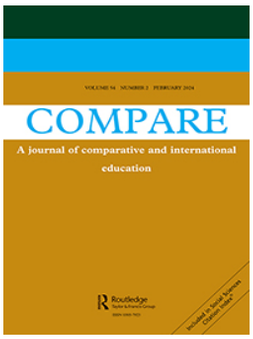

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Early childhood education and care policy change: comparing goals, governance and ideas in Nordic contexts

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ABSTRACT

Early childhood education and care (ECEC) is changing across Europe, reflecting multiple-policy intentions and assumptions about education in early years, and the role of the state in supporting, funding and regulating its institutions. In this article, we examine the evolution of ECEC comparatively in Finland and Sweden, and we explore the shifts in goals, governance mechanisms and policy ideas that have characterised reforms in the sector. We draw on an analysis of policy documents, and argue that the incremental changes achieved over the last 50 years have been in response to changing goals assigned to ECEC and ideas about its roles and functions as part of the welfare and education sectors. The power of ideas in effecting policy change is tempered by established institutional framings, yet is visible in the early dominance of child-centred ideas, and the later controversies over the emergent labour-market and education-driven rationales of the post-2010s.

KEYWORDS

Early childhood education and care; policy goals; governance; policy ideas; Finland; Sweden

Researching early childhood education and care policy change

Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC)[1] is a fairly modern part of education systems, but over the last 30 years, and across OECD countries, it is the most expanded sector of education. It is seen as a social investment strategy that performs multiple functions: preparation for formal schooling, children's well-being, social integration, employability, mitigating social inequalities, increasing women's labour participation, as well as bringing wider economic benefits (Council of the EU, 2019; Peleman, Vandenbroeck, and Van Avermaet 2020).

Its relatively recent development, and the multitude of social roles it is being assigned, makes it interesting to study and understand how and why it has been changing and evolving to its contemporary forms. This is an institution that in most European countries began to take shape in the early twentieth century, and for the first 50 years had a rather ad-hoc existence, relied on private, religious or charitable forms of provision, and was often of marginal significance for states.

This article examines such transformations in Finland and Sweden, and illustrates how incremental changes in policy have contributed to the formation of ECEC as an integral, institutionalised part of education systems. These two countries invest highly in

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education and early childhood, through generous welfare programmes, paid maternity leave, high participation of women in the labour market, and high redistributive policies (OECD 2016). They are amongst only seven EU countries where there is a legal entitlement to an ECEC place for all children (Council of the European Union 2019). In contrast to liberal welfare states, Nordic countries have invested substantially on ECEC with only small financial contributions from families, and developed delivery closely regulated by the state (European Commission 2019). As such, the expectation is for extensive services that include comprehensive, high-quality ECEC.

Even though ECEC provision is promoted in all developed economies, there are differences in the policy ideas and institutional mechanisms for its expansion and delivery. Our study concerns both policies and the ideas that underpin them, but also the governance dimensions of decisions over delivery of ECEC across public and private institutions, and within different levels of government (see also Neuman 2005). In addition, and following the focus of the 2001–2012 'Starting Strong' OECD reviews as well as relevant literature (Neuman 2005; Kamerman 2001), we focus on questions of integration of ECEC in different areas of social welfare (care, health, education), degree of decentralisation, and privatisation. Through this comparative study, we explore the complex relationships between policies, governance and ideas, and aim to contribute to research on the historical and ideas-based factors that continue to shape different kinds of ECEC systems in Europe.

In particular, we present and analyse the developments in ECEC historically, guided by the following research questions (i) How are policy goals for ECEC articulated in official documents, and what are the policy contexts framing them? (ii) What are the key governance mechanisms and institutional structures that operationalised these policy goals? and, (iii) what are the policy and pedagogical ideas that defined policy and constructed arguments for the development of ECEC?

Theoretical and methodological framing

The development of ECEC policies in the two countries can be explained not just by institutions and individual actors who drove reforms, but also by ideas about childhood and family policies: 'for new policy developments to be successful, actors must work within normative and policy frameworks already established. Future policy proposals must therefore fit with the ideas that have come before' (White 2002, 718). The literature on policy change focuses both on external shocks that bring about deep transformations in established institutions, as well as internal developments that are slower and more incremental in nature. Both are significant in our analysis of ECEC in Finland and Sweden, with a particular emphasis on the latter.

Inspired by the work of Mahoney and Thelen (2010), we sketch the historical development of ECEC in order to identify the circumstances and contexts under which the sector evolved in particular ways. In our analysis, we acknowledge how important it is to understand the properties of ECEC in different historical times, and the wider policy contexts that allowed changes of certain kinds. In addition to this type of historical institutional approach, we bring ideas as central to our work. We describe the ideological contexts of different periods and the dominant normative frameworks that drove or underpinned policies in the development and expansion of ECEC, as well as the educational ideas that gave the sector legitimacy and political drive. These ideas can at times be explanatory of changes or can provide additional support for the change of direction or purpose of the sector (Schmidt 2008; White 2002).

We adopt a comparative perspective to frame our analysis, acknowledging the complexities of comparing education in different cultural, political, economic and social contexts (Crossley 2002). We aim to follow Cowen's (2000) 'reading the world' approach (2000:334), not by juxtaposing two different ECEC systems, but understanding the 'historical location' of policy ideas and rationales (Nóvoa and Yariv-Mashal 2003, 430), and drawing similarities (and differences) in the responses to changing expectations for ECEC. We analysed official documents that include: legislation, government commissions, pedagogical and curricular plans (Table 1). In addition to these analysed documents, we have used several other policy documents as background research texts (Table A1, Appendix).

