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The local market makers: Swedish municipalities as preschool quasi-market organisers

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ABSTRACT

National policies aiming at marketisation and privatisation in welfare sectors such as Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) require governance and organisation to be realised. In Sweden, the municipalities are key but largely under-researched organisers for preschool quasi-market infrastructures. This study explores the different ways in which Swedish municipalities act as quasi-market organisers in the preschool setting. Following organisational theory, we analyse their market shaping activities in translating national regulations in efforts to influence, support and control their local preschool quasi-market. Documents, websites, and interviews with public officials from 30 municipalities characterised as having either a large ($N=10$), medium ($N=10$), or small ($N=10$) private ECEC sector are analysed. The analysis highlights large variations on how municipalities act as market makers, which is further discussed in the form of three ideal types: the *Frontier*, the *Keeper*, and the *Endorser*. We conclude that municipalities' varying and hybridised market shaping activities and local characteristics are important to understand the implications that emerge in terms of different rules of the game, stakeholder interdependencies and relationships, composition of market actors etc. Attentiveness to the sub-national/local actors are essential in understanding different welfare quasi-markets within national policy frameworks of marketisation and privatisation.

KEYWORDS

quasi-market; local governance; market organisation; market stewardship; privatisation

Introduction

Globally, private provision and for-profit actors delivering childcare is widespread and compared to countries such as the US, Australia, New Zealand and many Asian countries, privatisation of ECEC in Europe have previously been more marginal (Penn, 2014). As ECEC policy in Europe has changed there is now a growing body of literature addressing different aspects of implementation of market-oriented policies, privatisation and choice reforms in both Nordic and European Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) (c.f. Lloyd & Penn, 2012; Penn, 2014; Ruutiainen, Alasuutari, & Karila, 2020; Trætteberg, Sivesind, Hrafnisdóttir, & Paananen, 2021;

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Trætteberg, Sivesind, Paananen, & Hrafnisdóttir, 2023). In line with many other European and OECD countries, market-oriented policies on for instance parental choice and the right of private actors to establish and provide schooling/ECEC (Lubienski, 2009; Waslander, Pater, & Weide, 2010) have been widely implemented in all Nordic countries ECEC policy and governance (Trætteberg, Sivesind, Hrafnisdóttir, & Paananen, 2021, 2023). However, how such reforms emerge and are enacted in different nation states varies (c.f. Verger, Fontdevila, & Zancajo, 2017). Nordic ECEC also display variation with regards to, for instance, the extent to which public and private for-profit and/or non-profit actors are responsible for preschool provision. In addition, funding policies, supervision and regulation also varies (de la Porte, Larsen, & Lundqvist, 2022; Eurydice, 2019; Lloyd & Penn, 2014; Ruutiainen, Alasuutari, & Karila, 2020; Trætteberg, Sivesind, Hrafnisdóttir, & Paananen, 2021, 2023), resulting in somewhat different ECEC “quasi-markets”. In the following, the term quasi-market is used to differentiate efforts of marketisation and privatisation in the public sector from the more classical imagery of the free market, thereby denoting for instance how the price mechanism, public/private funding and (public) permits for (private) actor market entry and other fundamental mechanisms differ (Hartman, 2011; Le Grand, 1991). Whereas all markets require and are formed by institutions, rules, protection, and maintenance from government (Kaartemo, Nenonen, & Windahl, 2020), public actors play substantial roles in creating, organising, and retaining quasi-markets and “managing competition” (Enthoven, 1993). In this context, Kaartemo, Nenonen, and Windahl (2020) point to the importance of public actors’ “market shaping activities” in terms of regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive institutional work.

While the introduction of market-mechanisms in ECEC are filtered through national policy histories and legacies, they also undergo local interpretation at sub-national levels of government most often responsible for ECEC provision (Penn, 2014). Similar to other Nordic countries (c.f. Trætteberg, Sivesind, Hrafnisdóttir, & Paananen, 2021, 2023) the national market-oriented policy framework in Sweden “come to life” in municipalities. They are the responsible authorities when it comes to the provision of childcare services and this, along with the governing structure and policy set-up, position municipalities as key actors in shaping and organising municipal welfare service quasi-markets (c.f. de la Porte, Larsen, & Lundqvist, 2022).

Despite extensive local variation on provision, access, and governing, research has mainly focused on national policies of marketisation and privatisation of ECEC (c.f. Lloyd & Penn, 2012; Penn, 2014; Trætteberg, Sivesind, Hrafnisdóttir, & Paananen, 2021, 2023; Westberg & Larsson, 2022) or local variation in relation to issues of for example quality and supply (c.f. Edwards, Fuller, & Liang, 1996; van de Kuilen, Leseman, & de Wolf, 2023). Other research focuses on rationales for local ECEC policy set-ups (c.f. Eerola et al., 2020). Ruutiainen, Alasuutari, and Karila (2020) have provided important insights to the wide variety of private provision subsidies and share of private ECEC provision in Finnish municipalities focusing on how policymakers legitimise policy choices in terms of increasing choice, increasing possibilities to govern private providers, etc. Looking at the Swedish ECEC case, we know very little about how municipalities engage in “market shaping activities” (Flaig, Kindström, & Ottosson, 2021) to create preschool quasi-market infrastructures in their jurisdiction (c.f. Hanspers &

Mörk, 2011). To address this, the study reported in this paper¹ targets how municipalities organise what we label as their “local preschool quasi-markets” (LPQ).

The aim is to explore the ways in which Swedish municipalities act as quasi-market organisers in the preschool setting. We do this by analysing how 30 municipalities translate national regulations and engage in market shaping activities through their use and combination of different organisational elements (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2011). Thus, this study addresses local governance and sub-national variation of quasi-market organisation within the ECEC sector to highlight and promote further discussion on the reasons for and consequences of different forms of local quasi-market organisation – issues that are relevant and topical in decentralised welfare states going through processes of marketisation and privatisation.

