childhood education and care and parenting methods.

I will rely on Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological model to describe what factors influence children's development. Uri Bronfenbrenner was an American development psychologist. He described how development is shaped by a "child's biologically influenced dispositions in interaction with influences from its surroundings, the ecology." (Bronfenbrenner, 1999) According to Bronfenbrenner, "the environment is a complex system consisting of interacting layers, or nested systems, that together affect development." (Bronfenbrenner, 1999) Hence, a child's development is a complex phenomenon. He distinguishes five subsystems in this model: microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem. Each level encompasses different environments a child is a part of, starting from the family environment to kindergarten, teachers, and extended cultural belief systems. (Bronfenbrenner, 1999)

- The microsystem is the child's closest and immediate environment - family, grandparents, close neighbours, babysitter, daycare, or pre-school institution. Phillips and Shonkoff argue that this microsystem strongly impacts a child's development and positive learning outcomes. (Phillips & Shonkoff, 2000) Families have different educational, financial, and psychological resources, as well as time spent with children. These differences result in different child development outcomes. Here, the role of the

kindergarten is critical again, as quality pre-primary education might significantly reduce this gap.

- The mesosystem represents interactions among different microsystems. More specifically, this refers to communication and relationships between other microsystems, for example, kindergarten and family. When a child is exposed to similar values and learning objectives in different microsystems, it best impacts the child's development. (Bronfenbrenner, 1999)

- The exosystem encompasses more external factors, settings that do not directly involve the child but affect his experiences. These factors include parents' workplace and work situation, national education, healthcare, or other policies. Quality healthcare services influence a child's development. An example is a parent's social network on which they rely regarding advice. This advice can have a direct impact on children. (Bronfenbrenner, 1999)

- The macrosystem represents distant factors, such as cultural, religious, and other moral values and views to which the child is exposed. As an example, a country or a community might have different standards and practices on childcare that will impact the lives of children. (Bronfenbrenner, 1999)

Moreover, when analysing the role of pre-primary education institutions in contributing to a child's development, I will rely on the indicators highlighted in the Early Childhood Development Index (ECDI). The ECDI2030 was developed to capture the developmental milestones of children between 24 and 59 months. It looks at a child's development through

four indicators: physical ability, learning ability, literacy-numeracy, and social-emotional development. (UNICEF, 2020)

Social-emotional – a child meets the social-emotional target if at least two of the following are true: " the child gets along well with other children; the child does not kick, bite, or hit other children; and the child does not get distracted easily." (UNICEF, 2020) The same UNICEF report shows that only 11 per cent of Georgian children do not meet this target. (UNICEF, 2020) However, one should acknowledge that this domain is the most difficult to measure.

The ECDI considers a child to be on the right track of development if they meet at least three criteria from the four. Hence, based on these indicators, my study will explore:

1. Are public kindergartens in Batumi offering activities and interventions to target all four domains of child development? Which domain has the most significant emphasis and which domain has the minor importance when planning the activities?

2. When planning the session, do they develop individual development plans for each student, considering their individual needs? How is this translated into practice? In other words, how do teachers ensure that each child receives a unique and tailored approach?

Literature Review

The Literature review part of my thesis will address the following questions: What factors influence a child's development, and what are the theories that describe how development is influenced by environment and external factors? What is the economic and

societal impact of quality pre-primary education? What is the role of qualified personnel and teachers in providing quality pre-primary education, and how does it affect the quality of programs and children's outcomes? Should pre-primary education concentrate on developing cognitive skills or social-emotional learning? What are some of the characteristics of alternative kindergartens? This thesis report will illustrate a summary of the literature review that will further be developed in the final thesis.

While the right to education is enshrined in most international declarations, the right to pre-primary and early childhood is not explicitly mentioned. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), the Convention against Discrimination in Education (1960), and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) all emphasise quality education as a human right. It was not until 2015 that the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) added Target 4.2. "early childhood development, care and pre-primary education." (SDG, Target 4.2). Since child development is a complex phenomenon, some SDG targets respond indirectly to the rights to pre-primary education and care. SDGs 2.1 and 2.2 target child malnutrition, and SDGs 6.1 and 6.2 target clean water and sanitation access. Moreover, SDG 16.2 targets children's protection from violence. Now, governments are encouraged, yet not obliged, to prove commitments toward bettering pre-primary education through improved child outcomes.