The analysis of the documents followed and adapted Bryman (2004) and Atkinson and Coffey (2004) content analysis procedures, and was steered by our three research questions. We focused on: (a) descriptive information and data about ECEC in different stages of development (what topics and categories are included in documents, what is their legal status, what are the key governance authorities they specify); (b) more in-depth exploration of the texts (as 'social facts', ibid), that looked for stated policy goals, priorities, values, and incentives, (c) identifying ideological positions and policy ideas promoted in the documents, and justifications made in reference to context (political, economic, pedagogic) and to other related policies.

In addition, we draw on our earlier empirical research on different aspects of early childhood education in Finland and Sweden during the last two decades (Hakyemez-Paul, Pihlaja, and Silvennoinen 2019; Hjelmér 2020; Pihlaja 2003; Pihlaja, Sarlin, and Ristkari 2015; Sundström, Hjelmér, and Rantala 2021), as well as on key secondary literature. For each case, we have produced a periodisation of reforms that follows institutional, governance and ideological rationales.

The genesis of a sector – pre-1960s

Early childhood care (rather than 'education') has its roots in the nineteenth century in both countries, with the primary form of organisation being charity *crèches* and kindergartens providing care for children of poor working mothers. The orientation of those

Table 1. Primary data – analysed documents.

Finnish documents	- Law 36/1973. *Day Care Act*. - The Board of Social Care. 1975. *Happy Activities*. - The Board of Social Care. 1984. *Pedagogical plan for the children of 6 years of age*. - The Board of Social Care. 1986. *Pedagogical plan of the children under three years*. - The Board of Social Care. 1988. *Pedagogical plan of the children between 3 and five*. - Development Centre for Welfare and Health. 2004/2005. *National Curriculum Guidelines on Early Childhood Education and Care* (2004/2005). - Finnish National Agency for Education. 2018. *National Core Curriculum for ECEC* (introduced in 2016, into force 1.8.2017, translation in 2018). - Law 1503/2016. *Act on Client Fees in Early Childhood Education and Care* - Law 540/2018. *Act on Early Childhood Education*
Swedish documents	- SOU 1972:26/27. *Preschool: Commission on Nursery Provision 1968*. Ministry of Health and Social Affairs. - National Board of Health and Welfare. 1987. *Pedagogical programme for preschool*. - SFS 2010:800. *Education Act*. Ministry of Education and Research. - SNAE. National Agency for Education 1998. *Curriculum for the preschool, Lpfö 98*. - SNAE. National Agency for Education 2011. *Curriculum for the preschool, Lpfö 98 – Revised 2010*. - SNAE. National Agency for Education 2018. *Curriculum for the preschool, Lpfö 18*.

care institutions was in both cases, towards providing a home-like environment inspired by active pedagogy ideas of Fröbel and Pestalozzi, emphasising play and harmony (Lindgren and Söderlind 2019; Peltonen 1965). In Finland these arrangements were loosely regulated (Alila 2013), and embedded in the welfare system, with kindergartens receiving public subsidies first in 1927 (Law 296/1927). Responsibilities for kindergartens passed to the Finnish Ministry of Social Affairs in 1924. The rather ad-hoc arrangements came to an end in 1936 when 'folk kindergartens' got included in the Finnish Child Welfare Act (Law 52/1936), and in 1943 in Sweden', when 'day-care centres' were for the first time regulated by the National Board of Health and Welfare (NBHW) and begun receiving state subsidies (SOU 1943:9). Throughout the 1950s-60s, regulation of provision in both countries increases, as do the processes of professionalisation of workers, and debates around the nature of state interventions in early childhood (SOU 1960:33; Välimäki 1999), heralding their entering a 'modern' period of systematic provision.

Modern period I: consolidation and expansion (1960s-1990)

The evolution of ECEC during this period in both countries is characterised by a high degree of continuity along the lines set by the 1930s-40s developments, as well as high degree of similarity in the approach to ECEC. Both in terms of system goals and pedagogical ideas, and in relation to the governance and steering of ECEC, we observe gradual transformations that have led to the consolidation of the core features of early childhood education and care system.

Policies, governance contexts and financing

Consolidation was important for the expansion of the institution, and it led to a systematised ECEC provision through the passing of important legislation (Law 36/1973 in Finland; the first Preschool Act 1975 in Sweden) and the systematic growth of public childcare, ending the earlier fractured pattern of provision. In this period, ECEC was considered an independent part of Health and Welfare (Sweden) and Social Care (Finland), with National Boards in each country having the responsibility for funding and regulation. Swedish municipalities got responsibility for the organisation and quality of ECEC and were given significant autonomy over local decisions, especially after legislation in the 1980s that separated these from more central guidelines. Similarly, in the Finnish case, the 1973 legislation placed organisation and quality questions at the level of municipalities, a legacy still visible today after several cycles of reforms (Law 540/2018, 5§).

Certain dimensions of governance of course differed in the two countries especially with regard to financing. In Sweden funding was channelled via the municipality and steered by state grands (Martin Korpi 2014), whereas in Finland kindergartens received direct ear-marked money, governed by the National Board of Social Care (Act on Children's Daycare 36/1973, 2§). In terms of regulation, both countries linked financing to detailed requirements and standards of quality. Both the 1973 Act in Finland, and the 1975 Act in Sweden prescribed issues such as staff qualifications, food nutrition, space, maximum numbers of children in groups.

