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Still a poster child for social investment? Changing regulatory dynamics of early childhood education and care in Denmark and Sweden

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Abstract

This paper investigates the regulation of publicly organized early childhood education and care (ECEC) in Denmark and Sweden, through the regulatory welfare state (RWS) framework. The analysis focuses on how alterations in funding and quality of care are shaped by governmental and nongovernmental actors at national and local levels of government. Through focused structured analysis, we examine how various actors have shaped the funding and quality of childcare in Denmark and Sweden, from the early 2000s to 2020, with special attention to the period during and after the 2008 financial crisis. In the aftermath of the financial crisis, concerns about quality in care were raised on the political agenda by various actors in both countries, leading to decisions to improve the quality of care. Yet, the regulatory dynamics differ: In Denmark, the debate led to a decision in 2019, to implement a minimum statutory requirement of regulatory quality standards. From an RWS perspective, this outcome can be qualified as “double expansion,” because regulatory quality standards, and public funding for childcare increased. In Sweden, the debates about quality of ECEC led, in 2016, to political guidelines about quality standard, but with no additional national funds, and no mandatory regulatory quality requirements. Analytically, this can be qualified as “regulatory-led expansion,” that is requirements for quality standards, although the lack of additional national funds suggests that it will be difficult to improve ECEC quality substantially. The RWS perspective, which focuses on national and municipal levels of governance, also gives insights into hidden inequalities between municipalities regarding funding and quality of ECEC, which are more pronounced in Sweden than in Denmark.

Keywords: childcare, Denmark, ECEC, regulatory welfare state, Sweden, social investment.

1. INTRODUCTION

High quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) enables women and men to participate on the labor market, while investing in children’s ability to learn and to play (Borchorst, 2012; Lundqvist, 2017; Morgan, 2022). ECEC in the Nordic countries is considered a flagship of the social investment state¹—focusing on skills development throughout the life-course—due to its rights-based universal availability and high quality of integrated care and education services² (Gornick & Meyer, 2009; Larsen & de la Porte, 2022; Nordic Councils of Ministers, 2019). Furthermore, ECEC is heavily subsidized in the Nordic countries (1.1% GDP in Sweden and 1.2% GDP in Denmark in 2019, compared to EU average of 0.5% GDP in 2019, Eurostat, 2021), making it affordable for families with differing levels of income.

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While there is extensive literature on ECEC (Eydal & Rostgaard, 2011; Lindgren & Söderlind, 2019; Yerkes & Javornik, 2019), there are several gaps in the literature. First, there is little focus on the longitudinal evolution of ECEC quality in a multi-level framework. Second, there is, surprisingly little focus on how actors involved in political dynamics influence ECEC regulation (with few exceptions, e.g., Morgan, 2022). Third, there has been scant interest in how fiscal restraint, especially during financial crisis from the 2010s, affected ECEC in the Nordics (Gregory et al., 2012; Lewis & West, 2017). Through in-depth case studies, this paper investigates the regulation of publicly organized ECEC in Denmark and Sweden. We combine the regulatory welfare state perspective (RWS) (Benish & Levi-Faur, 2020; Levi-Faur, 2014) with key concepts from the international ECEC literature (e.g., Yerkes & Javornik, 2019). Furthermore, we focus on the political dynamics among the key stakeholders that shape the debate and output on ECEC financing and quality (see also Morgan, 2022). The following research question guides our analysis: how have governmental and nongovernmental actors, at national and local levels of governance, influenced the political agenda about the financing, and regulation of the quality of ECEC in Denmark and Sweden, and with what type of regulatory output? We examine this longitudinally, from the early 2000s through to 2020.

This article is organized as follows: The next section identifies relevant concepts from the international ECEC literature and develops the analytical framework around the RWS theory, followed by a section presenting the methodology, including the case selection. This is followed by the case study analyses, each including a first, presentation of regulatory framework of ECEC, second, an analysis of the evolution of funding of ECEC and third, an analysis on the actor engagement and regulatory decisions around quality in ECEC institutions. The last section comprises a comparative discussion and a conclusion.

2. THE RWS—AN ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

In the following, we briefly identify key concepts from different literatures, including public administration and care literature, which we combine with the RWS perspective. First, the public administration literature points out that in the Nordic countries, funding and regulation—from decision-making to delivery—is organized in a multi-level structure. Municipalities have substantial constitutional and financial autonomy to make their own regulatory and financial decisions, especially in areas close to citizens, such as the welfare area (Daigneault et al., 2021; Greve, 2006). Various challenges and new political priorities are decided through consensus-based democracy, involving national and local levels of government, as well as social partners and other relevant stakeholders (Greve et al., 2020). This also applies to ECEC, where municipalities decide on levels of fees, and local priorities of ECEC vis-à-vis other welfare services (Eydal & Rostgaard, 2011). Following this lead, we seek to capture the political dynamics and decisions around the *regulation of quality* and the *financing* of ECEC. The focus on childcare as an issue of political contention has been highlighted in previous care literature, focusing on ECEC³ (Ellinsæter & Leira, 2006; Morgan, 2022). We focus on the dynamics between national and local levels of government, political parties, as well as relevant stakeholders, enabling us to tap into changes in regulation of ECEC in Sweden and Denmark. As childcare is often delivered locally, with varying degrees of municipal autonomy in different political systems, our study is relevant for countries beyond the Nordics, because all advanced industrialized economies, many which were hit by the financial crisis, are struggling to ensure parents can combine work with family responsibilities. Yet, parents are more likely to use ECEC if it is of high quality.

Second, the care literature provides useful conceptualizations around the key indicators pertaining to assessing ECEC. In our analysis, we use two conceptualizations developed by Yerkes and Javornik (2019): *structural quality* (including children's group sizes, the level of education of ECEC staff, child: adult ratio) and *process quality* (the play and learning environment, intensity, structuration of child-teacher interactions and teaching plans). While there is extensive literature on structural quality in the ECEC and welfare state literature due to available indicators that allow comparison, there is less comparative research on process quality, as there are limited or no comparative indicators (Rostgaard, 2018; West et al., 2020; Yerkes & Javornik, 2019). Yet, process quality has been central in the literature on the pedagogical dimension on ECEC (Skolverket, 2013). Also, good results on structural indicators are correlated with better and more meaningful interaction between staff and children. From a social investment perspective, high-quality ECEC is believed to provide the foundation for further learning for children, and by extension, for productivity on the labor market later in life (Morgan, 2022).