First, a brief account of Swedish ECEC market policy developments is provided followed by the theoretical perspectives, method, and process of analysis. The findings are then presented in two main sections, beginning with how municipalities organise their LPQs, forming the overall basis for the identification of three ideal types of municipal preschool quasi-market organisation presented in the second part. We then conclude by discussing the findings.

National market-oriented policies in Swedish ECEC

Private actors in Swedish ECEC are nothing new and have been an important part of the delivery of various forms of ECEC in Sweden, but their role and conditions have changed over time. From the mid-1970s, childcare became stated as an explicit municipal responsibility (NBHW, 1975), and in line with political ambitions the enrolment rate has increased since then covering 85% of children 1–5 and 95% of 4–5 year olds. Today, the formal responsibility for childcare provision is still placed on the 290 municipalities, but they also depend on private actors to deliver preschool services (Westberg & Larsson, 2022).

In 2006, a regulation to ensure a free establishment right for private (“independent”) preschool providers was issued. With this decision, municipalities became obliged to grant permission and funding to private actors operating preschools if the requirements according to the Education Act could be met. Shortly thereafter, a child care voucher (Govt Bill, 2008), in line with a similar system that had existed for nearly two decades for compulsory and upper secondary schools, was implemented. Following these decisions, private providers could apply for permission to start a preschool service from the municipality and the tax-funded compensation paid by the municipality (the voucher) needed to be at the same level as the municipality’s own costs for ECEC (calculated per child and on an annual basis).

Overall, these decisions have served to increase private actor access to childcare provision. In parallel, the municipalities also have supervisory responsibilities to inspect the private preschools to assess compliance with legal requirements.² This municipal supervisory task was further reinforced in 2019 (Govt Bill, 2017), and the Education Act (2010:800) now states that each private preschool needs to be assessed and approved with regard to ownership and management. This assessment, carried out by the municipal administration, is to include both economic conditions and the experience and suitability of its owners, etc.

Market-oriented policies are often linked to either enable private actor involvement (the supply side) and/or facilitate competition and choice for parents (the demand side) in attempts to enhance welfare service efficiency and quality (c.f. Waslander, Pater, & Weide, 2010). In Sweden, parents are free to choose either a municipal or a private preschool for their child, and the parental fees are to be the same for both types of preschools. Needless to say, such a parental choice depends on there being private preschool providers to select from, and at present 43 of the 290 municipalities lack such private preschool options. Still, nationally, one in five children attend a private preschool (Skolverket, 2021). These private preschools can for instance offer different pedagogical profiles (such as Montessori or Waldorf), outdoor pedagogy and/or international or religious orientations, etc., but the private preschools can also have a more general profile. They can also be operated as chains with certain preschool brands connecting the preschools within a company group. Over time, the share of private preschool providers has increased – and this is particularly the case for limited companies, at the expense of non-profits such as parent-run cooperatives (Trættemberg, Sivesind, Hrafnisdóttir, & Paananen, 2021).

Theorising quasi-market organisation

Local preschool markets are quasi-markets that have evolved through different forms of national regulation shaped by municipal activities in an ongoing and dynamic process (Flaig, Kindström, & Ottosson, 2021). Such market-shaping activities are imperative since quasi-markets do not rely on the price mechanism to govern supply and demand relationships. The concept of market stewardship helpfully draws attention to how government and non-government actors take on responsibilities for market management to ensure that quasi-markets meet policy goals within welfare state services or “how best we manage these markets” (Dickinson et al., 2022, p. 897). To provide an in-depth description and analysis of different market-shaping activities present in Swedish municipalities, i.e. what municipalities actually do to influence, change and govern their LPQ, we turn to organisational theory. Such a theoretical perspective offers, among other things, opportunities for descriptions on management in action at the municipal organisational level via the *translation* of management ideas and policies in their local contexts. We see translation as changes occurring through the movement of ideas and their implementation into practice. More specifically – as the meaning of translation is not unanimous in organisational research (Wæraas & Nielsen, 2016) – we turn to the Scandinavian institutionalism strand (c.f. Czarniawska & Sevón, 2005; Sahlin & Wedlin, 2008; Wedlin & Sahlin, 2017) to highlight the processes in which circulated ideas are interpreted, made sense of and understood in organisations – in our case in the processes of municipal quasi-market organisation. To understand municipal organisation of LPQ, we find it important to acknowledge how such processes of translation evolve “differently in different settings, they may not only lead to homogenisation but also to variation and stratification” (Sahlin & Wedlin, 2008, p. 219).

An organisational perspective is also useful to highlight how markets, such as the preschool quasi-market, need to be continuously managed and organised. As Brunsson and Jutterström (2018, p. 8) put it, “[m]arkets are formed by processes of organisation. They are the objects of decisions. There are people and

organisations that decide not only on their own actions in markets, but also on the actions of others”. In a literature review on institutional work by market-shaping public

actors, Kaartemo, Nenonen, and Windahl (2020) identifies a range of different mechanisms aiming to shape markets, such as financial backing, gatekeeping, legislating, rule- and price-setting, consulting, defining market boundaries and terms, orchestrating collaboration, and standardisation. We view the preschool quasi-market as a partial organisation, where formal organisations (such as the national parliament, national agencies and in our case also local authorities) make decisions regarding the rules of the specific quasi-market, of monitoring and potential sanctions. These decisions and actions can be directed at different aspects of the preschool quasi-market, such as the services to be exchanged (hence directed at influencing preschool services), the activities or characteristics of the sellers or buyers (hence influencing either private providers or parents), where and how exchanges occur (hence where and how choices and preschool placements are made), and to prices, all of which ultimately influences competition (Ahrne, Aspers, & Brunsson, 2018).

