

Garvis, Susanne; Lunneblad, Johannes

## **Inequalities in Access to Early Childhood Education and Care in Sweden. The Equal Access Study. Expert report**

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E-Mail: [pedocs@dipf.de](mailto:pedocs@dipf.de)

Internet: [www.pedocs.de](http://www.pedocs.de)

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Expert report

Susanne Garvis  
Johannes Lunneblad

# Inequalities in Access to Early Childhood Education and Care in Sweden

The Equal Access Study

**The German Youth Institute (Deutsches Jugendinstitut e.V., DJI) is one of Germany's largest social science institutes focusing on research and development around the topics of children, youth and families, as well as the political and practical areas related to them.**

The German Youth Institute is based in Munich with a branch office in Halle/Saale. Founded in 1963, its supporting organisation is a non-profit association whose members stem from the political and academic spheres, as well as from other associations and institutions dedicated to the support of children, youth and families. Its institutional budget is primarily funded by the Federal Ministry of Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth (BMFSFJ), and, to a lesser degree, by the German federal states (Länder). Additional financial contributions are made by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF) as part of the Ministry's project funding, and by various foundations, the European Commission and institutions for the promotion of research.

The International Centre Early Childhood Education and Care (ICEC) was established at the Department of Children and Childcare at the German Youth Institute in 2012. Conceived as a Joint Research Center, the ICEC bundles empirical research with scientific policy consultation and professional practice. The ICEC supports the international transfer of knowledge, political concepts and experience, thereby enabling Germany to draw on insights from other countries. In this connection, the ICEC is also actively involved in international panels and networks in the field of early childhood education and care (ECEC). The Equal Access Study is a comparative research project carried out by the ICEC from 2017 to 2020. The focus of the study is the accessibility of ECEC services in Canada, Germany and Sweden, with an emphasis on persistent access barriers at the local level of service provision.

The ICEC is funded by the Federal Ministry of Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth.

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Volume 1 – Research Concept & Study Design

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Volume 3 – Inequalities in Access to Early Childhood Education and Care in Sweden

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Abteilung Kinder und Kinderbetreuung

Nockherstraße 2, 81541 München

**Telefon** +49 89 62306-0

**Fax** +49 89 62306-162

**E-Mail** [icec@dji.de](mailto:icec@dji.de)

**www.dji.de**

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# Introduction

This expert report highlights the problems associated with access in a Swedish context. This includes the current problem of municipalities providing enough places for all children without this resulting in large group sizes of children in preschool. While access does not appear a problem (all children have a right to attend preschool regardless of their background), variation occurs across municipalities in terms of how much access children actually have to preschool (time allocations), funding for preschools (some municipalities have socioeconomic models and some do not) and the types of quality monitoring in place (tools are chosen by the municipality).

This report consists of four chapters. The first chapter is preceded by a short overview of the Swedish early childhood education and care (ECEC) system. The first chapter gives an overview of the statistical data on ECEC access in Sweden on the national and local levels. Data is provided on current enrolment rates in preschool. Information on the enrolment patterns of children from a foreign background is also presented in chapter one. The first chapter concludes with a section on the diverse groups within society with access to ECEC.

The second chapter provides details about the multi-level governance of ECEC within Sweden. This includes information on the role of preschool, fee regulation and costing, municipal funding allocations and quality monitoring of ECEC services within Sweden.

Welfare policies and public debates on Swedish ECEC are explored in chapter three. Swedish welfare policies are combined with ECEC policies to target child poverty. A trend towards marketisation in the Swedish context is also discussed. Current media debates are also positioned to illustrate the public discourse around access and (in)equality in Swedish ECEC.

The final chapter (chapter four) reflects on the overall relationship between the welfare state, the structure of ECEC governance, and access and inequalities within Sweden. Current challenges are identified as well as potential strategies for dismantling barriers. The chapter concludes with reflections on a national quality monitoring system.

The report is interested in two characteristics: (1) socioeconomic status and (2) migrant background. The following material on the national, municipal and preschool levels was examined as part of this expert report:

- Official statistics from Statistics Sweden (*Statistiska centralbyrån*), the Swedish National Agency for Education (*Skolverket*), the Swedish Research Council (*Vetenskapsrådet*) and other Swedish government agencies

- Reports, surveys and academic journal articles (in Swedish or English) that focus on inequalities in access to ECEC, multi-level governance of ECEC, and the welfare policies associated with ECEC.

