

Transforming Nordic early childhood education and care in times of marketisation, privatisation and commercialisation

Sara Carlbaum & Linda Rönnberg

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ABSTRACT

This special issue focuses on important facets of market-oriented reforms in Nordic Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC). It aims to promote discussion on interlinked dimensions of marketisation, privatisation and commercialisation in Nordic ECEC and their manifestations in policy, practice and outcomes. With contributions from authors in five Nordic countries, the articles in the special issue offer accounts of marketisation, including the organisation of ECEC quasi-markets and shifts in the use and function of parental choice. The articles also analyse privatisation by researching the delivery of private services and the nature of the non-state providers within early childhood education markets. Finally, the theme of commercialisation is addressed through research on the commodification of preschool knowledge within Nordic countries but also its export in the global education industry. This special issue highlights how a variety of market-oriented policies, parental choice and private actor involvement are evolving. Taken together, the articles illustrate connections and mutually-reinforcing mechanisms of policy and practice that contribute to the expansion of marketisation, privatisation, and commercialisation in Nordic ECEC. This special issue provides a call to continue exploration of how these processes and actors contribute to the transformation of ECEC in the Nordic countries and elsewhere.

KEYWORDS

Preschool; market orientation; private providers; parental choice; Nordic model

Introduction and focus

Market-oriented reforms of various forms have permeated education systems in the Nordic region and beyond, at the same time, as we observe a growing involvement of private actors in education across the globe. Key drivers and manifestations of this include, for example, the introduction of choice and consumer-oriented policies, increasing commercialisation and the selling of associated services and products, and a rise in demand for private delivery of education services (Hogan & Thompson, 2021; Roberts-Holmes & Moss, 2021). International research has focussed on the processes of privatisation, marketisation and the roles of private actors. The processes have also been addressed in an emerging and growing body of Nordic literature (Blossing, Imsen, & Moos, 2014; Cone & Moos, 2022; Dovemark et al., 2018). However, most of this research has generally focussed mainly on compulsory and upper secondary education. The processes in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) have received less attention, despite important contributions for example, by Ball and Vincent (2005), Brennan, Cass, Himmelweit, and Szebehely (2012), Dýrfjörð and Magnúsdóttir (2016), Naumann (2011), Lloyd & Penn (2014), Penn, Stephen, Ang, and Brooker (2011, 2014), and Vandenbroeck (2006). This branch of the literature is growing

and recently authors contributed international (cf. Roberts-Holmes & Moss, 2021; Vandebroek, Lehrer, & Mitchell, 2023) and Nordic perspectives, shedding light to changes in policy, regulatory dynamics and governance (de la Porte, Larsen, & Lundqvist, 2022; Laiho & Pihlaja, 2022; Trætteberg, Sivesind, Hrafnisdóttir, & Paananen, 2021, 2023; Westberg & Larsson, 2022), choice, segregation patterns and private actor selectivity (Alm Fjellborg & Forsberg, 2023; Oxford; Alm Fjellborg & Forsberg, 2022; Ruutiainen, Alasuutari, & Karila, 2021), and private actors' influence on policy and ECEC developments (Fehn Dahle, 2020; Haugset, 2021). This special issue seeks to contribute to this growing literature and promote discussion on the varieties of privatisation, market-oriented policies, choice, roles of private actors, and how these processes and actors are transforming ECEC in the Nordic domain, and to some extent elsewhere, through business models of exporting their practices.

Noting that various concepts are used interchangeably when referring to various aspects of market-oriented reform and activities, Hogan and Thompson (2017) offer a useful set of definitions of marketisation, privatisation and commercialisation. Marketisation is seen as an overarching concept encompassing “a series of policy logics that aim to create quasi-markets” (p. 2). Privatisation is regarded as a policy tool to facilitate and develop such marketisation, through measures, such as changes in regulations and institutional structures to open up public services (particularly here ECEC) to private actor management or delivery (cf. exogenous privatisation, Ball & Youdell, 2008). Commercialisation refers to the generation and selling of education-related services and goods, resting on an exchange-relationship between providers and buyers, and hence involves commodification of practices and products. Notably, commercialisation can occur independently of privatisation for instance, if a publicly run preschool procures services and commercial products. However, as Hogan and Thompson (2017) succinctly assert, “in many circumstances, commercialisation and privatisation work most profitably together” (p. 3).