The literature on the importance of quality pre-primary education heavily relies on equity and moral arguments. There is also an emerging body of literature on the economic importance of investing in pre-primary education. In his research on The Economics of Inequality, James Hackman, a Nobel-prize-winning American economist, highlighted the direct influence of investing in early childhood development on the economy, health, and other social outcomes for individuals and society. He argues that "every $1 invested in quality early childhood programs can yield returns between $4 and $16." (Heckman, 2010) Similarly, a lack

of quality early childhood interventions can create deficits in skills and knowledge, adversely impacting the economy. While analysing various research on early human development and the role of investment in pre-school programs, Hackman reached the following conclusions: First, inequality in access to early childhood results in health, achievement, ability, and adult success inequality. Moreover, investing in early childhood education interventions for disadvantaged children from birth to age five significantly reduces the "achievement gap, need for special education and increases the likelihood of healthier lifestyles, lower the crime rate, and reduce overall societal costs." (Heckman, 2010)

In Georgia, the provision of pre-primary education is decentralised, and it is a responsibility of a municipal government. Since pre-primary education is the exclusive competence of the municipality, cities are free to decide how to manage the pre-primary education sector as far as it follows the national standard on early and pre-primary education and care. Unfortunately, despite the well-known critical importance of pre-school education, it faces many challenges in the country. Georgia's national rate of children's participation in the preschool education system (69.5%) is much lower than the European average (95%). (UNICEF Georgia, 2020) This percentage is even lower among ethnic minority groups, children with disabilities, and children from disadvantaged and rural families. (UNICEF Georgia, 2020) In addition, the number of children in the classes is very high, making it impossible to consider every child's particular need. Educational and entertainment resources are scarce, and the low qualifications of educators hurt the quality of preschool education.

The national standards of early and pre-school education and care define what knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes a child must develop within the framework of preschool education. It also determines the standard of preschool educational institutions' educational quality and infrastructure/environment. It is mandatory for all pre-school educational

institutions to follow this standard, regardless of their legal form (public or private). Interestingly, as research suggests, Georgia is one of the few countries where preschool enrollment does not translate into the child's improved learning outcomes. (PIRLS 2006 national report) This can be explained by the poor quality of education that public kindergartens provide for children.

My research will study the pressing challenges of public pre-primary education institutions in Batumi. However, existing data already highlights some of the significant problems. To start with, the low qualification of kindergarten educators remains the most critical challenge across the country. Evidence from the UNICEF report highlights that better educated and trained teachers almost always correlate with high-quality pre-primary education and improved child outcomes (Engle et al., 2011; Behrman et al., 2013; Rao et al., 2014). Another piece of evidence from UNICEF shows a similar positive correlation between quality programs and child outcomes with low child-staff ratios. (UNICEF, 2016) Regarding Batumi, there is no data available on the percentage of kindergarten staff who have higher education in the field of preschool education and care. My research will also try to fill this gap and study the ratio of qualified teachers per kindergarten. Qualified for my research will be defined as a teacher with a University degree in education.

Pre-primary education can have multiple service providers. The programs can be public and state-run, run by non-state, non-for-profit actors, and/or fully private and for-profit. There can be different settings for providing pre-primary education, including homes, schools, and communities. In Batumi, the local municipality is the primary provider of pre-primary education. There are several public pre-primary education institutions as well. In terms of settings, instruction is provided on kindergarten premises. Program duration varies in different countries. In Georgia, the government made pre-primary education available immediately after

the child turned 3. However, due to a limited number of public kindergartens and a significant demand, not every child has access to free pre-primary education as soon as they turn 3. Finally, pre-primary education programs have different hours of service provision. Some offer only a few hours daily, while others are full-day, whole-week programs. Public Kindergartens in Batumi operate from 9 am to 7 pm every weekday.

Another critical problem is the lack of Special teachers who can accommodate the needs of students with special needs. In Batumi, 34% of kindergartens have children with disabilities, although only 14.2% have a Special teacher. (UNESCO, 2018) One should also mention that there is only one special teacher per kindergarten, making it impossible to provide attention to each student individually. Personnel has a significant impact on the quality of the preschool programs, as well as the child outcomes. To illustrate this relationship better, UNESCO created a basic model (adapted from Fukkinnk & Lont, 2007). In this model, structural quality of education, meaning teachers' education and professional development, kindergarten's setting and work conditions, impact teacher competence (skills, experience, knowledge) which directly influences the quality of the preschool educational process. This includes teacher behaviour, interactions between teachers and children, as well as pedagogy styles. Ultimately, this impacts child outcomes – their development and learning.

The growing literature on early childhood education illustrates the importance of play and social skills in children's development. Hackman argues that "cognitive abilities alone are not as powerful as a package of cognitive and social skills – defined as attentiveness, perseverance, impulse control, and sociability." (Heckman, 2010) Hence, a combination of cognitive and social skills serves as catalysts for life-long success. To ensure quality play for children, it is vital to have a particular infrastructure – a yard and toys for child development. This is another challenge for the cities.