### **Overview of the Swedish ECEC System**

Society is constantly changing and evolving. Changes in society impact what goes on in preschool (Bruner 1996). Over the past decades, dynamic changes related to preschools and society have occurred in Sweden and also within early childhood education and care in Europe (Oberhuemer 2013). Given the state of change, new ideas about the lives of children and their parents during early childhood will demand a significant cultural shift in the way research, policy and practice interact in the fields of child health and learning (Shonkoff/Fisher 2013).

In Sweden, preschool has been a key factor in the development of society and has helped to strengthen the political agenda on women's participation in the workforce (Hägglund/Pramling Samuelsson 2009). The Swedish government spends 1.6 percent of GDP on preschool annually (European Commission 2014, p. 1). In 2016, more than 500,000 children were enrolled in preschools, with almost 94 percent of children aged four to five years attending preschool (Swedish National Agency for Education/Skolverket 2017a, p. 11). Consequently, preschool is clearly an important topic for society, especially for parents and politicians who frequently debate preschool issues in the media (Pramling Samuelsson et al. 2014). Internationally, other countries are also interested in the quality of Swedish preschools.

According to the new Education Act, which entered into force on 1 July 2011, preschool is a separate school form and is part of the school system. The role of the preschool teacher has been strengthened in both the school day and in the revised curriculum. The municipalities are required to provide preschool for all children aged between one and five. The obligation also encompasses children whose parents are unemployed or who are on parental leave with another child. All children are entitled to at least three hours a day or 15 hours a week of preschool. The municipalities also offer preschool to all children for at least 525 free hours from the autumn semester in the year the child turns three (general preschool) (Skolverket 2017a). Night preschools (overnight care) are also available in 120 municipalities to cater for parents who work at night (available only to parents who are employed in night-time professions who require care). Night preschools are less common than day preschools. They enable all parents to work, regardless of their work hours. Children generally have dinner and sleep at the preschool, before being picked up by a parent in the morning.

When children turn six, they attend the preschool class. This is a transition year between preschool and school. Preschool class has been made compulsory in autumn 2018.

There are three types of preschools in Sweden. The first type consists of preschools that are run by the municipality. The second type consists of independent preschools that may be for-profit or non-profit. The preschools receive their funding from the municipality and cannot charge parental fees above the rate of the municipal preschools. The third type consists of parents' cooperatives that are fully integrated into the universal public system of childcare where the municipalities again provide funding. Parents play an important role in the running of the preschool and are expected to invest time volunteering. Independent preschools and parents' cooperative preschools are run according to the same rules and regulations as public preschools and abide by national laws and guidelines. Parents can choose which type of preschool they would like their child to attend.

According to the Education Act, the municipality will also offer a child a place at a preschool within four months of its parents lodging an application. Parents register with their local municipality by furnishing their child's personal number (a national identification number) and selecting five preschools they would like their child to attend. Despite the fact that municipalities have to offer a place within four months, the actual waiting period can be both shorter and longer than the four months, depending on availability. Earlier surveys show that between 1995 and 2009, there were between ten and 50 municipalities that did not offer parents a preschool space for their child on time, i.e. within four months of application (SOU 2013:41 *Förskolegarantin*). Some parents, who are not given a preschool place for their child, turn to independent preschools or parents' cooperative preschools.

The role of the preschool director is to support the pedagogical work, management of the preschool and educational development. In Sweden, there are around 4,800 preschool directors (Skolverket 2017b, p. 9). On average, a preschool director manages two preschool units. Preschool directors working in municipal preschools have on average twice as many preschool units to manage (2.8 units) compared to preschool directors in independent preschools (1.2 units) (Skolverket 2017b, p. 9).