Continuing on a similar path of institutional developments, the next decade brought the most radical and important innovation with regard to ECEC that far in both countries. The passing in Sweden of the 1984 Bill *Preschool for All* (Govt. Bill 1984/85:209) established the right to childcare for all children, regardless of their parents' need for childcare. In Finland, the Amendments to the 1973 Act (brought in 1983), and new propositions in 1991, also established childcare for children under the age of 3 as a universal right (Law 630/1991). As a result, and in combination with wider progressive family policies, parental insurance schemes (Sweden) and higher female paid employment (Ferrarini and Duvander 2009), there was a continuing increase in demand for places, as well as costs of public childcare throughout the 1980s.

These conditions opened up debates about the contribution of private financing to ECEC, although still in their infancy. So, in Finland private actors were allowed to set-up operations (after approval), but explicitly prohibited profit-making (Law 36/1973, 23, 27§). This was revised later when municipalities were allowed to purchase ECEC services from other municipalities, or from private providers (Law 677/1982, 3§). This opened the way for for-profit types of privatisations in later decades. Similarly, in Sweden while in the mid-1980s most ECEC provision was still publicly provided and funded, the need for further places saw private actors being allowed to provide childcare. The Social Democratic government of the time was not positive to the idea of commercialisation of ECEC, fearing a differentiated by price and quality provision across the country (Martin Korpi 2014). This was soon to change in the next decade.

Ideas around childhood and pedagogical developments

This period's policy developments were important in defining the purposes of ECEC, both from a policy perspective, and in relation to evolving understandings of children's welfare and views around childhood. Childcare in both countries was part of welfare politics, drawing heavily on the rationale of labour market participation of parents, and increasingly on social equality and equality between men and women (Bradley 1990; Välimäki 1999). But, in this 'modern period', in addition to employability and equality discourses, there were also emerging narratives that focused on ideas around children's care as a public duty. So, the 1983 Amendments to the Finnish Act on Children's Daycare defined the purpose of ECEC in two ways, as supporting homes in the upbringing of children, and as promoting the child's balanced physical, social and emotional development, through aesthetic, cognitive, ethical and religious education (Amendments 25.3.1983/304, 2a§). The dimension of care was also included in references to daycare offering 'continuous, safe and warm relationships, versatile activities and support development' (ibid.). Similarly, the Swedish dominant arguments around childcare as primarily for labour market participation were supplemented in the 1984 Bill by ideas that brought children's development, early learning and socialisation at the core of the politics of childcare provision (Govt. Bill 1984/85:209). In addition, the social equality debates in Sweden extended beyond the gender equality in the labour market, to include equality of opportunity for children with different socio-economic backgrounds.

We suggest this expansion of policy purposes for childcare, and the shift to more child- and community-centred policies, also represented ideas and values seen as part of the Nordic traditions around childhood, and at the same time as 'programmatic ideas'

that define both the ideological and the more concrete policy goals to be achieved and instruments used (Schmidt 2008, 307). This is traceable in the more specific pedagogical ideas and debates in that period that drew on a social pedagogical 'Nordic' approach and built on ideals related to child-centredness, active and playing children, freedom and solidarity, and a holistic view of the child (Einarsdottir et al. 2015; Pihlaja 2003).

In Finland, pedagogical plans were developed in the period 1975–1988, by collaborations between academic experts, the National Board of Social Care (NBSC) and municipal daycare professionals. In 1980 a significant publication of a report by a National Daycare Education Aims Committee, defined the educational goals of childcare, followed by plans separating the guidance to pedagogues by age of children (Committee 1980; Board of Social Care 1984, 1986, 1988). The management and steering of daycare at state level belonged to NBSC, with local social care councils dealing with municipal plans, and State Provincial Offices responsible for supervision and inspections (Law 36/1973, 8–12§). In the plan for 3-5-years-old the parts of education included: health education, basic care and physical education, social and emotional education and cognitive education. These plans were based on developmental psychology, care and early education and pedagogic ideas, and highlighted the building of community between children and employees:

> The moments between the child and the adults around a book means a lot for both. In interaction, an intimate situation, there is great meaning for the development of the child . . . Language should be rich and include many synonyms. Discussions should give pleasure. (Board of Social Care, 1988:77)

The themes of 'warm relationships', competent carers and a sense of community for children and adults were highlighted in several reports of the period (Board of Social Care 1975, 1984, 1986, 1988).

In Sweden, even though the child-centred ideas were relatively new in the domain of politics, they were not new within the sector, and they seem to have been successfully transferred from the preschool to the policy arena. Significant pedagogical debates that flourished in this period, were rooted in the development of a universal and comprehensive welfare tradition of post-war Sweden. These represented a continuation with earlier periods in their emphasis on a child-centred pedagogy that views young children as active, communicative and social, with their own interests and perspectives that the preschool needs to account for. A 1972 Commission on Nursery Provision (SOU 1972:26/27) described the pedagogical approaches of ECEC as rooted in Piaget's developmental psychology, as well as Erik Homburger Erikson's writings on the social psychology of the growing child. The Commission recommended a model of a dialogic pedagogy, where children are in continuous dialogue with others (children/adults) and with society, in order to develop their identity. On the basis of the Commission's recommendations, the NBHW published six Working Plans for Preschool in the period 1975–79, that emphasised a play and activity-based preschool.