Morgan summarizes: “while ECEC programs mobilize human capital by supporting workforce participation, they also can help create human capital if they are of high quality and provided by well-trained staff.” (Morgan, 2022: 426).

In this study, we combine *structural* (and to a lesser extent) *process* quality with the RWS theory, to capture the implications of regulatory decisions of ECEC in an interplay between national and local levels of governance (Benish & Levi-Faur, 2020; Levi-Faur, 2014). The RWS enables us to focus on the political dynamics of ECEC regulation, which has been less researched. We focus on how regulation constrains and empowers actors differently, depending on the institutional setting. The RWS perspective applied to ECEC captures, first, the tensions around *financing* (financing of ECEC, from the national level and by local level resources, user fees, including the ceiling for parent contribution, which as pointed out by the ECEC literature is relevant regarding affordability). The second component comprises regulation of *quality in ECEC*. Concerning the quality standards, we mainly focus on *structural* parameters (i.e., level of qualifications of staff, the child: adult ratio, and the size of the group), as these entail budgetary commitments, and to a lesser extent on *process* parameters (i.e., requirements about skills development for small children in teaching plans, interactions between children and adults in the play and teaching environment). In our paper, we do not assume that these indicators can objectively and entirely measure quality in care, but we look at how key actors focus on quality, and on the regulatory decisions pertaining to quality of ECEC. Even if imperfect, they are proxies that give an indication about ECEC quality (Morgan, 2022; Yerkes & Javornik, 2019).

When merging these insights from care literature, with the RWS framework to ECEC, four theoretical possibilities of regulatory output, that is, the results of regulatory contention, are identified. These are theoretical ideal-type possibilities, providing us with a point of reference when examining our empirical material. First (A in Fig. 1), a retrenchment in structural quality standards (e.g., decrease in proportion of highly qualified staff relative to nonqualified staff, more children per staff), and a retrenchment in funding from national and local level, and/or a decrease in funding at local level, would lead to “double retrenchment.” This implies a decrease in *structural quality* of ECEC. Second (B in Fig. 1), an expansion in structural quality standards (such as a limit on the size of classes, a lower child: adult ratio, a higher proportion of qualified staff), but a retrenchment of public (national and/or local) funding, would most likely lead to an increase in quality, but could be more costly for users. If funding is mainly provided at the municipal level, there could also be inter-municipality differentiation, with more resourceful municipalities able to cover the costs of increases in quality, while the less resourceful ones may have fewer possibilities. Third (D in Fig. 1), an improvement of structural quality (e.g., increasing the ratio of qualified personnel per child), and an increase in funding from the national level to all municipalities, and/or by municipalities through local taxation, qualified as “double-expansion,” is likely lead to an increase in the structural quality of ECEC, evenly across municipalities. Finally (C in Fig. 1), a decrease in requirements for quality, with expansion of public funding, could lead to a decrease in user fees (Levi-Faur, 2014). Our research focuses on how governmental and nongovernmental actors, at national and local levels of governance have influenced the

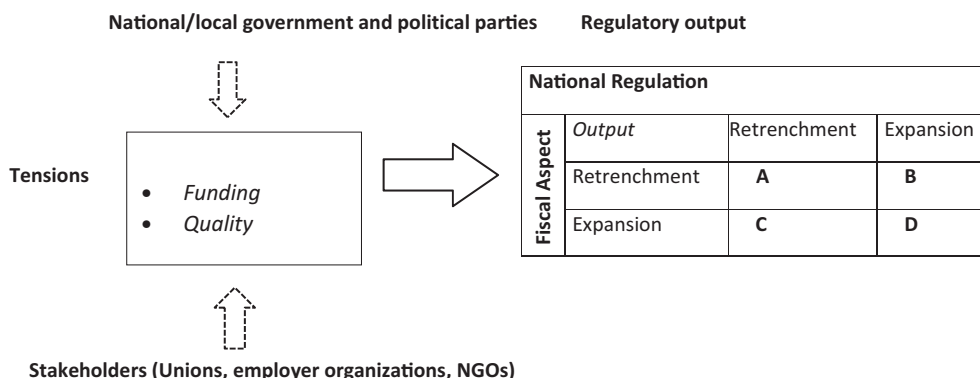


Figure 1 Regulatory tensions in early childhood education and care. *Source:* Own construction; the regulatory tensions are around public funding (mainly raised by national and local levels of government & political parties), and structural child-care quality, that is most relevant as this entails funding (raised by political parties, but also unions and employers, NGOs). Regulatory welfare state output adapted from Levi-Faur (2014)

political agenda about the financing and regulation of ECEC quality. The RWS perspective, focusing on different types of regulatory output, enables us to more precisely identify which regulatory dynamic was at play in the two case countries.

3. METHODS AND DATA

This paper analyses the RWS dynamics of ECEC in two Nordic countries, Denmark and Sweden. We select these two countries, as they are similar on a number of variables, in particular, they have tax-financed ECEC, which is heavily subsidized, making it affordable for citizens with different levels of income. Furthermore, it is broadly accessible, due to guarantees of places for children. This explains why both countries spend a relatively large proportion of GDP on ECEC (compared to the EU average rate, which is 0.5% GDP in 2019). Figure 2—on the share of ECEC expenditure as percentage of GDP in Denmark and Sweden—shows that in Denmark the expenditure has incrementally been decreasing, while in Sweden it increased until 2010, after which it has remained relatively stable. We seek, in our analysis, to tap into the regulatory dynamics behind these changes in expenditure.

Furthermore, Sweden and Denmark stand out as fore-runners in ECEC quality in international comparisons (Daly, 2018; Larsen & de la Porte, 2022; OECD, 2018; Yerkes & Javornik, 2019). This also explains why there is broad-based use of ECEC, contributing to high female employment rates, as illustrated in Figure 3.