The Swedish educational system is highly decentralised and gives the preschool heads (*huvudsmän*) on a local level significant responsibility and freedom of action. However, the preschool head's responsibility and accountability for this position are regulated in the Education Act, regardless of preschool type (co-operative, private or a preschool run by the municipality). Each preschool unit can have one responsible preschool head. A preschool unit can consist of several preschools. In Sweden, it is common for preschool heads to bear responsibility for one to four preschools, depending on the size of the preschools. Eight out of ten preschool heads have an average of 50 children or less enrolled in a preschool (Skolverket 2017b, p. 9).

In 2016, there were 2,300 preschool heads (*förskola huvudmän*) (Skolverket 2017b, p. 9). 290 were municipal preschool heads and 2,000 were individual preschool

heads. The preschool heads work with differing numbers of children. They oversee preschool directors<sup>1</sup> in the municipalities.

Open preschool is an organisation where children (age zero to five) and their guardians can participate without being registered. The aim is to offer high-quality pedagogical group activities in close collaboration with a child's guardian. The open preschool aims to stimulate children and offer activities with a focus on play and aesthetics. The open preschool is also perceived as a place that offers the guardians the possibility to come together with a view to creating social networks and building a community. In Sweden, it is common for the open preschool to collaborate closely with the social services and child and maternity care services in order to help meet parents' needs for medical and social services.

Swedish preschools rank high in international comparisons, although these measurements are more generally about what society does for children and families. The indicators that are compared are length of parental insurance, accessible places for all children in preschool, funding support from the government, subsidised fees for parents, staffing level of trained personnel in preschool (at least one adult for 15 children), at least 1 percent of GDP transferred to childcare and child poverty lower than 10 percent (Sheridan et al. 2014). Preschool teachers are also highly skilled. Most of the teachers working in Swedish preschools are qualified, about 40 percent of the teachers have a 3.5 year course of study at a university. Many of the teachers have a nursery nurse certificate obtained after 2 years at upper secondary/senior high school. However, the number of unqualified teachers (no training at all) is rising in preschool due to the higher number of children in preschool and teacher retirement. This is critical as research shows that preschool teachers' competence and the quality of their communication and interaction create different conditions for children's learning of content in preschool (Sheridan et al. 2014).

Today, changes in Swedish society related to preschool such as group size, inequality, lack of qualified preschool teachers, political reforms impacting the preschool curriculum etc. make quality issues more important than ever. In Sweden, research on preschool quality with the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS) has been conducted since the early 1990s (Kärrby/Giota 1994, 1995; Kärrby 1992) and in relation to children's learning and development (Sheridan 2009). For example, Sheridan (2009) studied 38 preschools and found three qualitatively different learning environments, namely separating and limiting environments, child-centred negotiating environments and challenging learning environments. The variety of learning environments of low, good and high quality created different conditions for children's wellbeing, learning and development. The results also highlighted

<sup>1</sup> While it is not compulsory to have graduated from a national principal programme, the majority of preschool directors have done so. It is compulsory for principals working in schools and high schools to have graduated from the national principal programme. From July 1, 2019 graduating from this programme will become compulsory for preschool directors as well.



tendencies towards a link between high quality in preschool and children's learning of mathematics and communication. It demonstrated that children under the age of three, who attended the nine high-quality preschools, were more successful in communication and language and early mathematics tasks than the children in the low and good quality preschools. Persson (2015) has also shown how the increased educational awareness of competent and well-educated staff in preschool has effects on children's wellbeing and learning in the long term.

In Sweden, education equality is viewed through the prism of 'equivalence'. The Swedish Education Act stipulates that preschool is equivalent when all children are offered a preschool of high quality. The concept of equivalence is based on how children from different backgrounds can achieve their potential in preschool. It does not mean that "all preschools are the same" but rather that they adopt an individualised approach to how they support the children enrolled (Persson 2015). The concept of Swedish equivalency is about how education supports all children and promotes social equality, especially within an increasingly segregated society. Equality has long been a key concept in Swedish education policy. In Swedish, the term has a wider meaning than the English word equivalence. Here, the concept has the connotation that children should be compensated for unequal conditions during their upbringing. Furthermore, the concept means that all children are to be offered education in preschool and school of equivalent quality.

In Swedish schools, equivalency is measured primarily by student performance. In Swedish preschools, there is no such measure and as national data is limited, there is no comprehensive knowledge of preschool equivalency. While *Skolverket* may conduct audits of preschools, this information is not available to the public. Within Sweden, there is a need for a national survey or measure of preschool equivalency (Persson 2015).