Both the pedagogical ideas and the organisation of ECEC consolidated further in the 1984 Bill that introduced a common framework for a pedagogical programme across all ECEC providers in the country. Three years later, the NBHW published a *Pedagogical Programme for Preschool* that built the steering of the sector at three levels: state level and the National Board that publish the Pedagogical Programme; municipality level that

decided the local guiding and organising principles; and, preschool level that had responsibility for local planning. The content of the Programme systematised the preschool focus on 'nature', 'culture' and 'society' as themes to be integrated in the preschool work through combined play and learning.

Modern period II: diversification, refinement and divergence (1990-2010s)

The two countries' development of ECEC up to (about) 1990 show considerable similarities, both in the welfare ideas that supported the creation and institutionalisation of ECEC as a sector, and in the pedagogical ideas that drove the development of pedagogical plans and cultures of daycare and preschools. There is a close policy relationship between the two countries in the field of education in the 1980s-1990s period. Finland organised visits to Sweden with a focus on reform implementation, especially at the level of municipalities and teaching associations, and this pattern is also reflected in the 2012 OECD review that recommends that Finland considers the strategies adopted in Sweden in the field of quality of ECEC workforce. But, the 1990s represent some departures from political and ideological positions, that see the beginnings of a widening of differences in how ECEC was conceptualised and provided in the two countries.

Policies, governance contexts and financing

The 1990–2013 period of developments in Finland is characterised by universality of ECEC, since after 1990 all children under the age of 3 could have full-time attendance in daycare, soon extended to cover all children under school age (Law 1128/1996). This expansion coincided with the deep recession of the early 1990s, and was accompanied by a significant shift from a centralised to a decentralised, 'culture of trust' based governance. Municipalities took over the administrative functions of the central administrative boards, and the governance of ECEC became the responsibility of the Centre for Research and Development of Welfare and Health. As a result, the steering capacity of the central state over social services was weakened (Alila 2013), and the municipalities were given new freedoms to decide on local services, produce them more efficiently and ensure savings (Niemelä 2008; Pihlaja and Laiho 2021). In a period of high unemployment and reduced demand for childcare, municipalities cut daycare placements and closed daycare centres (Välimäki and Rauhala 2000). Subsequent legislation allowed municipalities to make payments or acquire services through other agreements (Law 365/1995), in what Välimäki and Rauhala (2000, 399) argue was the beginnings of a breakdown of state-run institutional daycare. Subsequent amendments to the legislation, saw the launch of a voucher-based system for the funding of social and health services (Law 1311/2003; Law 569/2009), that allowed choice in service providers, and aimed to improve access, and promote cooperation between municipalities and the private sector. Even though profit-making was allowed with these amendments, the system was in effect profit-free since the private sector was still not organised. While daycare was part of the social and health care sector, the new privatisation elements in its financing were not questioned (Laiho and Pihlaja 2022) – something that has not been allowed for basic or upper secondary education.

Despite the universal nature of the provision primarily through municipalities, parents in Finland still needed to pay fees, even though this was capped at a maximum amount (the same for public and private providers) and had a waiver for low-income parents (Law 1134/1996, 7a§). In the name of efficiency, the strict norms limiting numbers of children in groups were changed, in order to prevent the under-utilisation of placements, while it was made possible that every third worker in 'care- and upbringing duty' should have a qualification at college-level training (Decree 806/1992). Policies very like the ones in Sweden, saw the integration of social and health services, whereby municipalities could decide on the allocations of resources to different services depending on local needs (Law 733/1992).

The governance context of the 1990s is also one of a deep economic recession, reduction of state expenditure and functions, and great reforms in Swedish public policy in general. The introduction of marketisation and privatisation of public services affected ECEC through a series of decentralisation reforms whereby local government was given a 'municipal lump sum' and autonomy over how this was allocated to different local services. In turn, municipalities were expected to respond to issues of quality and management of the system (Lundahl 2002). In addition to decentralisation, the wider context of extensive reforms in the period 1989–93, resulted in the introduction of new public management approaches to the governance of education, the introduction of quasi-markets and a voucher system of school funding, increased parental choice, and the right of private actors to establish independent schools, partly-funded through taxation (Blomqvist 2004). In 1993, the centre-right government passed a Bill on the right of free establishment of childcare, that formally allowed the publicly subsidised setting-up of private preschools (Govt. Bill 1993/94:11). When the Social Democrats returned to power, they revoked that decision, which was in turn re-instated by the centre-right governing coalition of 2006 – with municipalities granting permissions for the establishment of new privately-owned preschools and channelling public funds to private owners at the average cost for municipal preschools (Prop.2008/09:115).

Preschool provision continued to expand in this period, although in the early 1990s several municipalities were still far from the goal of full coverage in childcare for all children of working or studying parents. In 2001, there was a reform that specified a maximum fee for childcare, to address the problem of rising fees over the years but also of variation in the fees throughout the country (Govt. Bill 1999/2000:129). In addition, preschool became free of charge for all 4–5 year-olds (for 15 hours/week), also applied to children of out-of-work parents. This provision was later extended to children from the age of 3 (Govt. Bill 2008/09:115).