The articles in this special issue offer accounts of how these concepts manifest and unfold empirically within Nordic ECEC. The contributions, from all five Nordic countries, delve into marketisation, via analyses of the establishment and organisation of quasi-markets, uses and functions of parental choice of preschool. The articles also address privatisation by reporting research on the delivery of ECEC services and the nature of the private providers, who range from small-scale operations to large corporate actors. Finally, the articles address commercialisation, through descriptions of the commodification of preschool knowledge and pedagogical models at home and abroad as part of the global education industry, as well as through sales of products and services to preschools. Collectively, the contributions in this issue illustrate important connections among and the mutual reinforcement of marketisation, privatisation, and commercialisation in Nordic ECEC. Next we position these issues in a Nordic ECEC context, then introduce the articles in this special issue.

The Nordic welfare state and Nordic ECEC

Since this special issue focuses on ECEC in the *Nordic* domain, it is important to highlight the core idea of a “Nordic” model or dimension in welfare and/or ECEC. The five Nordic countries share histories, geographical closeness and to some degree language. They also traditionally shared a welfare regime characterised by Esping-

Andersen (1990) as “social democratic”, with heavy reliance on the state for funding, regulation and provision of welfare services, including education and childcare. Prominent objectives and values associated with this Nordic regime included universalism, reduction of economic differences, gender equality, increased labour market participation, and equality of access to education.

An element of this concept of a traditional Nordic welfare regime is a Nordic ECEC model, with goals of providing accessible and affordable (extensively publicly subsidised) preschool, orientated towards goals such as fostering democracy, participation, belonging, social competence, play, the integration of care and learning, and equality (Einarsdóttir, Purola, Johansson, Broström, & Emilson, 2015; Karila, 2012). While there are still similarities across Nordic ECEC, questions are being raised about what the Nordic dimension consists of today and whether we still can talk about a “Nordic model” of ECEC governance (Trætteberg, Sivesind, Hrafnadóttir, & Paananen, 2021, 2023). Regardless of the perception of Nordic ECEC as a reality or a myth (cf. Krejsler, *forthcoming*) it still has purchase and applicability seen from an international context, not least in the ways private companies use the discourse of a Nordic model for commercial purposes (cf. Rönnerberg & Hinke Dobrichinski Candido 2023; Andersen, 2020).

Shifts in governing mechanisms associated with marketisation and privatisation have raised further doubts about the ongoing validity of recognising a Nordic ECEC governance model. Trætteberg et al. (2023) have provided a comprehensive overview of the governing trajectories of the five Nordic countries showing how historical paths and political choices have resulted in different manifestations and varieties of privatisation and marketisation. Here we briefly describe some of the main similarities and differences between amongst Nordic countries in the ECEC context.

Despite the social democratic welfare model, private providers have always had a role in Nordic ECEC, but to different degrees. Today, public sector ECEC provision is declining, and the share of children attending a private ECEC provider is around 20% in Iceland, Sweden, Finland and Denmark. In Norway, the share is substantially higher, with around 50% enrolled in private ECEC centres. The private providers are not a uniform set of actors, ranging from sole proprietors and non-profit parental cooperatives to large for-profit corporations – which may also operate ECEC centres internationally and/or be owned by large international investment firms (Trætteberg, Sivesind, Hrafnadóttir, & Paananen, 2021, 2023). Another major contemporary factor is growth in for-profit provision, which has reached different levels in the five countries, due to variations in nationally specific conditions and policy set-ups for example, in public financial cost coverage, regulations on profit, and other historically embedded legacies and circumstances (Trætteberg, Sivesind, Hrafnadóttir, & Paananen, 2021, 2023).