In this context we find it helpful to turn to elements of organisation to better understand how local authorities use their discretion to organise their LPQs. Ahrne and Brunsson (2011) have identified five such elements: *membership*, *rules*, *monitoring*, *sanctions*, and *hierarchy*. Firstly, in terms of *membership*, we have described how local authorities administer and issue permits for who can establish and operate on their LPQ. Even if there is a legislated right to free establishment for private providers, municipalities can and do ultimately decide who is to be a member and who is not. This means that private providers need to follow how local authorities translate this right into, for instance, application systems and requirements.³ Secondly, while there are national *rules* on the actions of the members, such as national curricula and requirements about who can be authorised to operate a private preschool, local authorities translate these rules and may also construct additional local ones, such as participating in local quality systems as a requirement for permits. Thirdly, based on national legislation, local authorities translate and decide on how they choose to *monitor* the members, and fourthly, decide on different *sanctions*, positive and negative. Lastly, *hierarchy* refers to who has power over binding decisions for the members.

These organisational elements are not the only ways that organisations attempt to govern quasi-markets. *Information* is a soft mode of governing based on norms and ideas on best practice and is not necessarily followed by monitoring and sanctions. Another important element is *imagery*. Similarly to information, imagery describes situations but with a focus on connections and relations between different units and individuals characterising, sorting and valuing both the present and the future. They are powerful instruments, since they influence our imaginations of current activities (Andersson, Erlandsson, & Sundström, 2017). In terms of information and imagery, municipalities can provide different amounts of information and represent their local quasi-market and preschool services in different ways for stakeholders such as private providers and parents. In organising LPQs, the above-mentioned elements can be used separately or in combination, in different ways and through different activities, with varying consequences for how the local quasi-markets operate. In this study we focus

on what organisational elements are used and in what way and how municipalities are trying and/or refraining from attempting to interact and influence their local quasi-market, but firstly we present some notes on methods and empirical data.

Methods and empirical data

Beginning with the selection of municipalities, this was a process involving several steps. Firstly, an initial mapping of the 290 Swedish municipalities was made and this provided an initial overview of the private preschool sector (measured as the amount of municipal preschool budgets paid as a voucher to private providers). From this mapping, we selected 30 municipalities characterised as having either a large private ECEC sector ($N = 10$), medium-sized ($N = 10$) or small private ECEC sector ($N = 10$). When selecting municipalities from these three overall categories, basically referring to the size of the private ECEC sector in the municipality, we strived to ensure that each of the three groups should include municipalities located in different geographical areas of Sweden, and thus that the resultant selection would display varying contextual and demographical characteristics (c.f. [Table 1](#)).

When these 30 municipalities had been identified, we began to collect data from additional databases and statistics, as well as harvesting the municipalities' websites to retrieve relevant documents and information. In [Table 1](#), each municipality is assigned a letter that is used when quoting this data. This desk-based research formed the basis for the construction of an interview guide directed to municipal administrative officers with overall responsibility for preschool in the municipality and/or responsibility for quality, licencing, inspection etc of private preschools. A total of 35 municipal representatives were interviewed (in some municipalities we have interviewed more than one informant depending on divisions of administrative tasks). These were asked, among other things, about choice systems and how the municipality support, licence and inspect private preschool organisers, informing us on different modes of market infrastructure that serve to create choice, trust, quality, control, and competition. The interviews were audiotaped and transcribed to provide insights into how and what the municipality do or do not do to either facilitate or hinder the involvement of private preschool actors. To minimise the risk of informants being indirectly identified through contextual characteristics of municipalities presented in [Table 1](#), quotes from interviews are followed by a municipal number (not in the same order as the municipalities appear in [Table 1](#)) and thus not the letter assigned to each municipality. In cases where several officers have been interviewed a letter to differentiate informants from the same municipality is also added. Prior to the interviews, all municipal officers were informed about the project and consented to participate. They were informed they had the right to withdraw, how the data would be stored and used, etc. In summary, the research ethical framework of Vetenskapsrådet (2017) and accompanying legislation, such as GDPR, was carefully followed.

The process of analysis was done in several steps, during which the authors had continuous discussions on interpretations, categories, and conclusions. First, we analysed the document data, i.e. the websites and documents from the 30 municipalities, focusing on various aspects on how they organise their LPQs, including where information on licences, inspections and sanctions could be found, the amount of

Table 1. Selected municipalities.

Municipality	Size of Private ECEC sector	Municipal purchases of private ECEC services (from limited companies/ other org.) %*	Municipality characteristic (SALAR)**	Political majority**	Number of children enrolled in preschool 2020
A	Large	87 (84/2)	Commuting municipality near large city	Right (M)	3600
B	Large	52 (46/6)	Commuting municipality near large city	Right (M)	5800
C	Large	32 (22/11)	Medium-sized town	Mixed (S)	7800
D	Large	32 (31/0)	Commuting municipality near medium-sized town	Right (M)	1200
E	Large	31 (30/0)	Rural municipality	Mixed (S)	800
F	Large	28 (13/13)	Commuting municipality near medium-sized town	Right (M)	100
G	Large	29 (28/0)	Commuting municipality near large city	Mixed (S)	5200
H	Large	20 (19/0)	Commuting municipality near small town	Left (S)	700
I	Large	19 (10/9)	Commuting municipality near large city	Mixed (S)	2300
J	Large	19 (16/3)	Medium-sized town	Right (M/L)	4300
K	Medium	14 (12/1)	Small town	Right (C)	2900
L	Medium	13 (13/0)	Commuting municipality near large city	Right (M)	1800
M	Medium	12 (11/1)	Commuting municipality near medium-sized town	Mixed (S)	1900
N	Medium	12 (5/7)	Medium-sized town	Mixed (S)	8100
O	Medium	10 (7/4)	Medium-sized town	Mixed (S)	7500
P	Medium	10 (10/0)	Rural municipality	Left (S)	300
Q	Medium	9 (0/9)	Commuting municipality near small town	Right (M)	500
R	Medium	8 (1/7)	Commuting municipality with a low commuting rate near medium-sized town	Right (M)	2200
S	Medium	9 (7/1)	Medium-sized town	Mixed (S)	3500
T	Medium	9 (3/5)	Commuting municipality with a low commuting rate near medium-sized town	Mixed (S)	1800
U	Small	7 (0/3)	Commuting municipality near small town	Left (S)	200
V	Small	5 (2/3)	Commuting municipality near medium-sized town	Mixed (S)	1500
W	Small	5 (1/4)	Rural municipality	Mixed (S)	1300
X	Small	5 (4/1)	Small town	Left (S)	3400
Y	Small	3 (3/0)	Rural municipality	Left (S)	700
Z	Small	3 (-/-)	Commuting municipality near medium-sized town	Mixed (S)	600
AA	Small	2 (2/0)	Rural municipality	Right (M/CD)	700
AB	Small	1 (-/-)	Commuting municipality near small town	Right (M)	400
AC	Small	1 (-/-)	Commuting municipality near small town	Mixed (S)	600
AD	Small	-	Commuting municipality near small town	Right (CD)	400