This is also a period when ECEC is no longer part of Swedish family policy. Since 1996, it is incorporated into education policy, under the aegis of the Ministry of Education and Research, with the National Agency of Education the responsible authority for the sector (SFS 1997:1217). The significance of this shift of governance is considerable, and in this period preschool for children aged 1–5 is approached as the first step of life-long learning. Preschool is guaranteed for all children as a right, with the passing of legislation in 1995 that led to further expansion of the sector (Govt. Bill 1993/94:11). While the early part of the 1990s saw the implementation of radical public sector reforms that affected all sectors of education, the later parts of the decade and the 2000s were important years as preparation for the institutionalising of ECEC as part of

the education system. So, in 1998 there is for the first time the introduction of a formal curriculum, Lpfö98 (SNAE, 1998) and the introduction of a new school form ('pre-school class') aimed at six-year-old children. This reform guaranteed 15 hours/week free-of-charge participation for all children and was drawing on the compulsory school curriculum (Lpo 94) with an exception to the part of expected outcomes for pupils. The service was mandatory for municipalities and, in that period, still optional for parents. An interesting contrast of the Nordic approach to evaluating preschool activities as compared to the Anglo-Saxon approach, is that the focus of evaluations is never performed through the outcomes of individual children. Rather, the stated goals to be achieved are aimed at giving direction for the work in preschools, and not at providing individually-derived goals for children.

Ideas around childhood and pedagogical developments

Even though the policy and finance instruments for regulating and steering daycare were changing fast in Finland during the 1990s, the policy ideas around the goals of early childhood care were still dominated by the norms of social equality and universality of provision to support and foster children's early learning (Lundkvist et al. 2017). The pedagogical ideas that captured these goals in practice were crystalized in *The basics of ECEC*, a plan published in the early 2000s by the Development Centre for Welfare and Health (2003/2005). This was a social policy document with only traces of education, and the main aim to promote the overall well-being of the child. It emphasised social policy ideas in a set of proposals that treat 'education' and 'upbringing' as intimately connected. The Finnish curriculum values the 'care' dimension of ECEC, and emphasises upbringing and education as part of both structured and unstructured play and other activities ('Learning is happy, with playing, moving, examining and experiencing art', ibid.). It also highlights the need to take parents' views in consideration (for instance, in relation to ethical and religious questions), and to encourage the children's democratic participation, decision making and autonomy:

> ECEC is educational interaction taking place in young children's different living environments, aimed at promoting their balanced growth, development and learning. In order for the educational efforts of families and educators to form a meaningful whole from the child's point of view, close co-operation, i.e., an ECEC partnership, is needed between parents and educators. (Finland, Development Centre for Welfare and Health 2003/2005, p.13)

The *Basics of ECEC* plan had an explicit 'orientation to curricular subjects' to address scientific, mathematical, historical-social, aesthetic, ethical and religious dimensions, albeit specified in rather thin and short sections, for example:

> Mathematical orientation is based on making comparisons, conclusions and calculations in a closed conceptual system. In ECEC, this takes place in a playful manner in daily situations by using concrete materials, objects and equipment that children know and that they find interesting. (Finland, Development Centre for Welfare and Health, 2003/2005, p.26)

In addition, the plan devoted sections to delineating the principles for providing special support, assessing children's particular needs, as well as measuring the level of support needed. This informative early curriculum plan was constructed by extensive cooperation between a variety of health, social care, education, trade union and academic actors, as well as municipal and church contributions.

In Sweden, the first 1998 curriculum for preschool was a thin document (14 pages) that drew heavily on social ideas focused on equality, solidarity, integration, children's influence and democracy, with continued emphasis on child-oriented holistic approaches to pedagogy and experience. The preschool should provide children with good pedagogical activities, where care, nurturing and learning together form a coherent whole. Children's development into responsible persons and members of society should be promoted in partnership with the home (Lpfö 98, pp.4–5), and there is recognition of the child as a competent and active agent with great potential (Sommer, Pramling Samuelsson, and Hundeide 2010). The part of the curriculum referring to goals, included a section on curricular subjects such as mathematics, literacy, arts and science. For example, under 'development and learning' there were two mathematics goals that 'the preschool should strive to ensure that each child':

> . . . develop their ability to discover and use mathematics in meaningful contexts; and, their understanding of basic properties in the concepts of speech, measurement and form as well as their ability to orient in time and space (Lpfö 98, p.10)

In these respects, the fundamental values underpinning ECEC represent a continuity with the earlier periods, and a consistency with the Nordic traditions around childhood and care albeit increasingly combining these with education (Einarsdottir et al. 2015). So, play is still important, but is now talked about as part of the daily pedagogy, and a way for teachers to understand the children's perspectives (Lindgren and Söderlind 2019), and the characteristic Nordic social pedagogical approach in curriculum has now a greater focus on education, learning and didactics (Lillvist and Sandberg 2018).

The policies introduced in the Swedish ECEC in this period reflect two interesting shifts. On one hand, we observe deep changes in public philosophies around the welfare state that, during the 1990–2010 period, saw the fundamental re-orientation of education and other public services towards a stronger neoliberal model whereby privatisation, and new public management are the dominant policy programs. Policies around preschool vouchers, the possibility for private actors to set up preschools on a profit-making basis, and the management by objectives in a highly decentralised system of childcare, are such examples. On the other hand, the educational and pedagogical ideas of these 20 years do not indicate such radical departures. On the contrary, the established traditions of practice and cultures of ECEC continue to be strongly represented in the narratives of equality and care that re-affirm the role of ECEC in a rather uninterrupted continuum. Still, the introduction of a formal curriculum paved the way for a (slow and gradual) movement away from traditional definitions of preschool functions.