In Sweden, where a previously almost exclusively publicly operated welfare system has been extensively privatised (Jordal & Blix, 2021), one might perhaps expect the private for-profit sector to have gained a larger market share in ECEC. However, the growth and expansion of ECEC service provision reached full coverage fairly early, making it relatively difficult for new for-profit actors to enter (Westberg & Larsson, 2022). In Norway, despite a general reluctance to accept privatisation, non-profit providers have historically been major contributors to ECEC service provision, but in recent efforts to reach full coverage the country introduced commercial incentives and

invited commercial actors to enter the sector. This strongly increased the participation of for-profit actors and large corporations (Trætterberg et al., 2023), which tend to develop important resources such as networks, capital and knowledge in an exclusive fashion, and sheer size has enabled the private actors to influence policy decisions and governance in the ECEC sector (Fehn Dahle, 2020; Haugset, 2021, 2023). While such corporatisation is most prominent in Norway, this trend is also evident in Sweden and Finland, with close relations of private corporate ownership across the three countries. In Denmark, such for-profit corporatisation has been much weaker due to stricter for-profit regulations and different historical roots (Trætterberg et al., 2023).

Notably, in the Nordic countries the delivery of services is being privatised, while the funding and regulation are still in public hands, so both public and private ECEC providers must comply with the same national curricular and other regulations. The public funding of ECEC is extensive, through either vouchers or public tenders, and includes correspondingly smaller (capped) needs-based parental fees (Trætterberg et al., 2023). In all five Nordic countries, municipalities have responsibilities to provide ECEC and control private actors. Local autonomy is especially strong in Finland, where for example municipalities have responsibilities for setting policies for funding private providers (Ruutiainen, Alasuutari, & Karila, 2020). The extensive local autonomy has also resulted in substantial within-nation variation, including (for example) privatisation trends being strongest in urban, high-density, metropolitan areas and weak or non-existent in rural areas. Clearly, these factors are interactively transforming the Nordic model of welfare and ECEC, and the articles in this issue, which are introduced next, offer insights into manifestations of the transformations and the marketisation, privatisation and commercialisation processes involved.

The articles in this issue

In the first article, entitled “*We help Germany create greater equality*”: *Logics and rationales in exporting “Scandinavian” early childhood education and care*, Carlbaum and Rönnerberg (2024) address the export of private “Scandinavian” ECEC service delivery. This is done by studying how a Swedish education company exports its ECEC services to Germany, by analysing how the Scandinavian ECEC offer is represented to the German setting by the Swedish company. Drawing on interviews and documents from both Sweden and Germany, the article offers empirical examples of how private commercial actors can become co-creators of a particular desired future of ECEC policy and practice. The article also highlights how ECEC as a commodified internationally traded product reproduces and modifies discourses on “Scandinavian ECEC” in the global education industry.

The nature of ECEC as a commodified product for international export is also a central theme of the second article, entitled *Welfare institutions as knowledge factories: Danish “welfare export” of childcare know-how to China*, in which Andersen (2024) analyses how a Danish University exports its knowledge and expertise to Chinese settings. With “post-workerism” as an overall theoretical lens, the article pinpoints how ECEC welfare export is a phenomenon that blurs the line between “public” and “private”. A central argument is that welfare exports involve the use of approaches normally associated with corporations in public welfare institutions. In the studied case, knowledge acquired and taught in Danish higher education institutions is commodified

as a product while simultaneously creating a “market niche”. In this way, Andersen argues that welfare institutions are turned into knowledge factories.