Note: *The numbers cover average share of purchases of ECEC services from municipalities to private providers between 2018–20, in percent, based on official records derived from Statistics Sweden. “Other org”. include other forms of private preschool operation than limited companies, such as private preschool providers registered as associations or foundations.

**Based on the classification from Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (SALAR): Large cities – municipalities with a population of at least 200 000 inhabitants with at least 200 000 inhabitants in the largest urban area. Medium-sized towns – municipalities with a population of at least 50 000 inhabitants with at least 40 000 inhabitants in the largest urban area. Small towns – municipalities with a population of at least 15 000 inhabitants in the largest urban area.

***Political majority in the municipal councils 2018 (party affiliation of the chairperson). Political parties included in respective categories: Right includes one or more of the Moderate Party (M), Centre Party (C), Christian Democrats (CD) and Liberals (L). Left includes Swedish Social Democratic Party (S) and/or Left Party (LP). Mixed: Includes one or more parties from Right as well as Left.

information given, the application process for establishing new private preschools, what rules/regulations were highlighted, supply of support material for private providers, how preschool inspections were carried out, information and application systems for parents, and how the local preschool market was described. This resulted in descriptions of

each municipality, which was compiled into summarising tables for comparative purposes. To further aid comparisons between municipalities, the document/website-derived data was coded into categories; i) no information given, ii) limited information given, and iii) extensive information, accompanied by text on what form the different activities took. As a next step, we worked deductively to analyse these activities using the organisational elements described in the theory section. Here we focused on what type of element(s) the activities represented i.e. what was being organised, to what extent and how; which of these elements were more common, and what combination of elements were used, etc.

We then turned to the interviews, and through a qualitative content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) this data was used to exemplify and illustrate how these organisational elements were described and used, both more generally in the data and how this varied between municipalities. The analysis sought to inform, in more detail, how the municipal officers described the use and work of the organisational elements to map similarities and variations. Another central aspect at this stage of the analysis was to discern how the municipalities, through these elements, were described as either trying and/or refraining from attempting to interact and influence preschool providers and parents (“the sellers and buyers”), with a focus on where and how exchanges between private and public preschools were facilitated (or not), as well as to what extent competition and choice were encouraged and how.

As a final analytical step, the overall insights from the previous analytical stages were condensed in the form of three ideal types (Stapley, O’Keeffe, & Midgley, 2021; Weber, 1949) of municipal quasi-market organisers. These ideal types are constructed based on the organisational elements, what was being organised and how, what combinations of different market shaping activities were used and how municipalities through these elements were trying and/or refraining from attempts to influence and manage their LPQ as well as local characteristics. Furthermore, the presented ideal types do not represent individual municipalities but consist of overall patterns and characteristics in terms of local modes of quasi-market organisation, formed into analytical constructs that we use as tools to communicate and discuss our results. Hence, the studied municipalities can have traits from all three of these ideal types (Weber, 1949).

The findings are structured according to the previously described analytical steps, and we first turn to the document and interview data on how municipalities organise their LPQs. This is followed by a second section about the three ideal types.

Organising local preschool markets

While some elements of organisation are more prominent, such as membership, monitoring and information, others are not as visible, such as hierarchy. We will therefore present and exemplify how the most common elements in attempts to



Table 2. Municipality use of various elements for organising their LPQ.

Municipality (private preschool sector)	Membership & Rules			Monitoring & Sanctions		Information & imagery		
	Application & permission guidelines	Cost of application in SEK	Choice system	Information on inspection	Where information is found	Amount of information	Support material	Presentation of preschools/ Benchmarking
B (Large)	Extensive & Juridified	0	Fully integrated	Limited	Business	Extensive	Extensive	Fully integrated/Yes
A (Large)	Limited	0	Fully integrated	Extensive	Business	Extensive	Extensive	Fully integrated/Yes
N (Medium)	Extensive & Juridified	12 000	Separated	Extensive	Education	Extensive	Extensive	Fully integrated/No
G (Large)	Extensive & Juridified	20 000	Fully integrated	Limited	Education	Limited	-	Semi-integrated with links/Yes
S (Medium)	Extensive & Juridified	0	Separated	Extensive	Education	Extensive	-	Semi-integrated with links/No
J (Large)	Extensive & Juridified	12 000	Separated	Extensive	Education	Extensive	-	Separate site with links/No
X (Small)	Extensive & Juridified	26 000	Separated	Extensive	Bus/Edu	Extensive	-	Separate site with links/No
L (Medium)	Extensive	35 000	Separated	Extensive	Business	Extensive	-	Semi-integrated with links/No
I (Large)	Extensive & Juridified	24 000	Semi-integrated	Limited	Business	Extensive	-	Semi-integrated with links/No
W (Small)	Extensive & Juridified	15 000	Separated	-	Business	Extensive	Limited	Semi-integrated with links/National site
C (Large)	-	12 000	Semi-integrated	Limited	Education	Extensive	Limited	Semi-integrated with links/No
R (Medium)	Extensive & Juridified	0	Fully integrated	Limited	Education	Some	-	Semi-integrated with links/No
M (Medium)	None (within application)	0	Separated	Limited	Business	Some	Limited	Semi-integrated with links/No
V (Small)	-	0	Semi-integrated	-	Education	Limited	-	Fully integrated/No
E (Large)	Extensive & Juridified	0	Separated	-	Education	Limited	-	Separate site with links/No
O (Medium)	Extensive	24 000	Separated	Limited	Business	Limited	-	Separated site with links/No
AC (Small)	Limited	0	Fully integrated	Limited	Education	Limited	-	-
T (Medium)	Extensive & Juridified	20 000	Fully integrated	Limited	Education	Limited	-	Fully integrated/No
AD (Small)	Limited	0	-	Limited	Education	Limited	-	-
Q (Medium)	Limited	0	Fully integrated	Limited	Education	Limited	-	Semi-integrated with links/No

(Continued)

Table 2. (Continued).