There is no data on what percentage of the educational budget is spent on pre-primary education in Batumi. However, the official documents state that the annual cost of providing preschool education services for one child is 1200 GEL (around $400), 70% of which is spent on administrative salaries. (UNICEF, 2018) Zero GEL is spent on children's toys, books, and other necessities for development. As Figure 1 illustrates, 3.7% of kindergartens do not provide toys for children, 27.7% do not have enough toys, and 15.5% are provided by parents voluntarily. (UNICEF Georgia, 2018) This indicates that children in Batumi get only primary care instead of early childhood education and care because the children's development is not included and promoted.
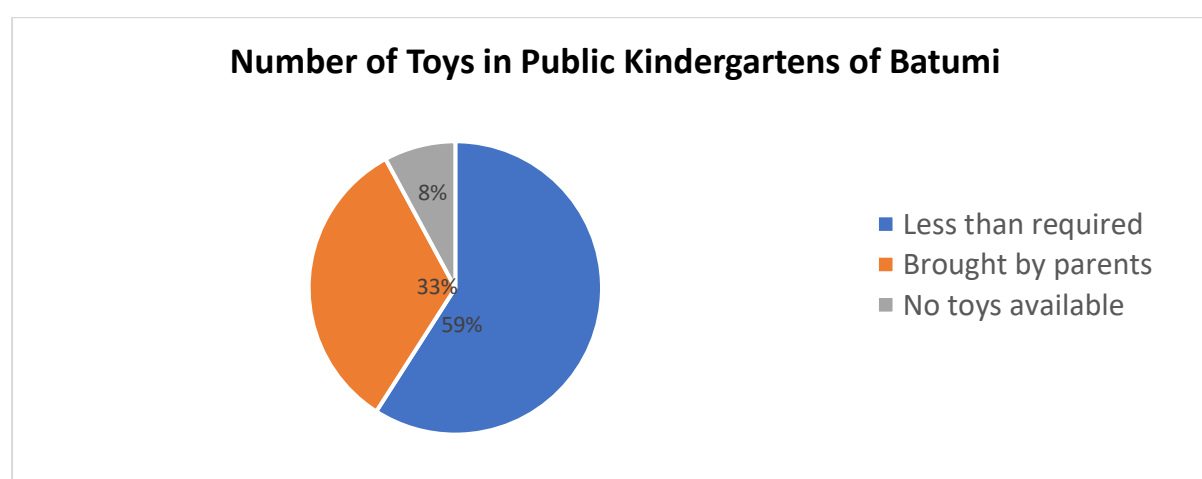

Figure 1: Number of Toys in Public Kindergartens of Batumi

According to the cost-benefit analysis of the global early childhood programs, investing each dollar in ECEC brings a 13.7 per cent return to the economy. As Figure 2 illustrates, we can see direct benefits in children's health and education outcomes, and individual earnings can increase up to 25 per cent. Quality preschool preparation is vital in the Georgian context. Recent research on children's preparation and readiness for primary school states that 3 out of 4 children lack adequate skills and knowledge to enter school. (National Assessment report, 2020) Moreover, accessible and quality early childhood education dramatically impacts

children from vulnerable families. For these children, preschools are usually the only opportunities to access children's literature and toys that stimulate brain development. In my research, I am interested to see if the needs of vulnerable groups are considered while planning pre-primary education policies in the city and if yes – how they ensure that their interests and needs are considered.

Theory of Change

Interconnected Problems   Intervention   Outcomes

Insufficient Staff in Kindergartens

Kindergartens' Infrastructure and the lack of outdoor spaces

Lack of emphasis on children's educational and social development

Lack of educators with expertise in preschool education

Budgetary allocation for ECEC

- Better education and health outcomes for children;
- Employment or further education opportunities for parents;
- Family outcomes: meaningfully involved and supported;
-Government savings from improved health and reduced crime and child maltreatment.

Finally, alternative learning methods in early childhood education have recently received more interest and admiration. There are several famous schools with a specific focus, learning approach and emphasis. The Reggio Emilia approach, the Montessori method, and the Waldorf schooling are some of the most prominent models. They have different teaching and learning approaches; however, the main similarity is the emphasis on a child's needs and interests. The Reggio Emilia focuses on increasing curiosity among children and the natural desire to learn. "At our schools, students spend at least 10 hours a week outdoors. In our excursions, we encourage active thinking and scientific exploration. There is no way to learn quite like learning with your hands. "Montessori school, on the other hand, is more formalised and structured, closer to traditional schooling. However, unlike traditional kindergartens, they stress the importance on developing individualism, confidence, and independence in children. They achieve this goal through different play games and activities, as well as with the help of school infrastructure, which is also child-centric. Finally, Waldorf schooling has traditional features but less focus on "academic knowledge." The Waldorf kindergartens facilitate learning through play and activities like baking, gardening, and community building. For the interest of my study, I will research if any public kindergarten in Batumi uses alternative learning methods and how familiar the educators are with these methods and approaches. After analysing the data and diving deeper into the alternative learning methods in early childhood education, I will try to offer some methods and tools in the recommendations section that can be cost-effective and successful for integrating them into the learning process.