The comparative differences in the development of ECEC in the two countries are subtle. The stronger cooperative and corporatist welfare approach in Finland finds ECEC still within the health and social care sector in this period. The changing governance and financing mechanisms of childcare are steered by evolving policy ideas around decentralised provision, local autonomy, mixed-economy public and a small part private

involvement, and efficiency rationales. The increasing private involvement in the provision of daycare was framed by high degrees of continuity with earlier periods, through a social policy still driven by equality and child-centred ideas. In the same period of 20 years, Swedish ECEC is firmly within the education sector, were we observe a bifurcation. Policy ideas around preschools take a significantly different route to the past and experiment with new models of public management and financing, whereas educational ideas continue to draw on earlier established childhood narratives but within the new framework of a national curriculum even if in a skeletal form still.

Modern period III: the definitive turn to 'edu' in ECEC (2010+)

The last 12 years have seen significant reforms in both countries in relation to ECEC. Both Finland and Sweden made attendance to a 'preschool class', 1 year before compulsory education, mandatory (in 2015 and 2018 respectively), have introduced or revised national curricula, and have intensified the process of ECEC staff professionalisation by reforming both initial teacher education and professional development. Concerns about 'schoolification' have been raised, and the acceleration of ECEC integration as part of the school system has not been without controversy. Despite these similarities, there are some important differences in the ideas that underpin the two countries' policy developments in ECEC.

Policies, governance contexts and clashes of ideas

Employment narratives versus a 'social' ECEC

There are two major ideological and policy trends that pull ECEC policies in different directions in Finland in this period. In 2013, ECEC governance was transferred from Social Affairs and Health, to the Ministry of Education and Culture, with the National Board of Education becoming the central agency responsible for the sector (its tasks, organisation, and curriculum development) 2 years later. The consolidation of ECEC as part of the education system comes also in the 2015 amendments to the earlier legislation, that made attendance to the 'preschool class' compulsory, as preparation for school (Law 36/1973 (8.5.2015/580)). The 2015 reform made a strong case for the overall improvement of the quality of ECEC, putting the rights of children and their welfare at the centre. Combining care, play and learning, ECEC was seen as the best instrument to foster the interests of children, while at the same time to contribute to social equality, democratic participation, personal development and lifelong learning, and bring in parents as partners in the process. This was done without resorting to discourses around human capital investment as in other international contexts (Nygård, Nyby, and Kuisma 2019).

At the same time however, and in contrast to these ideas constructing ECEC around the goal of child welfare, the government decided to limit the right to full-day childcare to 20 hours/week (when both parents are not in full-time employment) and introduced maximum fees to (only) municipal ECEC (Law 1503/2016). Even though the limit was removed in 2019, ideologically this was a significant change to the earlier commitment to full-time care as a universal right, and happened against a period of financial crisis and reduction of public spending. The emphasis of this reduction was on cost-cutting and increasing the incentives for female employment rather than the right of all children to

early participation in ECEC services (Autto 2016). These two contrasting sets of policies represent an ideological 'battle' between what Lundkvist et al. (2017) suggest were dominating the ECEC politics in the early 2010s:

> on the one hand a child-focused investment discourse pertaining to ECEC rationales such as 'social equality', 'lifelong learning and social mobility', and on the other hand a discourse that put parents' and notably mothers' employment . . . as well as cost containment at the centre' . . . the outcome of the battle was a victory for the latter discourse (p.1552).

A new binding National Core Curriculum, and the 2018 Act on Early Childhood Education (540/2018) marked a clear shift of emphasis from the earlier period. The essential change was that the ECEC curriculum became a norm that every kindergarten should implement. Even though the themes of warm interpersonal relations, equality, the intrinsic value of the child, diversity, and wellbeing, were still present, the focus was now more on developing children's competence and cognitive development than socialisation. The National Core Curriculum obliged providers to make their own curricula based on the national one and also to design plans for individual children. The curriculum specified five areas of learning under the following headings: 'rich world of languages', 'diverse forms of expression', 'me and our community', exploring and interacting with my environment', and 'I grow, move and develop' (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2018). A more structured approach was demanded with a subject orientation and documentation. The ECEC plan addresses three levels: national, local and children's individual plans (Law 540/2018, 21–23§) that required a pedagogy connected to:

> systematic and goal-oriented activities based on multidisciplinary knowledge, particularly in the fields of educational sciences and early childhood education, that are professionally managed and implemented by professional personnel aiming to support children's well-being and learning. (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2018, p.24)

The 2018 Act contained strict regulations that governed the operations of both municipal and privately provided ECEC, from the ratio between staff and children, to the qualifications of staff who could be ECEC teachers, 'socionoms', or 'practical nurses' (26–30§). In addition, the Act devoted a section specifically referring to 'the ECE of the private service providers' (section 9, 43–49§), that set out the conditions of operations for the expanding private sector, including the procedures of inspection by the municipalities. The privately provided ECEC (about 20% of all provision, but with a variation from 0% to 100% across municipalities) has become more diverse because national and international for-profit companies have been providing services in municipalities (Ruutiainen, Alasuutari, and Karila 2020).