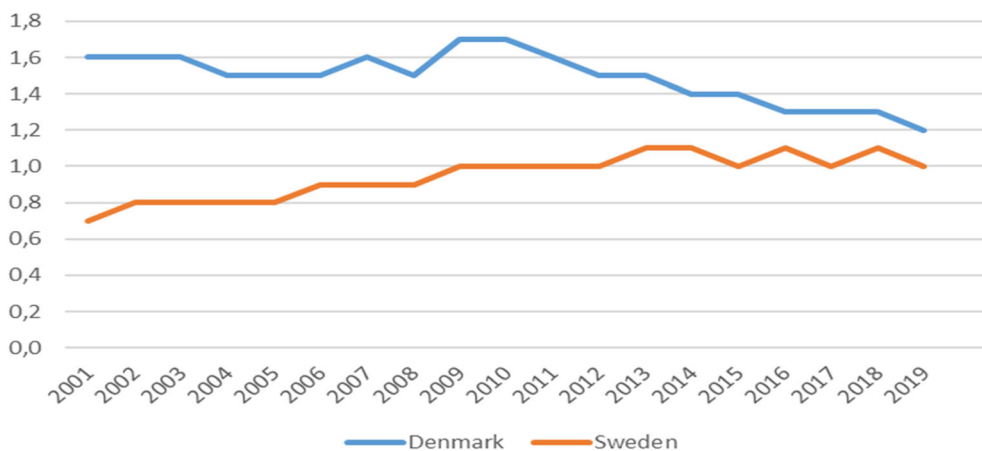


Figure 2 Early childhood education and care expenditure 2001–2019. Source: Eurostat (2021)

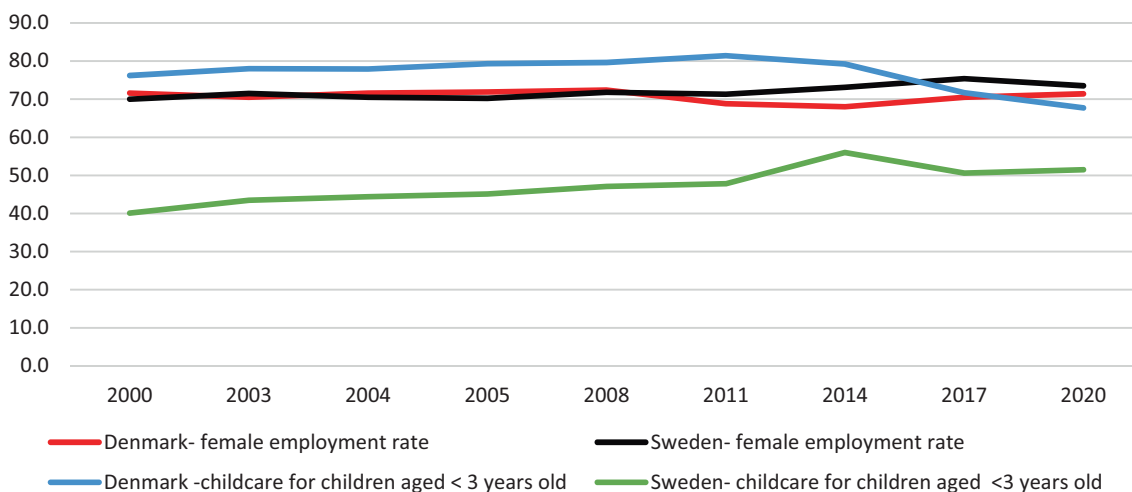


Figure 3 Children aged >3 year old in early childhood education and care and female employment rates. Source: Eurostat (2021a, 2021b) and Nordic Council of Ministers Database (2021)

Yet, while there are similarities in ECEC, there are also important differences: in Sweden, municipalities have more autonomy, including taxation and funding, compared to in Denmark, where the system is more centralized, as the national government sets regulatory standards, and also provides the bulk of funding to municipalities. Thus, in answering our research question, we examine whether the different national-municipal regulatory dynamics in Sweden and Denmark could lead to different outcomes, in terms of managing quality of ECEC.

To examine the regulatory dynamics of ECEC, we use the case study approach, which is based on carrying out structured, focused analyses (Bennett & George, 2005). This signifies that we systematically examine actor positions related to our key concepts—issues of funding and quality—in the regulatory dynamics of ECEC. Our data comprises a variety of policy documents, emanating from the central government, political parties, relevant trade unions and employers’ organizations were collected (see Table 1). We examined all the documents through qualitative document analysis (Bowen, 2009), focusing on how the actors addressed topics related to quality and funding of ECEC. We supplement this data with one semi-structured elite interview undertaken for this research (BUPL, 2021), where questions were structured around the key concepts of interest, that is, the position of BUPL on how funding and quality of ECEC has changed over time. The interview was recorded. We also draw on two other semi-structured elite interviews, which were undertaken for other purposes, but where there were reflections pertaining to our research. Where possible, we triangulate our data.

4. DENMARK

4.1. The regulatory landscape for ECEC

In Denmark, the central government decides on the quality standards and the overall budget for ECEC provision, while the administration and service delivery is the responsibility of the 98 municipalities (until 2007,

Table 1 Actors and documents

Actors and types of documents, 2000–2020	Denmark	Sweden
Central Government (reports, memos, directives, and bills)	Ministry of Children and Education Ministry of Social Affairs Ministry of Employment	Ministry of Education and Research Swedish National Agency for Education (NAE)
Political parties (party programs, party web pages, and party manifestos)	Social Democratic Party Socialist Party The Social Liberal Party The red-green alliance The Liberal Party of Denmark The Conservative Party The Danish People’s Party	The Center Party The Conservative Party The Christian Democrats The Left Party The Liberal Party The Social Democratic Party The Sweden Democrats
Trade unions (reports, web pages)	The Union of Public Employees (FOA) The Union for Pedagogues (BUPL) The Danish Trade Union Confederation (FH)	Swedish Teachers Union Swedish Municipal Workers’ Union
NGOs/lobbying organizations (reports)	FOLA (Parents Organization)	Save the Children The Preschool Uprising
Employers organizations	Local Government Denmark (KL) Confederation of Danish industries (DI) Danish Chamber of Commerce (Dansk Erhverv)	Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (SKR)

Source: Own creation of the basis of knowledge.

271 municipalities). ECEC is financed mainly through a lump-sum distributed to the municipalities on a yearly basis, while it is topped up through local tax expenditure. Wages and working conditions of ECEC staff are regulated through collective bargaining and labor laws, and pertain to all workers in a particular sector. The Social Service Act and the Daycare Act outline the overall regulatory framework for service delivery, including the division between the central and local level.