In 2015, a review of the literature was conducted in Sweden about the concept of equivalence of preschool which distinguished between process and structural qualities in preschool (Persson 2015). Literature was included from Sweden, Scandinavia and international research papers. The Swedish Research Council found that (Persson 2015, p. 8):

The focal point of equivalence quality then essentially becomes a question of how preschool staff understand, act, listen to the child, how they recognise a child's potential and behave in a way that the children feel committed, capable and proactive in their learning. An equivalent preschool then means that all children have the opportunity to interact with preschool staff equipped with the skills, knowledge and ability to ensure that the pedagogical relationships are of a high quality. Process quality is also linked to how well preschool staff are able to listen to parents and encourage their participation and commitment. From an equivalence perspective, it is important for the pedagogical relationships to be based on inclusive education for all children.

The report suggested that the conditions for pedagogical relationships in Swedish preschools either enhance or impair quality. For enhanced equivalence, Swedish preschools and policy should focus on:

1. Preschool staff education and competences
2. Preschool staff working conditions – staff-child ratio, group sizes, salary, planning time and space
3. Access to preschool

The report discussed the fact that preschools have a greater opportunity to promote social equality for all children if they are positioned in the wider social and societal context. The results suggest that a mono-institutional focus is not sufficient if one wants to understand and explain the importance of preschool for a child's learning and development, or what action is most effective in creating more equal living conditions for the children (Persson 2015).

There is a Swedish understanding of pedagogical quality. It is a perspective based on four dimensions of pedagogical quality (Sheridan 2009). The four dimensions contribute to the understanding of preschool quality and how it affects the conditions for children's learning and social wellbeing in preschool. They are (1) society, (2) teachers, (3) children and (4) learning contexts (*ibid.*). The four quality dimensions are derived from a meta-analytical process of deconstruction and reconstruction of research on quality in preschool (*ibid.*). Each dimension consists of qualities that are unique to that dimension and can be related to structures, processes, contents and results (*ibid.*). Depending on how the dimensions interact with one another, learning environments of differing quality are created. Thus, from a pedagogical perspective of quality, the learning environment in preschool can be seen as a complex system of interplay between policy, people, material resources and pedagogical processes.

This report helps fill this current void in understanding by drawing together the latest research statistics, government reports and academic research in order to explore the concept of equality or inequality in access to Swedish ECEC. The intention is to provide an up-to-date understanding of the number of children who attend (including children from diverse backgrounds), the issues related to access and current levels of leadership and responsibility surrounding Swedish ECEC in the municipalities. The report sets out the author's reflections on the current situation.

# 1.

# Inequalities in access to ECEC in Sweden

## 1.1 Introduction

The first chapter gives an overview of the statistics on enrolment and access around Swedish ECEC. Sweden has high child attendance rates in ECEC services. All children have access to ECEC and parents can choose between preschool, family day care or staying at home. All of these options are funded by the Swedish government. Parents also have the right to choose, when their child starts preschool, the type of preschool they will attend (public or private) and the hours their child will attend. These decisions are based on parental income, education levels and location.

Staff qualification levels and group size (staff-child ratios) are also reported in this chapter. The number of qualified staff (teachers and assistants) working in preschools appears problematic in certain locations across Sweden. The findings suggest that middle socioeconomic areas have higher qualified staff than low socioeconomic areas, leading to variation in quality. Likewise, group size also shows variation across Sweden, with some locations having higher and other locations having lower ratios. Ratios may be higher because of municipal requirements to enrol more children in a group (to reduce waiting periods) or finance (costs of hiring extra staff are too high compared to increasing group size). Both staff qualification and group size also influence parents' decisions about enrolment.

Sweden has seen a significant increase in children with a foreign background, especially with the recent waves of refugees. The enrolment rates for children from a foreign background seem to differ from those for children with a domestic background. Differences also emerge in terms of origin when it comes to starting times in preschool.

The chapter concludes with an overview of deprived groups including children from a refugee background. Segregation in Swedish society is discussed.