	Membership & Rules			Monitoring & Sanctions		Information & imagery			
	Municipality (private preschool sector)	Application & permission guidelines	Cost of application in SEK	Choice system	Information on inspection	Where information is found	Amount of information	Support material	Presentation of preschools/ Benchmarking
F (Large)		Listing attachments	0	Fully integrated	-	Forms	Limited	-	Fully integrated/No
D (Large)		-	25 000	Separated	Limited	Business	Limited	-	Separated site with links/No
P (Medium)		-	0	Separated	-	Education	Limited	-	Separated site with links/ National site
U (Small)		Listing attachments	0	-	Limited	Education	Limited	-	-
K (Medium)		-	25 000	Separated	-	Education	Limited	-	Separated site with links/No
AA (Small)		-	0	-	Limited	Education	Limited	-	-
H (Large)		-	-	Semi-integrated	-	-	-	-	Semi-integrated with links/No
Y (Small)		-	-	Separated	-	-	-	-	Excluded/No
AB (Small)		-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Z (Small)		-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-

Note: - refers to no information on websites or in available documents.

organise LPQs are used. Table 2 is based on data from municipal websites and documents and summarises how the 30 selected municipalities vary, controlled with the interview data. It should be noted that when it comes to the elements of membership and rules, we have focused on how municipalities organise the application and permission processes to establish a new private preschool, studying information on application, guidelines, and costs. We have also included how the municipalities organise parental preschool choice. When it comes to the elements of monitoring and sanctions, the information on websites is often limited. Elements of information and imagery have been analysed by focusing on where the information can be found on municipality websites, the amount of information given, whether any supporting material is available, and how preschools are presented and benchmarked. In the three sections below, we further describe and analyse the different uses and combinations of organising: membership and rules; monitoring and sanctions; information and imagery.

Membership and rules

Organising membership, translating national rules and establishing local ones varies extensively across the municipalities in our study and in the following section we will highlight different attempts as well as necessities for trying to (or refraining from) actively shaping LPQs, noting that insecurities on the extent of local autonomy and how national regulations can be interpreted – their scope and reach – are recurrent issues underlying the varying local translations.

Controlling membership is about who is approved for operating a private preschool in a municipality, and some municipalities in our sample have extensive guidelines on how to proceed with an application. Often these refer to the Education Act and specific paragraphs concerning what is necessary to receive a permit.

Permission and right to grants (...) is regulated in the Education Act chapter 2 paragraph 5–7 and chapter 25 paragraph 10. There it is stated what quality demands must be fulfilled for an operator to get approval and right to grants and when the approval may be revoked. (Guidelines for approval and right to grants, Municipality X, Small private ECEC sector)

Such guidelines may also explicitly state other obligations related to different specific paragraphs in laws and regulations about obligations, secrecy, quality audits, language use, denominational orientation, openness, special support, group size, staffing, etc. Other municipalities provide less information on what is required to receive a permit, and some do not provide any information on how to proceed, or do not provide an application form on their website, instead stating “if interested, contact us”.

These differences display different ways of organising, and hence controlling, who is seen as eligible to provide preschools in the municipality. Extensive and juridified guidelines, along with information on how to proceed, can on the one hand provide clear and necessary information, but on the other hand it can also deter applicants from even proceeding with an application. Less information requires more contacts between municipal officers and potential permit applicants. This could promote an experience of familiarity, a less bureaucratic and juridified process, but it could also represent ways of gatekeeping how what is required is examined and communicated. However, less or no

information on application processes and requirements may indicate that there is no or limited organisation and knowledge on governing membership in contexts with no or little interest from different private providers to establish in the municipality. An officer we interviewed in a municipality with such an ad-hoc informal process described the situation as follows:

I: Do you have any guidelines – any document?

R: I don't think we have anything on paper.

I: Ok, have you discussed if there is a need for such a document?

R: No, since there has not been any demand, we have not seen any reason to do anything.

(Officer 29, Small private ECEC sector)

Municipalities provide various levels of support in the application process, and for different reasons. Some of our informants argue that no additional support than that offered online is provided because applicants should already possess the knowledge and competence to provide the information asked for in the application:

I think that in the entire application process, you must prove that you have enough knowledge and insight and capacity to be able to run a private preschool. So, I think that we cannot differentiate the support, because then it is obvious that then you have the capacity based on what the requirements are for what you should be able to do when you start a business. (Officer 28A, Small private ECEC sector)

One municipality with a rigorous process allows three attempts to submit a complete application. Presumptive members are given information about what is missing and timeframes for completions. Even more generous municipalities engage in dialogues, where the joint goal is to produce a good application:

I: Is there a limit to how much help and support you can get in the application process?

R: I don't actually know [laughs]. I would think our strategists are quite patient, and really try to help and support them as much as possible, up to a point. (...) we have a dialogue with the actor who has submitted an application, so we want it to be a good application (...) but there is no limit to how long we keep at it and how many times they can resubmit.

(Officer 4A, Large private ECEC sector)

We also find differences on fees for applications for new and existing preschools that want to expand. When approval regulations were enhanced in 2019 municipalities were allowed to charge a fee that covered administrative costs. Many municipalities do so and some also see the fee as a tool to keep the not so serious actors away. Charging a fee then is a way to attempt to control who applies and who does not.