The main governmental actors are central government (Ministry of Children and Education) and the individual municipalities (with administrative units dealing with children and young people). The interest organization KL (Local Government Denmark) represents municipalities collectively in negotiations with the central level of government. KL is also active in collective bargaining with the trade unions BUPL (representing skilled ECEC staff) and FOA (representing low and nonqualified ECEC staff). KL and both unions support higher quality of ECEC (but also with adequate funding) as this also entails better working conditions for staff. In terms of political actors, shifting liberal leaning- and social democratic governments have been involved in the debate on regulating ECEC with the main political parties being the right of center parties—conservative party (Konservative Folkeparti), Denmark's Liberal party (Venstre), and the Danish people's Party (Dansk Folkeparti)—which support cash-for-care as well as more effectiveness, that is, savings, in ECEC. This type of policy supports a traditional gendered division of labor in caring for children. The social democrats (Socialdemokraterne), the socialist party (Socialistisk Folkeparti) and the social liberals (Radikale Venstre) support a higher structural and process quality in ECEC and increasing opening hours of ECEC. Besides the political actors and social partners, the interest organization, representing the voice of parents (FOLA) has been very active, especially since the 2010s. Such policies would enable women to combine work and family life. It is the left-of-center actors that have shaped the agenda, especially the structural and the process quality issue, which has been a contentious issue since the financial crisis during the 2010s.

The quality standards stipulate that ECEC should advance children's well-being and learning. In terms of *Structural quality*, the share of educated ECEC staff and child: adult ratio is comparatively high. The highest level of qualification is a 3.5 year university college degree to become a qualified pedagogue (45% of all staff in 2019). There is also a 4-year vocational education for pedagogical assistant (9% of all staff in 2019). However, the share of skilled staff differs—similar to the child: adult ratio (from 2.4 to 3.7 children aged 0–3 years per adult) across individual municipalities (EVA, 2020; Statistics Denmark, 2021e, 2021f). Since 1998, the Daycare Act has guaranteed available and affordable high quality full-time ECEC (i.e., 30+ hours per week) for all children from the age of 26 weeks and up until compulsory schooling. Regarding *process quality*, the Daycare Act has required pedagogical teaching plans for all children in ECEC since 2004, but from 2018 with a stronger emphasis on curiosity of the individual child, play and the children's collective development in the pedagogical work and thus a more holistic approach to learning (BEK nr. 968 af 28/06/2018). These teaching plans aim more specifically to develop children's various cognitive and social skills through play and by integrating learning in all day-to-day activities as well as ensuring stronger ties between ECEC and compulsory schooling (LBK nr 1326, 2020: Section 8). All ECEC institutions are legally obliged to develop such teaching plans, including reflections on how they ensure that their pedagogical learning environment involve play, staff-initiated activities, spontaneous activities, child-initiated activities and day-to-day routines with respect for the children's perspective, their individual situation and learning capabilities (LBK nr 1326, 2020: Section 8).

4.2. Funding issues

In the yearly budget law, municipalities are allocated lump-sum funding, which should ensure access, availability and *structural* and *process quality* of ECEC, along with other services. However, in times of austerity, the lump-sum to municipalities is reduced (Borchorst, 2009). The power of the national level vis-à-vis the local level has increased with the 2007 structural reform, due to budgetary limits developed at national level on expansive expenditure for municipalities. Since the EU-induced Budget law of 2012, there is even a possibility to levy fines, in case of breaching budgetary limits (Pedersen, 2016). During financial crisis that started in 2008, the municipalities received less funding from the national level. This meant that municipalities had to decide where to implement savings. This has, in some instances, led a number of municipalities to curb ECEC spending, for example by closing down or merging ECEC institutions into larger units, by increasing ECEC fees, or by relying on fewer

staff. This, in turn, has put pressure on maintaining the quality of affordable ECEC, which has in some cases led to double-retrenchment (Blom-Hansen et al., 2016; Hulberg, 2016; Nøhr et al., 2012). More specifically, in the years of the financial crisis, the proportion of GDP spent on ECEC decreased from 1.7% of GDP in 2009 to 1.2% of GDP in 2019 (Eurostat, 2021). The municipalities have been struggling to strike a balance between a restrained budget as well as high structural and process quality. Between 2015 and 2017, nearly one in three municipalities reduced their ECEC budget in real terms, that is, expenditure per child. In 2018, more than one in two municipalities increased their ECEC spending, while in 2019, nearly one in two municipalities again introduced cutbacks in their ECEC budget (BUPL, 2021; Authors' own calculations based on Statistics Denmark, 2021a). This suggests that there is variation among municipalities regarding ECEC expenditure.

Regarding user fees, which is important to keep low to enable availability across class divides, a cap on own contribution was introduced in 2006, whereby parents pay a maximum of 25% of total ECEC costs (Borchorst, 2009; LBK nr 1326, 2020; Rostgaard, 2014). With a context of higher budgetary constraint, ECEC fees have increased everywhere—with a few exceptions since 2009—but more so in the richest than poorest municipalities. The share of ECEC fees as a percentage of families' average income differs across municipalities and amounts to 5% of families' average income in the richest municipalities, to 13% in the poorest municipalities (authors own calculations based on data from Statistics Denmark, 2021b). Thus, hidden inequalities appear to exist as to families' access to affordable ECEC, even if a regulatory decision sets an upper threshold for ECEC fees.

Different key stakeholders, such as the unions organizing ECEC staff (FOA and BUPL) and the parental organization FOLA have, similar to the Socialist party, been strong advocates for increasing ECEC spending to secure affordable and available ECEC (BUPL, 2020; FOA, 2019; FOLA, 2020a; SF, 2019). They have for years criticized cutbacks in ECEC spending and pointed to its effects in terms of lower levels of *structural* and *process* ECEC quality, poor working conditions and higher stress levels among ECEC staff. The grass-roots organization, FOLA, has campaigned extensively against further financial cutbacks. Also, the municipal government organization, KL, has advocated for sufficient funds from the national level to secure affordable and widely available ECEC (KL, 2014). As a partial response to this, the central government has allocated extra funds on *ad hoc* basis to (2012: DKK 500 million; 2015: DKK 250 million). However, several municipalities have continued to curb their ECEC spending, increased ECEC fees, reduced types of available ECEC, notably childminders, and shortened opening hours of ECEC institutions, even during periods with increased funds from central government (FOA, 2017, 2020a; BUPL, 2020; author's calculations based on data from Statistics Denmark, 2021b, 2021c, 2021d).

The most recent reforms from 2018 and 2019 imply a shift on the one hand in the role of teaching plans from a pre-school approach to a more holistic learning perspective (2018) while the reform from 2019 stipulates a statutory child: adult ratio of 3:1, which should be fully implemented by 2024. To accompany this, additional funding has been provided, to ensure *structural* and *process quality* in the form of a higher level of skilled staff compared to non-skilled or low-skilled staff as these aspects are considered closely interlined with both *structural* and *process quality* of ECEC (Regeringen, 2020; LBK nr 1326, 2020: Section 1). This is DKK 500 million in 2020, and DKK 200 million for each subsequent year in 2021–2024 to ensure that the quality norm is met (Interview BUPL, 2021; Regeringen, 2020). The funding is calculated, assuming municipalities claim the full 25% of parental fees that they are entitled to claim. The debate on funding is closely linked to quality in ECEC, which has become prominent in recent years.