Controversies over a goal-driven, professionalised ECEC

In this same period in Sweden, ECEC gets fully integrated in the school system via a new Education Act (SFS 2010:800) that regulates preschool (for children aged 1–5) as well as other school forms. The emphasis was on preschool work that should aim for the 'acquisition of knowledge and values' and build on scientific ground and 'evidence-based' experience and knowledge (SFS 2010:800, 1§3).

Following the Act, the National Agency for Education took responsibility for a rather thorough revision of the preschool curriculum (SNAE, 2011). It ended up in an increased number of goals, especially about literacy, mathematics, natural science and 'technic', and an own chapter about 'Follow-up, evaluation and development' (to be supported with

documentation produced by preschool teachers). The systematic quality work was highlighted in the revisions, as the instrument expected to support children's learning, while there were increased demands on school development and follow-up evaluation (SFS 2010:800). In the revised curriculum (SNAE, 2011), for example, evaluation is more emphasised than planning and, state control was increased via inspections carried out by the Schools Inspectorate.

The switch to learning as a normative idea during the 2010s provided legitimacy to incremental policies that reformed ECEC as part of the educational sector. It also generated significant backlash from the sector and produced controversies especially over the use of terms and what they suggest. Consultation comments over the Education Act were critical of the concepts of 'teaching' and 'education' that had not been used in the Swedish preschool before. As a result of the critiques, the government decided to keep the word 'child' in references to preschools, and reserve the word 'pupil' for other school forms (Govt. Bill 2009/10:165, p.215). Similarly, 'teaching' was given a broad interpretation in the whole Act order to make it applicable to preschools, defined as:

> Goal-oriented processes that, under the guidance of teachers or preschool teachers, aim at development and learning through the acquisition and development of knowledge and values (Govt. Bill 2009/10:165, p.217)

This context however meant that when in 2018 the Swedish National Agency for Education undertook a significant new revision of the curriculum, the concepts of 'education' (*utbildning*) and 'teaching' (*undervisning*) featured prominently (Lpfö 18) although references were still to 'children' instead of 'pupils' as in school. Also important in this period is a change in the balance of staff responsibilities. With a dedicated section now in the 2018 curriculum, university-level qualified teachers are the ones 'responsible for teaching in accordance with the goals' (Lpfö 18, p.12), and are further distinguished from the tasks of other staff in the work-team (child minders and non-educated). This was seen as a major change in the established working practices of preschools and potentially divisive (Vallberg Roth and Holmberg 2019).

The new curriculum, that governs both municipal and private schools, aimed to improve quality (with 10 more goals around 'development and learning' in 2018 as compared to the 1998 curriculum), and to increase 'equivalence' amongst preschools across the country. As an overall objective, preschool is still expected to follow a holistic view around care, development and learning, with play activities as the foundation (Lpfö 18, pp.7–8). Both the differentiation of ECEC staff responsibilities, and the increasing emphasis on learning and pedagogical goals in the new curriculum, are seen as clear steps in the progression of the sector from a 'care' to an 'education' sector. The turn to education and the increasing focus on teaching, produces tensions over the definitions of goals for ECEC in Sweden, and researchers identify a policy approach that underscores lifelong learning rather than the holistic development of children *as children* (Lillvist and Sandberg 2018; Wahlgren and Andersson 2022).

Municipalities are launching implementation projects in an attempt to work out local solutions to this controversial reform (Sundström, Hjelmér, and Rantala 2021), while preschool teachers opt for practice-based definitions of 'teaching' that draw on well-

established narratives of child-centred themes, 'diffuse teaching' or even 'repudiation' of the concept for preschools, and to a much lesser extent on 'teacher-oriented teaching' or 'measurable learning' (Vallberg Roth 2020, 14).

Concluding remarks

The often-ambiguous or fragmented nature of ECEC, falling between 'care' and 'education', and between state, family, and private responsibility, has meant that few studies in comparative education have focused on the pre-school years. Similarly, within the ECEC research field, both comparative and policy studies are relatively few, even though its highly complicated governance make it particularly interesting. In this study, we investigated ECEC policies in Finland and Sweden and how they evolved since the 1970s, in order to understand the national positions towards developing ECEC, and the rationales that drove the creation of ECEC systems rather than piecemeal services. Our approach has accounted for policy goals and ideas, but also the governance of ECEC, paying attention to the ways in which ECEC is organised and implemented, and viewing governance as a 'glue that holds the pieces of the early childhood system together' (Neuman 2005, 132).

We observed that changes in ECEC policy reflect wider changes in welfare positions as well as shifting policy ideas around education, early childhood, and the role of the institutions of ECEC (Autto 2016; Westberg 2021). The 1970s period of expansion of early childhood provision saw similar approaches to the goals of ECEC in Finland and Sweden, drawing on concerns for children welfare and development, social equality, and facilitating women's participation in the labour market. These developments were crystallised in the 1973 Day Care Act (and 1983 Amendments) in Finland, and 1975 Act (and 1984 Bill) in Sweden, legislations that consolidated ECEC as a fundamental part of the welfare state with local municipalities responsible for its provision and regulation. Significantly, however, in Sweden the policy ideas of this period prioritised ECEC as *a right for all children*, as well as *a right for parents* (in the 1984 Bill), whereas in Finland this came in 1996 (Law 1128/1996). The time lag in institutionalising ECEC as a right between the two countries is also reflected in the shifts of institutional locations for ECEC. In Sweden it falls under Health and Welfare services until the late 1990s when it comes under the responsibility of the Ministry of Education and Research. In Finland, it remains part of Social and Health Care and family policies until 2013.