There are different interpretations of what room for manoeuvre and discretion municipalities actually have. One such insecurity in translating national policies is whether an application can be turned down if it means long term negative effects on the municipalities' own preschools, as stated in the Education Act. Some informants argue that it would be possible to dismiss applications if they plan to establish in an area where there is no need for more preschool places. Others find it difficult to envisage such negative consequences. There are also municipalities who do not interfere with the dynamics of the market – they do not dismiss any applications with reference to over-establishment. Some do not apply this criterion for establishment due to structural conditions:

You know, there is such lack of preschool places. They just want ... We just want ... If they find appropriate facilities or building permit (...) if they fulfil the law and everything, then it is a go. (Officer 4B, Large private ECEC sector)

Other issues regard what local rules can be enforced, such as participation in local quality and follow-up systems and/or joint and integrated choice systems, where parents can choose from both municipal and private preschools. There are different interpretations on what the national regulations allow and municipalities tend to translate this differently. In our 30 municipalities we find situations from completely integrated systems including all preschools (municipal and private), to completely separated systems, where parents need to apply to the municipality and/or to the preferred private preschool through different application systems. In between these forms of organisation, we find municipal arrangements where it is voluntary for private preschools to join the integrated system – resulting in some joining and some private providers preferring to keep control over their own application system and admission procedures.

Arguments for separated systems are that they keep the public-private divide clearly visible to the “customer” (Parent). In this line of argument, there should be no question about who is responsible for the preschool and the parents need to actively seek out and place their children in queues at private preschool providers. Integrated systems are instead preferred by many municipalities for several reasons. Firstly, this gives municipalities an overview and easier administration. Secondly, it is argued to provide easily managed applications, improving choice, providing “one way in”:

... making it easier for parents and their children, to be offered a preschool place that suits them as quickly as possible. (Document Municipality K, Medium private ECEC sector)

Thirdly, integrated systems also incorporate elements of monitoring the members in terms of oversight and control of supply and demand, as well as ensuring that private providers abide by national and local rules regarding who is offered a place at a specific preschool:

[t]here is a desire to be able to streamline and optimise the allocation of childcare. ... it is important to make maximum use of the places that are available. ... more and more parallel queues arise, as each private operator currently manages their own queues. (...) and to ensure that queuing rules are adhered to regardless of who the preschool operator is”. (Document, Municipality K, Medium private ECEC sector)

To be able to enforce local rules regarding membership, municipalities use different strategies. One municipality that previously had implemented extensive outsourcing of municipal preschools ensured that all former public preschools were integrated in the same customer choice system; “it was a prerequisite” (Officer 5, Large private ECEC sector). Another municipality implemented an accreditation system:

R: If you get permission to operate a preschool in our municipality, then we say that we want them to be included in the regulations we have. We call them general and specific accreditation. We want everyone to join in, and if you are accredited, you get some good things in the bargain. But you also need to be included in the follow-up system and our “customer choice system”. So far no one has said no. (...) it is an underlying demand. (...) We cannot [due to national regulations] force them. (...)

I: So in theory you can receive a permission or a licence to operate, but not be accredited.

R: Exactly, in theory, but it doesn't happen, no. (Officer 2, Large private ECEC sector)

Monitoring and sanctions

In this section we move on to show how the elements of monitoring and sanctions primarily are made up of the inspection process required by the municipalities as stated in the Education Act. We find important similarities in referring to this responsibility but also that the organisation of inspection activities varies in different municipal contexts, for instance with different levels of specialisation in the municipal organisation, overall administrative capacity, etc.

Most municipalities are keen to explicitly reference the Education Act, the stated inspection task, and possible negative sanctions if the municipality decides there are deviations from their interpretation of national regulations and local rules. If corrections are not made, sanctions available are conditional fines and a withdraw of the licence and approval to operate in the municipality. However, organisation varies, for instance in terms of how often private preschools are inspected, what forms of inspections are carried out, who the inspectors are, what kind of support is given in correcting shortcomings, how certain regulations are interpreted by municipal inspectors as well as the use of sanctions. In remote and sparsely populated municipalities, with a limited and less specialised municipal organisation, inspection may require unusual and creative solutions:

We set up a group including me, a principal for our municipal preschools and then maybe some administrative function [to do the Ownership and management suitability assessment] – we are not that many of us so we have to make use of what we have. (Officer 10, Large private ECEC sector)

To abide by the law, similar municipalities may also hire retired principals to conduct inspection, or even buy inspection services from other municipalities. Such organisational solutions are in sharp contrast to the professionalised and specialised management practices developed in larger and more market-oriented municipalities:

We must do a lot of work with both regular and targeted inspection. I have one branch head who is a school lawyer specialised in preschool and one officer in charge of inspection. We have a large proportion of private preschools and the new task to do ownership and management suitability assessment takes a lot of time. (...) Then we cooperate with support functions in the matrix [organisation] and we use Creditsafe [system] to investigate the economic status of these companies. Well, then there are a couple of other officers working with support and to produce material for quality audits. (Officer 5, Large private ECEC sector)

In addition, this municipality had a meticulous inspection system with tight intervals (document-based inspections each year) and unannounced visits (“in order to get a correct picture”). Thus, different local translations may result in different inspection practices. One of the informants shared concerns about this:

The problem is that we have more than 290 municipalities and they have so incredibly different muscles for their inspection and abilities to handle private actors (...) it goes without saying that this cannot be achieved in an equivalent and professional way. (Officer 28A, Small private ECEC sector)

According to this informant, these differences are threatening principles of legal certainty and ultimately a matter of injustice for the most vulnerable group in the education system – the small children. While other informants shared these concerns, some preferred to have control over the inspection process, allowing to get to know and build relationships with the private providers, creating and maintaining a constructive dialogue.

The different translations of inspection practices are also seen in the different use of sanctions made available through the Education Act where some use remarks more often than stronger sanctions and few inspections result in the use of conditional fines and withdraw of private actor licences. While the municipal inspections are tied to negative sanctions in attempts to incentivise rule compliance, one municipality also practices positive sanctions in the form of “quality funding” based on indicators, such as the number of qualified teachers and customer satisfaction. According to our informant, however, the monetary rewards are marginal, rather this is a way to organise for competition where the currency is reputation and what is at stake is the prospects of attracting new customers.