4.3. Quality of ECEC

The financial cutbacks in ECEC spending and subsequently lower levels of ECEC quality in the years after the financial crisis, have sparked political debates among key stakeholders and created tensions between central and lower levels of governance regarding standards for *structural* and *process* quality of ECEC. It was particularly a series of incidents with highly distressed toddlers attending public ECEC, poor working conditions, lack of *structural quality* (qualified staff shortage and understaffed ECEC institutions), along with lower levels of *process quality* (less time for individual child-teacher interactions, weakening of the holistic approach to learning) that pushed the theme up on the political agenda, not least during the general election in 2019. Both *structural* and

process quality of Danish ECEC, in conjunction with less funding, has decreased after the financial crisis, although it varies across the 98 Danish municipalities. The share of educated staff ranges from 42% and up to 65%, where the richer municipalities tend to have higher levels of qualified staff in ECEC. Likewise, ECEC staff spends less time with individual children due to time constraints and understaffing (BUPL, 2021).

In terms of *structural quality*, the child: adult ratio has declined with an increasing share of ECEC staff being alone with a groups of children aged 0–3 years. Likewise, *process quality* is under pressure with an increasing share of ECEC staff experiencing they are without enough time to comfort and to provide the necessary care or learning for the children several times a day or on weekly basis has increased compared to just a few years ago, ranging from 35% to 89% across municipalities in 2019 (BUPL, 2020, 2021; FOA, 2020b). Work-related stress has thus become more common among ECEC staff with nearly one in four educated ECEC teachers having symptoms of work-related stress in 2016 and their share has increased by nearly 50% since 2012 (AE Rådet, 2018). In addition, differing levels of *structural* ECEC quality can be seen across rich and poor municipalities. In 2019, three in four of the poorest municipalities have increased their child: adult ratio compared to two in three municipalities belonging to the richest municipalities (authors' own calculations based on Statistics Denmark, 2021d). Thus, divides between rich and poor municipalities in terms of this quality parameter seems worrying.

The deteriorating structural and process ECEC quality has sparked a lot of debate with the main themes being to introduce nation-wide regulatory standards to ensure a maximum child: adult ratio in ECEC institutions and to secure more educated staff as well as revise pedagogical teaching plans toward a more holistic learning perspective. The views are mixed, although all political parties and key stakeholders support better ECEC standards, but often disagree on the approach. The center-right leaning political parties opposed the introduction of a specific child: adult ratio, emphasizing that such decisions should be left to the lower levels of governance while they embraced regulatory standards on teaching plans both in 2004 and 2018, arguing it would strengthening social investments and subsequently prevent social exclusion (2003/1 LFS 124:201; 2017/1 LFS 160). Likewise, KL has also pinpointed that decisions regarding child: adult ratio should be left to local rather than central level, to avoid top-down regulation, and thereby to secure flexibility and resources being adjusted to local demands and needs (KL, 2014). However, they welcomed central regulatory standards on teaching plans both in 2004 and 2018, but criticized the reforms for being underfunded and thus fearing that it would affect implementation and potentially demotivate staff (KL, 2003, 2018).

The left-of-center political parties have previously been reluctant to introduce a specific staff to child ratio as well as teaching plans, except for the socialist party historically has favored a child: adult ratio and the social democrats supporting teaching plans (L124: BEH af 3 af 25/3/2004). This has changed in recent years, following the public debates on these issues, including the mobilization of parents groups, where several grass-root movements organized by Danish parents together with the trade unions (FOA and BUPL) and the parent organization FOLA campaigned extensively for improving the *structural* and *process quality* of ECEC under the slogan “Where is an adult.” Among the left-leaning parties, it was the socialist party—building on its historical position—that had child to staff ratios and a high proportion of qualified staff in ECEC as its main electoral pledge in 2019. The socialist party was the one that most unambiguously supported a strong social investment policy for all children of pre-school age, but initially opposed the idea of teaching plans on similar grounds as the social liberals due to the specific teaching targets for small children and underfunding (L 124 BEH1 af 15/01/2004). It was the former right-wing coalition government that introduced nation-wide regulatory standards on teaching plans, accompanied with additional funding in 2004 and 2018, respectively. Yet, it was only in 2018, with broad political support across the political spectrum (L124BEH3 af 25/032004; L160 af 28/02/2018) that the social democratic party agreed to introduce nation-wide regulatory standards and to expand the ECEC budget, in their governmental program, to gain the support from the socialist Party and social liberals to form a minority government in 2019.

Thus, as a counter-reaction to austerity (also reflected by decreases in quality of ECEC) and the results of several years of lobbying by the parent organization FOLA and the trade unions BUPL and FOA, and the more left-oriented political parties, different Danish governments took various decisions and implemented different reforms. In January 2018, the government decided to strengthen the teaching plans to embrace more holistic approach as well as in December 2019, to introduce a minimum child: adult ratio in Danish ECEC of one adult per three children in the ages 0 up to 3 years. The reforms on teaching plans, as central in *process quality*, are

already implemented with 75% of ECEC having developed such plans in 2006 compared to 94% of ECEC institutions using teaching plans in their day-to-day work (EVA, 2022; Ministry of Family and Consumer related issues, 2006).