Staying with the notion of the global education industry, the first two articles discuss the ways in which ECEC is promoted and brokered internationally by both private and public actors. In the third article, *Principals’ financial and pedagogical challenges when choosing programs and educational materials: The scope of the private education industry for preschools*, Dýrfjörð, Magnúsdóttir, and Bjarnadóttir (2024), address how such actors and processes become established and manifested in a particular national context – Iceland – and preschool principals’ associated experiences. General drives for datafication by educational authorities and the private education industry have shaped the pedagogy and preschool principals’ autonomy. A presented analysis of questionnaire data shows that educational and management programmes and solutions are widely used in Icelandic preschools and affect them in diverse ways, both pedagogically and administratively. The authors identify how such programmes have become so hegemonic in the field that they have become almost nationally mandatory for pedagogical work and used by almost all preschools. Finally, Dýrfjörð et al. show how this opens opportunities for the educational services industry in Iceland, where a weakened professional status of preschool teachers also plays into the hands of this expanding industry.

In both national and international contexts, there are important interconnections (and associated blurring) of relationships between private and public actors in ECEC delivery. The fourth and fifth contributions turn to Sweden and Norway, respectively, to focus on the central roles of a particular set of public actors (the municipalities/local authorities) in managing, controlling and dealing with these interactions and relationships. Municipalities in the Nordic countries generally have strong autonomy and extensive responsibility for ensuring ECEC provision and controlling private actors. In *The local market makers: Swedish municipalities as preschool quasi-market organisers*, Carlbaum, Lindgren, Benerdal, and Rönnberg (2024) analyse how 30 Swedish municipalities attempt to govern and organise their “local quasi-markets” (LPQs). The findings show how ECEC quasi-markets require extensive work and how contextual factors, governing principles and ideas as well as political views shape the LPQs. To illustrate and summarise the extensive variation in how municipalities act and organise, the authors present three ideal types: the Frontier, the Keeper and the Endorser. The authors argue that there is a need to discuss the implications of municipal market-shaping activities, as they create different local rules of the game that affect ECEC stakeholders in different ways.

Staying with the central role of local authorities, in the fifth article, *Governing early childhood education and care quality development among diverse private ECEC providers in Norway*, Haugset and Finne (2024) investigate how attempts by municipalities to govern ECEC quality play out among private providers in Norway. Through interviews with key informants they show how local non-mandatory quality and competence networks result in coercive, normative and mimetic pressures that shape quality development. However, they also identify differences in the perspectives of ECEC corporations and small private providers. The latter are dependent on municipalities for quality and competence development and collaborative networks, so they align with the local authority. ECEC corporations, in contrast, highlight differences between the municipalities and question the municipalities’ competence related to ECEC quality, and advocate for more national regulation and standardisation. The authors argue that the increased focus on ECEC quality in a diverse provider field may reduce

local municipals' autonomy and influence for the benefit of corporate conceptions of ECEC quality, and how it should be governed, implemented and developed.

The local setting and focus on ECEC quality in a field with both public and private providers brings us to the last two articles of this special issue, which investigate issues associated with marketisation in preschool enrolment, particularly how choice and enrolment in different preschools reproduce social inequalities. In one, *Class-based preschool enrolment – social stratification and quality differences in the Swedish preschool market*, Forsberg, Waddling, and Alm Fjellborg (2024) analyse patterns related to socio-economic class in enrolment in preschools of various providers, and the associated quality differences between municipal, non-profit and for-profit providers. They present statistical analysis based on a Bourdieusian classification scheme, and individual register data on all families with children in Swedish preschools in 2019 that reveals class-based segregation patterns. The findings show that upper- and middle-class families are overrepresented in private providers' preschools, both non-profit and for-profit. Further, findings regarding structural quality indicators in all Swedish preschools show that private providers' centres are generally smaller and have higher staff-to-child ratios than municipalities' preschools whereas municipalities' preschools employ more qualified preschool teachers with a formal degree and thus display a higher preschool teacher-to-child ratio. The authors argue that the increasing marketisation of preschools risk undermining equitable and universal access to quality for all children. Hence, they provide a more nuanced picture of Scandinavian ECEC as a universal public good.