There were markedly different approaches towards ideas of regulation and nature of provision. The rapid decentralisation reforms in both countries during the 1990s were accompanied by a rise in inspections and evaluations in Sweden – a reflection of similar developments in the compulsory education sector. This was in parallel to extensive privatisation reforms in the Swedish public sector landscape. In a strong contrast of positions, Finland long resisted the discourses and policies of a standards-driven agenda and accountability across its education reforms, as well as privatisation in ECEC (although no more). In compulsory education it is still prohibited to make profit. Debates around privatisation in the ECEC field are still ongoing but also controversial in Finland.

Turning to policy and pedagogical ideas, it is interesting that child-centred ideas that were well established within the ECEC services in the 1970s-1990s, were relatively new in the domain of politics that tended to focus primarily on labour market and social rationales for reforming and expanding ECEC. Such ideas seem to

have been successfully transferred from the preschool to the politics arena, although in the later periods we see the reverse trend. With a distinct turn towards normalising 'teaching', 'knowledge acquisition', and 'learning' within preschool pedagogy, the 2010 Education Act in Sweden included preschool as part of the school system, having followed the earlier introduction of a formal curriculum in 1998. Similarly, in Finland a new ECEC Act and revised 2018 curriculum saw a greater orientation to education than care. In both countries, official legislation and curricula still give significant weight to children's rights, play as a pedagogic tool, equality, democracy (Sweden), peace and warm relations (Finland). But the concrete guidelines around goal-oriented learning objectives and subject-related structures are dominant, embedded in an increased documentation practice (Sweden) and the construction of individual plans for children (Finland), and increasingly the focus for both preschool practice and teacher education (Sundström, Hjelmér, and Rantala 2021; Alila 2017). Still, Finland has retained an orientation towards social care through the continuing employment of 'socionoms' alongside ECEC teachers.

In conclusion, we observe significant similarities in the legislation and policy orientations in the two countries, with some differences in governance approaches, and important timeline differences in their introduction and implementation. These are very much following national priorities in relating ECEC to other parts of the education system, as well as welfare reforms more generally. Still, in both Finland and Sweden the state is financing ECEC in a mixed economy with very low-level parental contributions, although the provision of preschools and kindergartens is a more mixed public-private affair.

Policy and pedagogical ideas around early childhood education and care are often an expression of national conversations about the role and functions of ECEC and its relationships to other parts of public services and education. This is visible in relation to the narratives around ECEC goals for equality, care and socialisation of children, but also its role in facilitating labour market participation of parents. But, ideas can have a much stronger steering role in policy, as the introduction of formal curricula suggests a shift in ideology from care and play towards learning and its documentation, particularly visible in Sweden. The comparative analysis of the evolution of provision of ECEC shows the significance in understanding the interplay between policy and governance contexts and ideological frameworks that shape ECEC systems. This is of high relevance for the coherence of policy making in the field, and the quality of outcomes that is critical for young children's experiences.

Note

1. Many terms have been used in the two countries over time, to refer to different forms of provision for ECEC and (later) education, such as 'daycare', 'preschools', 'kindergartens', 'play schools'. We refer to the specific terminology when discussing particular developments, but use the general term ECEC to capture all these forms of provision.

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Appendix

Table A1. List of policy documents used as background research and reference texts.

Finland	Swedish documents
Committee. 1980. The committee report on the aims of day care. Helsinki: Council of State. Law 733/1992. Law on Planning and State Subsidy in Social and Health Care. Law 630/1991. Law on Changing the Law on Children´s Day Care Law 11a§ and 31§. Decree 806/1992. Decree on Changing the Decree on Children's Day Care. Law 569/2009. Act on Service Voucher in Social and Health Care. Law 1311/2003. Act on Changing the Customer Fees of Social and Public Health Law 1134/1996. Act on Customer Fees in Social and Healthcare Services. Law 1128/1996. Child Home Care and Private Care Allowance Act. Law 677/1982. Act on Social and Health Care Planning and Government Aid. Law 52/1936. Child welfare law. Law 296/1927. Act on the State Subsidy of Kindergartens.	Government Bill 1984/85:209. Preschool for All. Government Bill 1993/94:11. Expanded law regulation in child care system, etc. Government Bill 1999/2000:129. Maximum fee and public preschool. Government Bill 2008/09:115. Child care and public preschool also for three-year old children. National Agency for Education 2020. Descriptive statistics – Children and staff in preschool 2019. Dnr 2020:320. NBHW. 1975. Working plan for preschool 1: Our preschool. An introduction to preschool's educational work. National Board of Health and Welfare. Stockholm: Liber. SFS 1997:1217. Förordning om ändring i förordningen (1991:1112) med instruktion för Statens skolverk. SOU 1960:33. *Förskollärarutbildningens organisation*. Betänkande avgivet av 1958 års förskollärarutredning. Stockholm: Socialdepartementet. Ministry of Health and Social Affairs. SOU 1943:9. *Utredning och förslag angående statsbidrag till daghem och lekskolor m.m*. Avgivna av 1941 års befolkningsutredning. Stockholm: Socialdepartementet. Ministry of Health and Social Affairs.