The reform on child: adult ratio is to be fully implemented by 2024, although the government already started to finance this new scheme in their budgetary plans for 2020 and promised regulatory changes to reflect this decision in 2020/2021 (Regeringen et al., 2019, 2020). The Danish government also decided to first target the most pressurized ECEC institutions and accompany their mandatory child: adult ratio with additional funds to raise the share of educated ECEC staff. To receive additional funds, municipalities have to present plans to increase their share of educated ECEC staff to 85%, or at least 10% above their current situation (Regeringen et al., 2020). Unions, such as BUPL, considers the new nation-wide regulatory standards a “historical victory” and FOA recently stated that “it is much more than we have dared dream about” while the Parent organization FOLA stated: “all we have fought for in all these years will now become reality” (FOA, 2020a). They have also welcomed the idea of teaching plans, notably the shift toward a more holistic learning approach, but criticize the teaching plans for being underfunded, their initial emphasis on teaching targets for individual children and calls for accompanying the reform with minimum child: adult ratios and increased shares of educated staff (BUPL, 2003, 2019; FOA, 2003, 2019; FOLA, 2003, 2020b). Other key actors, such as the left-wing parties and the social liberals, have also welcomed the new regulatory standards and stress that they are pivotal to secure similar high structural and process ECEC quality standards. The liberal leaning political parties and KL remain skeptical toward minimum child: adult ratios and have raised concerns about their implementation, arguing that funds are not sufficient, that there could be red tape for showing implementation of the ratio (Conservative Party, 2021; KL, 2021). Also, the Employers’ Associations have repeatedly called for increased opening hours of ECEC institutions that match parents need vis-a-vis successive Danish central and local governments (Interview with DA 2007, 2020). Despite these concerns, BUPL assesses that the funding provided to introduce this provision will lead to upwards convergence in regulatory standards (Interview with BUPL, 2021; BUPL, 2020). The recent regulatory decisions suggest there will be “double expansion” with new nation-wide regulatory standards and additional funds to secure their implementation. At the time of writing, most ECEC institutions (94%) have implemented and use teaching plans in their day-to-day management and activities (EVA, 2022). However, in 2019, the child: adult ratio continues to be higher than the newly stipulated 3:1 regulatory standards for children aged 0–3 in 92 out of the 98 municipalities (Statistics Denmark, 2021d). Yet, in most municipalities, it appears feasible to reach these targets within the time-frame set by the government (Interview with BUPL, 2021).

5. SWEDEN

5.1. The regulatory landscape for ECEC

The main actors governing preschools in Sweden are the government, deciding on the regulatory framework and parts of the budget, and the Swedish National Agency for Education (NAE) (*Skolverket*), which regulates quality standards (Skolverket, 2020a). The NAE is also responsible for preparing knowledge requirements, new regulations, and general recommendations (Lindgren & Söderlind, 2019; Skolverket, 2020a). Hence, in Sweden, the government and the NAE together determine the goals and prepare guidelines that the municipalities should strive to meet (Garvis, 2018, p. 6). The municipalities are the main provider of preschools⁴, and in Sweden, there is a comparative larger proportion of for-profit institutions than in Denmark, where it is marginal. In terms of access, since 2002, municipalities are required to offer ECEC for children within 4 months, similar to the Danish case.

One of the main regulatory acts regarding ECEC is the Education Act from 1998, which introduced a shift from the concept of a day-care center to a pre-school (Jordahl & Öhrvall, 2013). In contrast to the Danish case, ECEC for 1-5-year-olds are integrated in one institution, although in separate sections (the children are divided in age groups). They are regulated jointly, rather than separately, and most children attend these institutions.

As in Denmark, wages and working conditions are regulated through collective agreements. Two main trade unions organize preschool staff across the country, the Swedish Teacher’s Union (*Lärarförbundet*) and the Swedish Municipal Workers’ Union (*Kommunalarbetareförbundet*). The former organizes mainly pre-school teachers (*förskollärare*) with a 3.5 years university degree while the latter one mainly organizes ECEC assistants (*barnskötare*) with three-year upper secondary vocational training in ECEC and leisure time. Thus, the levels of

education of the two types of pedagogues is comparable in the two countries. On the employer's end, the largest organization is the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (*Sveriges kommuner och regioner*, SKR), representing local governments. In addition, a number of NGOs such as Save the Children and The Swedish Associations of Independent Schools, but also parents' groups are engaged in issues regarding the development of pre-schools.

Political actors engaged in ECEC issues represent the whole political spectrum, including the Left Party (Vänsterpartiet), The Social Democrats (Socialdemokraterna), The Green Party (Miljöpartiet) The Liberal Party (Liberalerna), The Center Party (Centerpartiet), The Christian Democrats (Kristdemokraterna), The Conservative Party (Moderaterna), and the Sweden Democrats (Sverigedemokraterna). All of the parties have an agenda for preschool education, mainly focusing on issues regarding quality in ECEC and whether private alternatives (in which "freedom of choice" and "care-for-profit" are important topics for all the parties) should be developed or limited. To this end, the highly contested (re-)introduction of the cash-for-care scheme in 2007 has also been a topic in the debate, especially in regard to whether the reform fostered a return to a housewife ideal. Similar to in Denmark, the more right-wing oriented parties are favorable to less focus on institutionalization of ECEC and more favorable to free choice (Duvander & Ellingsæter, 2016; Lundqvist, 2011).

5.2. Funding

The funding of Swedish preschools is shared between the state and the municipalities, although municipalities have larger fiscal autonomy in Sweden, compared to in Denmark. State funds are paid through a block grant to all 290 municipalities, but it covers between 15% and 33% of the municipal revenue; the remaining income for municipalities comes from local taxes. Each municipality then allocates resources to various policies, including pre-schools. It is crucial to note that pre-schools and schools account for the largest part of the municipalities' expenditures (about 44% in 2018). In addition, direct state funding (*likvärdighetsbidrag*) comprises about 7%, which includes funding to increase teachers' salaries (i.e., structural quality) and for the municipalities to be able to apply the maximum fee for parents (see below for a description of the fee). Also, state funding is distributed via the Migration Agency for asylum-seeking children who attend preschools. The rest of the income comes from fees, that is, parents' own contribution (SKR, 2020).

The overall cost for preschools in 2019 was 81.2 billion SKR. According to the NAE, the costs for pre-schools have increased with 44% since 2009. This is in large part, because the number of children who attend preschools has increased with 17%, while the number of staff (full-time equivalents) has increased with 22% (Skolverket, 2020b).

A maximum fee for ECEC was introduced in 2002 by the then Social Democratic government. The maximum fee aimed to make preschool affordable for all parents, irrespective of income, and to enable families to combine work and family life (Bill, 1999/2000, p.129; Lundin et al., 2007, p. 3). The maximum fee is means-tested and calculated according to the total income of the household. It is overall much lower than in the Danish case. The fee for children between 1 and 2 years old in 2021 is SEK 1510 (€149) per month for the first child, SEK 1007 (€99) for the second child and SEK 503 (€49) for the third child (2020 data).