Research design and chosen methods

The study will employ a qualitative approach using the case study method. The chosen method best responds to the research objective. It responds to the main goals and objectives of the research, as the qualitative approach allows for an in-depth understanding of the topic, explores the problem and rooted causes, and generates new ideas through expert interviews. I will also apply the inductive method, drawing conclusions and recommendations from a narrow topic to a broader context.

Using the case study method will allow me to build a hypothesis in the process – formulating concepts first, analysing the case and finally formulating the theory. As the title suggests, I will provide a critical assessment of pre-primary education in Georgia, more precisely, in the city of Batumi. The research will focus on gaining a holistic understanding of the provision of pre-primary education in the city, challenges in this process, and potential opportunities. I selected Batumi as the case study for several reasons. First, it is the second biggest city in Georgia and is considered the country's most progressive public kindergarten system. Untangling the local puzzle and looking at challenges will be a valuable case for Georgia. It will further allow the generalisation of the findings. Moreover, from a practical point of view, considering my work experience in the Batumi municipality, I will have access to primary and secondary data easier.

In my research, I will rely on both primary and secondary data to answer the research questions. First, I will analyse the following data from local, national, and international agencies and organisations: national legislation on pre-primary education, municipal documents, public kindergarten assessment reports, and reports from the International Organizations in Georgia. Moreover, 15 Semi-structured interviews will be conducted with experts on the topic, city representatives engaged in providing pre-primary education, as well

as teachers, administration of the kindergartens, and parents. Choosing the potential interviewees wisely and achieving diversity among respondents will be necessary. From my initial conversations with the city representatives and the head of the Batumi Kindergartens' Union – the main stakeholders are interested in unbiased research. They want to see the real challenges in the provision of pre-primary education. This attitude will be constructive for conducting the study as, during the interviews, we will ensure the respondents are not defensive and talk openly about the actual situation in public kindergartens.

Considering that I will be residing in England and my respondents will be in Georgia, I plan to conduct around fifteen interviews, mainly online, through Zoom. If necessary, I plan to travel to Georgia during Spring Break and conduct additional interviews in person. If the initial research is required, visiting several kindergartens and attending some classes without involvement might be helpful.

Finally, at the data analysis stage, I will focus on thematic analysis. This might involve organising and labelling data, identifying common and prominent themes, and dividing them into different thematic chapters.

Work Plan and the Timetable towards completion of the Master's thesis – major milestones and deliverables detected

Stage	Activity	Start date	End date	Deliverables	Comments
Research design and planning	Finalizing thesis report		September, 2022	Draft research design submitted. Background research and initial literature review prepared. The thesis report was submitted to the MUNDUS board and both supervisors.	
	Developing final research design	October, 2022	November, 2022	Feedback received from the supervisors. Revisions made. Draft thesis outline with sub-sections created. Final research design prepared and approved by both supervisors.	In process
Literature Review	Prepare a list of relevant authors and literature	September, 2022	November, 2022	The list of relevant authors and literature submitted to the supervisors.	In process
	Finalize the draft literature review		February, 2023	Feedback received from the supervisors and reflected in the final literature review draft.	
Data Collection	Mapping and collecting the secondary data	November, 2022	February, 2023	Secondary data mapped and collected: national and regional legislation, municipal statistics and records, national reports from the International Organizations.	
	Talks with local kindergarten staff and	August, 2022	September, 2022	Unofficial and undocumented meetings with local representatives to collect background	

	other stakeholders			information about the topic	
	Develop questions for the in-depth interviews		January, 2023	Semi-structured interview questions developed and submitted to the supervisors.	
	Finalize the list of potential interviewees		January, 2023	List of potential interviewees developed. Contact information obtained.	
	Carry out the interviews	February, 2023	March, 2023	15 interviews carried out.	Half of the interviews carried out online. Half – in person. A trip to Georgia will be arranged during the Spring Break.
Data Analysis	Preparing data for analysis	January, 2023	March, 2023	Interviews transcribed. Both secondary and primary data classified.	
	Analyse data	February, 2023	April, 2023	Notes from data analysis.	
	Draw conclusions		April, 2023	Report on research findings and final recommendations	
	Divide arguments in chapters – Thesis design		April, 2023	Thesis structure developed. Chapter names developed	
Writing up the thesis	First full draft		June15th, 2023	First full draft submitted to supervisors	This part might be divided into shorter deadlines for the chapters, so supervisors can provide feedbacks on individual chapters, instead of

					going through one full draft. June 15th is considered as the final deadline for all chapters.
	Review draft	June 15th, 2023	June 30th, 2023	Feedback notes.	
	Final edits	June 30th, 2023	July, 2023	Final thesis	
	Submit final thesis		July, 2023	Thesis submitted	