Information and imagery

The different usages of the above organisational elements (i.e. membership, rules, monitoring and sanctions) need to be communicated via information. The following section shows how this information is used to represent different images of their LPQ and its actors, attempting to position both private providers and parents and their actions in certain ways.

Information aimed for private providers when it comes to establishing a new or expanding an existing preschool takes different forms. While most municipalities provide information on their website related to preschool specifically, others provide this information on sites related to business in the region. This speaks to and positions private actors as either educators and pedagogues, or as businesses. This entails a particular representation of who the private providers are, as well as a certain expectation of who they should be, identify and behave as.

Some municipalities supply other information or support materials that can be interpreted as imageries of their LPQ. These include data on projected child births; available preschool places related to different areas within the municipalities; infrastructure; real estate; housing; and development areas that depict the prospects in the municipality. These can be seen as attempts to organise the LPQ in terms of influencing private actors to establish and/or expand in the municipality, and more importantly where to establish.

Another form of imagery of the local preschool market is how the municipalities represent preschools on their websites. This information is primarily directed at parents and can be seen as forming a certain norm, on the one hand, keeping private and public preschools separated, or blurring these distinctions by describing the private preschools within the same template as the municipal website, or providing comparative and benchmarking tools for informed parental choices. It is also a way of signalling diversity and plurality (or lack thereof) of their LPQ.

Municipal quasi-market organisation as ideal types

We can discern extensive variation on how municipalities act as quasi-market organisers. From the different uses and combinations of elements of organisation presented in the previous section we have condensed these findings in the format of three ideal types of municipal organisation of LPQs: the Frontier, the Keeper, and the Endorser. As noted above these ideal types do not represent individual municipalities as LPQ organisers, rather they should be understood as constructs fusing together certain identified market-shaping activities and characteristics to help us understand the market-shaping roles of municipalities (Weber, 1949).

The Frontier

The Frontier is located in the countryside, and have a few old and well-established non-profit private preschool operators, or none at all. Principally, the Frontier is what the marketing sphere call a "cold market" which means that there are no previous relations – no established trust or common ground – between sales persons and customers, or in this context between municipal administration and commercial for-profit actors.

As noted by Enthoven (1993, p. 39), sparsely populated areas require specific "organised systems" to accomplish managed competition. The Frontier remains passive in relation to the actors and rules of the market and do not act as a market steward trying to improve quasi-market sufficiency and diversity. Rather, the Frontier have no need for or resources to mobilise a rigorous quasi-market organisation. Consequently, parental choice is not emphasised on the Frontier's website. In terms of organising membership, information on the website is limited as are guidelines on "how to open" a new private preschool, and perhaps just a telephone number is provided. There are no routines for applications and approval, but with interest from private actors the Frontier tends to support the applicants in different ways, discussing profiles, recruitment, and application. In terms of monitoring and sanctions, the Frontier provides very limited information on inspection procedures, and these are conducted by a municipal principal or an officer responsible for the municipal preschools. Inspections take the form of cooperative dialogue and familiarity where sanctions are not as common. In terms of information and imagery, the Frontier positions private preschools as pedagogues and educators rather than businesses.

The Keeper

The Keeper is larger than the Frontier in terms of the number of inhabitants and have medium-sized private preschool quasi-markets. The municipal organisation is a traditional bureaucracy. The Keeper is characterised by extensive information on rules, requirements, and guidelines for permits. Ownership and management suitability assessment along with tariffs for applications are used to hold back market forces. In terms of organising membership, there are political goals and activities to maintain balance or status quo between public and private providers, hence acting as a market steward (Dickinson et al., 2022) keeping a sufficient supply of different choices but not more far-reaching than that. The Keeper value to maintain a balanced and diversified

market, and may offer support in terms of discussing tentative profiles and locations. On the other hand, the Keeper is more likely to deny applications due to over-establishment and possible negative consequences for its own public preschools. The Keeper also tends to be restrictive with support to new and existing private actors in terms of demographic data, development plans, and land and real estate use. Likewise, inspection can be used to hold back market forces and, if an integrated choice system is used, its primary goal is to control and monitor queues and make sure admission rules are followed. The Keeper prefers the current system of municipal inspections of private preschools since this allows for them to be in control of monitoring their own local quasi-market.

In terms of information and imagery, the Keeper tends to demarcate between municipal and private preschools on the website – which means that they are kept separated to ensure that parents are aware of the difference between public and private preschools. Parental choice is enabled, but free choice is not emphasised on the website. The Keeper tends to have a “political” organisation that is governed by ideological goals and value judgements (rather than supposedly “neutral” New Public Management-techniques, see below). Translated into concrete practices, the Keeper may have policies to engineer staffing and how practices are operated based on the social composition of children in preschools. The goal here is to achieve equivalence and social justice by allocation of resources. However, the Keeper often combines such traditional modes of governing input with management techniques oriented towards systematic quality work and results that foremost focus on output.

The Endorser

The Endorser has a large private preschool sector and gravitate towards a business-like and business-friendly municipal organisation characterised by New Public Management. The Endorser typically speaks of being “attractive” and increasing choice, and encourage private welfare delivery in other areas as well. As such, the Endorser actively promotes and sponsors private market actors through extensive information, guidelines, and support to new actors by business units in the organisation that aims to represent this image of a business-friendly local market positioning new actors as businesses. The Endorser is heavily invested in market-shaping activities acting as a market steward (Dickinson et al., 2022). These activities serve to achieve sufficiency and diversity to meet the needs of service users and promote quasi-market performance through discourses of value for money.