As noted above, the expenditure for preschools has increased over the years, due mainly to an increase in the number of children attending preschool. This is, however, not the same as saying that there have not been cutbacks in the sector. Austerity measures have been carried out in most municipalities over the past years, affecting all welfare services, including ECEC and preschools. For example, cutbacks in preschools and schools have been carried out in 6 out of 10 municipalities the last 3 years, resulting in increasingly severe working conditions and increasing sick leave among the staff. In addition, due to the cutbacks and worsened working conditions, more and more preschool teachers leave their jobs and change career (Läraryrket, 2018b; cf. Kallós & Broman, 2010). Important to note is that these cutbacks, like in the case of Denmark, differ between the municipalities, hence inequalities in terms of working conditions, children's group sizes and ECEC quality tend to polarize the country. Hence, as in the Danish case, differing levels of structural ECEC quality can be seen across rich and poor municipalities. The consequences of the cutbacks have sparked off heated debates. Political parties, trade unions, and parents groups have been active, mainly emphasizing the problems with working conditions and increasing numbers in the children's groups, affecting the quality of ECEC.

5.3. Quality of ECEC

Broadly speaking, ECEC quality entails the education level among pre-school staff (structural quality of care) and the physical environment and surroundings of the pre-school (process quality of care). The government and the NAE decide on national quality goals and recommendations, and according to the Education Act, a municipality is responsible for the implementation of the goals. The national goals stipulate that preschools shall provide “staff with such an education or experience that the children’s need of care and proper pedagogical activities can be satisfied. The children’s groups shall have an appropriate composition and size. The physical space should be appropriate”⁵. Hence, two main issues are emphasized in the debate on how to best achieve quality in ECEC: the children’s group size and the education level among the staff (both structural quality). In addition, teaching plans for preschool children were introduced in 2006. These are steering documents, aiming to provide concrete advice and guidelines to the pre-schools but they are also “political manifestos that express the image of school and education that the responsible politicians want to highlight” (Skolverket, 2013, p. 10).

While in Denmark, the debate has been centered around child: staff ratio⁶, in Sweden the debate on structural quality has focused on the level of education of the staff and the size of the group (which to a certain extent also includes *process quality*: the logic is that fewer children per group enhances the playing and learning environment). Different recommendations of group sizes have been in place since the 1990s. During the 2000s the recommendation was 15 children per group, but this guideline was removed in 2013, mainly because the recommendation was not implemented in the municipalities, partly due to insufficient resources (including lack of highly qualified staff) and partly due to local political priorities. In 2016, after grass-roots movements mobilized for enhancing quality of ECEC, the NAE introduced new guidelines, stating that the group size for children between 1 and 3 years old should be between 6 and 12 children, and the group size for children between 4 and 5 years old should be 9–15 children (Skolverket, 2020a). The average number in each group for all ages was about 16 children in 2020, but variations between municipalities are large, from 9 to 25. The average size of the groups of children between 1 and 3 years old was 12.2 children in 2019, while the average age for children between 4 and 5 years old was 16 children (Skolverket, 2020a). It is however important to notice that the average size of the groups of children have decreased slightly since 2008, from about 17 to 15.4 (for all age groups) (Skolverket, 2019). The disparity in figures across municipalities mirror the difficulties for the national level to govern the development in local levels, considering greater autonomy of Swedish municipalities, compared to Danish municipalities.

One reason the group sizes often are, on average, slightly larger than the recommendations is because municipalities are required to offer all children a place in pre-schools, and in combination with the lack of additional funding, the groups become large. This has, in turn, led to high levels of stress and increasing sick leave among the staff—similar to the Danish case—and a critique about the quality of ECEC. According to the Teachers’ Association, large group sizes not only increase stress among the teachers, but also among children. Parents are concerned about the safety and quality of learning (Läraryrket, 2018b). Although the NAE recommends how many children should there be in a group, the municipalities decide on the actual outcome, because the budget mainly relies on sources from the municipal, rather than national level. This means that there are variations between affluent and low-income municipalities, in relation to group size. There are also variations between private and public preschools. In municipal preschools, group sizes are smaller than in private preschools (Skolverket, 2020a).

Another major issue in the debate on structural quality focuses on the education level among the staff. In 2019, about 40% of all pedagogues in preschools had a preschool teacher exam, which is a high level of qualification (3.5 years University degree). The remainder have a lower level of qualification: 18% have a three-year upper secondary vocational training in ECEC and leisure time studies (*barnskötare*) and 31% do not have any education related to children. There are differences in numbers of qualified teachers between the cities and smaller municipalities (31% of the staff in the cities were qualified preschool teachers, and 48% of the staff in the smaller municipalities were educated) (Skolverket, 2020a). Thus, the polarization here, as well, is larger than in Denmark.

The many problems faced by preschool staff and the children have fostered not only critique but also protests. One important actor in this context is *Preschool Uprising (Förskoleupproret)*, established in 2013 and is today organizing about 26,000 members. This was initially organized by preschool teachers, protesting against poor working conditions. Their aim is to improve *structural* quality of ECEC, by increasing the number of educated

pedagogues and by reducing the group sizes (Förskoleupproret, 2020). They want to achieve a number of goals, for example reducing the group sizes (maximum 12 children between 1 and 3 years old and maximum 15 children between 3 and 5 years old across the country); adjust the group size after the physical space, increased salaries for qualified staff, which would make the profession of pedagogue more attractive. Furthermore, they highlight that children with special needs should have access to more resources. The *Preschool Uprising* is an important lobbying group—and is recognized by the Teachers Union and the Municipal Workers' Union—but their demands have not yet led to new decisions. The recommendations from 2016 are still in place, but are in the realm of soft law.

The Teachers Union (*Läraryrket*) is another important actor in the debate. They view the low amount of higher educated pedagogues as a central constrain to the structural quality of ECEC and a reason for the differences across Sweden (*Läraryrket*, 2018a). The Municipal Workers' Union (*Kommunalarbetareförbundet*) argue that, rather than solely focusing on the educational level of staff, personnel policies of municipalities and ECEC institutions are pivotal to quality. They argue that continuity and a safe environment (including smaller groups of children) are central conditions for the wellbeing and development of children. Hence, issues regarding process quality are emphasized.

Among the political parties, the Social Democrats put forward the importance of group size: large groups, they argue, pose the risk that children and their needs are not seen and do not get the security and learning to which they are entitled. The Social Democrats when in government (2014), reintroduced national benchmarks for the size of children's groups, which was abolished by the center-right coalition government in power between 2006 and 2014. They have also invested almost 1 billion SEK a year in smaller children's groups since 2015 (*Socialdemokraterna*, 2020). Among the center-right wing parties, a number of measures on how to improve the quality of ECEC have been introduced. In 2015, the Conservative party for example proposed (a) strengthening the reputation of preschool teachers, (b) introducing a headmaster-training/education, and (c) increasing the number of highly qualified staff (*Moderaterna*, 2015). However, no specific decisions were taken on this.