The final article, *Enrolling the child in private early childhood education and care in the context of universal service provision*, by Alasuutari, Ruutinen, and Karila (2024) provides complementary understanding of the segregation patterns identified in the article by Forsberg et al. in Finnish contexts. The authors delve into the intricate motivations and justifications of choices to enrol children in private ECEC expressed by interviewed Finnish parents. The results provide insights into the frames – accessibility, pedagogical values and approaches, facilities, and security – that parents employ when assessing ECEC options. While accessibility is a key foundation for all other frames, it is often perceived as “natural” and taken for granted in parental accounts. However, the authors illuminate how middle-class parents have embraced their role as active consumers, considering pedagogical values, perceptions of emotional safety and child security, as well as the quality of facilities and natural surroundings, including the size of ECEC centres. Alasuutari et al. also raise the important question of whether the increasing size of Finnish public ECEC centres risks undermining the universal system, as parents with high cultural, social and financial resources use the commodification of ECEC to seek private alternatives that are more in line with their expectations and perceptions of good ECEC, thereby also reproducing inequalities.

Final words

The articles in this special issue shed light on central aspects relating to ECEC in the context of marketisation, privatisation and commercialisation in the contemporary Nordic welfare states. While the pursuit of the goals of universalism, equity, extensive public funding and investment in childcare are still prominent, the studies in this issue show how traditional universalism and equity are challenged by marketisation and privatisation. The ECEC quasi-markets turn the

upper- and middle-class families into active consumers using ECEC enrolment as a commodity. Privatisation has given rise to a plurality of non-state ECEC providers, and this situation put additional attention on quality and quality control issues. This attention to quality, paired with a discourse on schoolification of ECEC (Alexiadou, Hjelmér, Laiho, & Pihlaja, 2022) on school-ready children and subject-based skills in maths and literacy, is pushing ECEC towards increased standardisation. The articles illustrate these developments by drawing attention to several transformational factors and processes associated with contemporary commercialisation, including (for example) pressures on ECEC providers and staff to use certain digitalised tools and corporate ECEC providers to advocate for national quality standards.

At the same time, there is still strong local autonomy in the management of local quasi-markets and the articles amply illustrate how contextual differences within the Nordic countries result in large variations in ECEC-related experiences of families, providers and local authorities. Thus, it is important to acknowledge that marketisation, privatisation and commercialisation relate to and reinforce each other in varying ways also *within* each country. Such sub-national Nordic variation warrants further comparative analysis, for instance with a focus on rural or small-town areas. Such comparative work could extend our understanding of the interactions between marketisation, privatisation and commercialisation in ECEC and their sub-national manifestations in different Nordic settings.

In summary, the issue illuminates various aspects of Nordic ECEC's transformation, including potentially important variations in national and sub-national trajectories. Arguably, it may still be analytically relevant to acknowledge a Nordic dimension – a construction or a “reality” (c.f. Krejsler, [forthcoming](#)). We hope that this issue will promote further discussion and research on the varieties of market-oriented policies, choices, and the role of private actors evolving in the Nordic ECEC domain, as well as continued exploration of how privatisation and commercial actors are transforming ECEC in both the Nordic countries and elsewhere.

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Notes on contributors

Sara Carlbaum is an Associate professor at the Department of Applied Educational Science, Umeå University, Sweden and the focus of her research is education policy and governance with an interest in marketisation, privatisation, and juridification.

Linda Rönnberg is Professor at the Department of Applied Educational Science, Umeå University, Sweden and her research interests include education policy and education governance, with a special focus on evaluation, marketisation, privatisation and internationalisation.

ORCID

Sara Carlbaum  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-2554-1810>

Linda Rönnberg  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0209-558X>

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Sara Carlbaum

Department of Applied Educational Science, Umeå University, Umeå, Sweden

Linda Rönnberg

Department of Applied Educational Science, Umeå University, Umeå, Sweden

 linda.ronnberg@umu.se  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-2554-1810>