This means not less organisation and bureaucracy, but a *different* bureaucracy. For example, the Endorser is characterised by a larger and more differentiated organisation in place to monitor the quasi-market through extensive inspection schemes; tighter schedules, unannounced visits – a more systematic and conscientious control from objective inspectors. The Endorser makes no distinction between private and municipal preschools. Choice and queue system and presentation of preschools to parents are fully integrated on the website. Overall, the municipal organisation is governed by New Public Management techniques, for example through purchaser/provider models to create fair competition between the private providers and the public municipal preschools that are de-politized and rational. Ideological motifs and political judgement are

thus replaced by apparently value-free goals in terms of efficiency and quality. Benchmarking and “quality funding” (positive sanctions) are used as drivers of quality and competition through incentives and indicators such as the number of qualified teachers (which implies more resources to good preschools). The Endorser seeks to establish links between quality and parental choice through competition, where quality is measured through systems of consumer satisfaction.

Overall, the Endorser positions parents as consumers, and individual democratic rights and accountability is organised and mobilised through complaint and quality systems where consumers’ attitudes and satisfaction are carefully measured for benchmarking purposes. The consumers’, i.e. the parents’ preferences are an important component in the organisation of the LPQ in the Endorser-ideal type.

Concluding discussion

This paper has explored and analysed varying local translations of market-oriented ECEC policies with an empirical focus on municipalities’ organisation of their local quasi-markets. Our findings show that there are large variations on how municipalities act as quasi-market organisers. While this might be expected, due to local autonomy and contextual characteristics, the study has empirically highlighted, via organisational elements, *how* they differ, contributing to the literature on market-shaping public actors (Kaartemo, Nenonen, & Windahl, 2020).

The main organisational elements municipalities use to influence and shape their LPQs can be located within the regulative pillar (Kaartemo, Nenonen, & Windahl, 2020) such as organising membership (gatekeeping), monitoring and sanction (enforcing) and rules (rule-setting). But we also find activities within the normative pillar (Kaartemo, Nenonen, & Windahl, 2020) in terms of support and specific guidance offered to private actors, etc. To organise their LPQs, municipalities use and combine the elements of organisation and translate national rules and regulations in diverging ways. Some municipalities have developed rigorous and detailed systems for establishment applications from private providers (including local rules), as well as a range of monitoring activities and approaches, including sanctions. Some municipalities display explicit private preschool-friendly orientations and offer extensive support to both new and existing private preschools, resulting in distinctions between private and public being blurred. In other municipal contexts, the rigorous systems are combined with policies and actions aiming to balance or even hold back private preschool services in various ways, thereby emphasising the distinction of private and public preschool services. And even if some municipal political councils wish to welcome private providers they find it hard to attract such actors, as evidenced in the US context by for instance Fuller and Liang (1996). The construction of three ideal types served to condense various ways of organising local preschool quasi-markets. *The Frontier*, that is passive or re-active in relation to organising their local preschool market; *the Keeper*, that strives to maintain balance or status quo between both public and private providers, and the *Endorser*, who actively promotes, supports, and sponsors private providers.

Based on these findings, we would like to highlight three main concluding points. First, that it is important to acknowledge not only the variation but also the hybridity

that evolve from the ways in which municipalities engage in “market shaping activities” (Flaig, Kindström, & Ottosson, 2021; Kaartemo, Nenonen, & Windahl, 2020). This include how such activities are combined and how they serve to position both the municipalities and related stakeholders in certain interdependencies and relationships. It also includes how market shaping activities are combined and become hybridised within the same local municipal context. A municipality thus takes on different roles at different times and acts as both a Keeper and as an Endorser, being a local “market-police” when designing local inspection practices where municipalities aim to ensure that private actors meet quality standards, or as a “market-coach” or a “market-servant” by supporting private preschool providers in various ways. To highlight the different and often hybridised ways in which municipalities form the conditions for their local preschool market, we want to reconnect to the notion of market stewardship (Dickinson et al., 2022), as our results validate how local “market stewards [...] play an important role in keeping quasi-markets functional” (Dickinson et al., 2022, p. 898).

Another point to highlight is that research on welfare quasi-markets needs to be attentive to the sub-national/local actors and the contextual characteristics, as translations and actions from different stakeholders result in the organisation of different local quasi-markets also under the same national policy framework and legislation. At the national policy level, Sweden has far-reaching marketisation and privatisation in education but perhaps it is more adequate to speak about 290 welfare municipalities rather than one welfare state. Swedish municipalities are exposed to national regulations on the right of private establishment and quasi-market mechanisms for funding and choice in ECEC, even more so than for example Finnish municipalities (cf. Ruutiainen, Alasuutari, & Karila, 2020) or, for that matter, Swedish elderly care (Sivesind, Trætteberg, & Saglie, 2017). Even so, variation is still extensive in terms of how municipalities act as quasi-market organisers and the kinds of local markets they cultivate. The importance to include the sub-national level and variation “beyond the national” could also be a starting point for a potential Nordic comparative research agenda, where sub-national comparative analyses could provide additional knowledge on the processes of translation in local quasi-market organisation at sub-national levels in the Nordic welfare states.

Thirdly and finally, we need to understand and discuss the implications that emerge from local market shaping activities as they create different rules of the game that affect different stakeholders in different ways. Looking at the private providers, a small non-profit parent cooperative preschool has significantly less administrative (and other) resources to navigate a rigorous and complex municipal bureaucracy where demanding application rules, inspection and start-up assessments are to be successfully managed, compared to for instance a large preschool chain with expertise and staff devoted and trained for such work. In this way, market organisation also comes to shape and even promote particular composition/s of market actors. How different kinds of private actors experience the different local modes of quasi-market organisation presented here is an area for further research, that can be used as a means to further explore the relationships between private and public actors emerging from different local quasi-market organisation (c.f. Ruutiainen, Alasuutari, & Karila, 2020).

Notes

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2. The supervisory responsibilities do not include the current chapter 6 of the Education Act, which covers “measures against abusive treatment” for which the national authority, the Swedish Schools Inspectorate, is responsible.
3. Private actors may appeal municipal decisions on permits and in some cases administrative courts have ruled in favour of the private actors.

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