Overall, the national guidelines on group size from 2016, which can be considered a regulatory expansion, give leverage to the actors that would like an increase in quality of ECEC, such as the *Preschool Uprising* and the Teachers Union. Yet, the guidelines leave interpretations on quality issues open to the municipalities, which are constrained financially. The lack of educated staff is also a major problem for the Swedish preschools. However, overall, the guidelines signify that there has been stability in the overall rate of expenditure, although this may be partly because the number of children attending ECEC has been increasing, but without sufficient resources to lead to higher quality across all municipalities.

6. COMPARATIVE DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

In this paper, we used the RWS perspective, to examine how governmental and nongovernmental actors, at national and local levels of governance, influenced the political agenda about the financing, and regulation of the quality of ECEC, in two countries. Our findings underscore that both structural and process quality of ECEC was debated in both countries during the 2000s, mainly in terms of group size, high quality of environment for children and, in Denmark, a focus on teaching plans, as well as child: adult ratio in ECEC. During the crisis years (early 2010s), quality in ECEC decreased in both countries, if we look at the proportions of qualified staff, as compared to nonqualified staff. Furthermore, in Denmark the child: adult ratio increased and in Sweden, group sizes increased. Thus, the period of austerity—permanent pressure on fiscal expenditure—has led to a slight, yet clearly detectable decrease in the quality of ECEC in both countries. Such decreases in structural quality are also likely to influence the learning environment negatively. Subsequently, in the latter part of the 2010s, concerns about structural and process quality were raised by various actors, in particular left-of-center political actors, unions and grass-roots movements that have successfully set the agenda in both countries.

Yet, the regulatory dynamics differ, mainly because in Sweden municipalities have more regulatory and budgetary autonomy, compared to Denmark. In Denmark, concerns about depletion of quality. After actor mobilization, there was political commitment by the shifting political governments to introduce regulatory standards on teaching plans in 2006 and 2018, and a mandatory regulatory standard for child: adult ratio, agreed in 2019. Some additional funding has been provided to enable this implementation, which should be completed by 2024.

This “double expansion” is likely to lead to an increase and leveling up of standards in ECEC, in terms of structural quality, which hopefully has a positive spillover effect on process quality. Thus, the social investment component of ECEC is likely to be strengthened in Denmark. In Sweden, similar debates about the depletion of quality of ECEC, led to political guidelines in 2016, with a focus on norms about group size, and having the teaching plans as central in terms of child development. However, in contrast to the Danish case, there are no additional funds, and no regulatory requirement for implementation at municipal level. This “regulatory-led” expansion, through political guidelines rather than a mandatory norm, is likely to sustain a *status quo* in Sweden, rather than leading to a leveling up between municipalities. Our assessment is corroborated by expenditure data, which suggests there has been stagnation since 2016, rather than an increase in expenditure. Furthermore, in Sweden, it may be difficult to improve quality of ECEC, because the fees are much lower than in Denmark.

Overall, both countries appear able to tackle challenges through a participatory national-municipal system of governance, involving, vertically, political actors and horizontally, various stakeholders. Despite various challenges, what is notable in both countries is that when there are concerns expressed through organized interest groups, it forces decision-makers to take measures to ensure shortcomings raised—pertaining especially to structural and process quality of ECEC. There are, of course, some limitations of our study: first, we do not examine how the regulatory decisions actually impact selected municipalities on the ground; second, the study does not consider the extensive evaluation processes and documents on quality of ECEC, which includes not only the structural quality, but also process quality.

Our article makes contributions from a policy perspective in several important ways. First, since decisions about funding and quality of ECEC are inter-linked, as captured through the RWS framework, it shows that the period of financial austerity during the 2010s had a significant negative impact on the structural and process quality of ECEC in both countries. Second, it highlights the role of actors at different levels of governance, including non-state actors at municipal level. The latter have been pivotal in both countries in raising concerns about depleting quality of ECEC on the political agenda in the aftermath of the financial crisis. Third, the architecture of the political systems explains the different outcomes: in the more top-down regulatory system, in Denmark, quality parameters seem more easily upheld, compared to in Sweden, where guidelines are voluntary. This is likely to lead to a leveling up of quality of social investment in ECEC in Denmark, and stability in the Swedish case.

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Endnotes

- ¹ Social investment refers to the shift from a welfare state relying almost exclusively on passive transfers, to an active welfare state—still providing passive economic support when needed—but with an enhanced focus on investment in skills throughout the life-course. However, those that are critical toward social investment argue that, especially in countries that already have high segmented welfare states and labor markets, ECEC mainly benefits those at the upper echelons of the income scale (Pavolini & van Lancker, 2018). In the Nordic countries, however, use of ECEC is balanced among groups with different income levels (see also Morgan, 2022).
- ² In the ECEC literature, *access* refers to whether ECEC is a right or whether it is conditional. Furthermore, it specifies specific admissions criteria. *Availability* refers to whether provision is market-based, private or mixed. It also looks at the enrolment rates, distinguishing between full and part-time (Yerkes & Javornik, 2019).
- ³ Care literature is a shorthand for the literature addressing research on care services, including ECEC and elderly care. We focus in this paper on literature on ECEC.
- ⁴ The last major reform, changing the structure of the municipalities in Sweden, was carried out in 1971. Today, Sweden consists of 290 municipalities and 21 regions. The municipalities are responsible for providing a large proportion of all

public service, including ECEC services and education. They have a considerable degree of autonomy from the state, including the power to collect taxes.

- ⁵ The quote in Swedish: För bedrivande av förskoleverksamhet ... skall det finnas personal med sådan utbildning eller erfarenhet att barnens behov av omsorg och en god pedagogisk verksamhet kan tillgodoses. Barngrupperna skall ha en lämplig sammansättning och storlek. Lokalerna skall vara ändamålsenliga (Kvalitetsparagrafen i 2 a kap 3 § skollagen).
- ⁶ There are no articulated national or local regulations stating how many children per full time equivalent staff should there be. The number of children per fulltime equivalent seems relatively stable over the time (from 5.3 in 2009 to 5.2 in 2019; Skolverket, 2020a). Yet, this is difficult to compare to the Danish case, as it covers all children from 1 to 5.

Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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