Data from official statistics is not available on quality (there is no national quality measure) or hours of attendance (they depend on the municipality and parental choice). Specific profiling by age ranges (for example children aged one and two or three and four) is not available either.

## 1.2 Enrolment rates

Preschool attendance in Sweden has been strong for a number of years since all children have a right to access, regardless of income, location or background. The vast majority of preschool children attend preschool on a full-time basis, with the average usage for children aged under five being 33 hours a week. Thanks to the full-time participation of children in preschool, the maternal employment rate is around 80 percent (OECD 2014).

Since 1975, the number of children (aged one to five) enrolled in preschools in Sweden has increased to around 84 percent today (see Table 1) (Skolverket 2017a, p.11). Around 94 percent of children aged four to five attend preschool (ibid.). The steady increase has been prompted by changes in government policy that have given universal access to all children. In 2016, more than 501,000 children were enrolled in preschool (Skolverket 2017b, p. 2). Preschool, however, is not compulsory with a small percentage of families still choosing to keep children at home before compulsory schooling.

**Tab. 1: Percentage (%) of children enrolled in preschool at the respective ages**

Year	1–6 year-olds*	1–5 year-olds
1975	10	
1980	21	
1985	32	
1990	40	
1995	49	
2000		66
2001		68
2002		72
2003		75
2004		76
2005		77
2006		79
2008		81
2009		82
2010		83
2011		83
2012		84
2013		84
2014**		83
2015		83
2016		84

\* In 1998, children aged 6 were moved from preschool to preschool class. The preschool class is a transition year between preschool and school.

\*\* The numbers from 2014 are still comparable even though statistical reporting has changed.

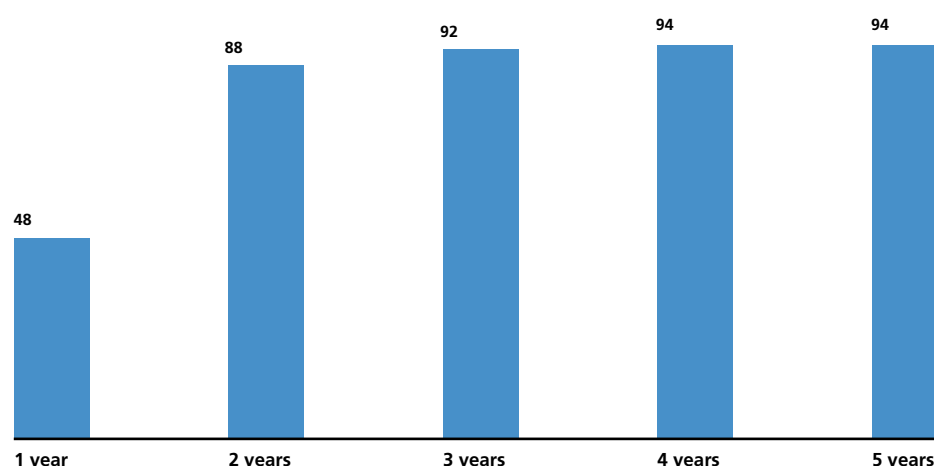
Source: Skolverket 2016a

The distribution between boys and girls within preschool enrolment has been fairly even over the past 20 years and has not been reported as statistically significant. In 2016, 48.4 percent were girls and 51.6 percent were boys (Skolverket 2017b, p. 2).

Figure 1 below gives the percentage of children enrolled in preschool by age group. The most common age to start preschool in Sweden is 18.2 months (Skolverket 2017a, p. 192). According to figures from 2016 (Skolverket 2017b, p. 3), 77 percent of children aged one to three attended preschool. The enrolment rate for children aged one is lower than for children aged two. In Sweden, preschool starting ages are closely linked to family decisions about parental leave and when children should start preschool. Children usually start preschool after parents have completed parental leave. Parents are entitled to 480 days of parental leave that can be taken until the child is eight years old. It is relatively unusual for parents to have private care arrangements.

One alternative to preschool is for a parent to stay home with the child during the ages one to three. In 2008, a childcare allowance was introduced at the rate of SEK 3000 a month. As at 2011<sup>2</sup>, only 2.5 percent of guardians used the allowance (Skolverket 2017a, p. 193). The proportion of guardians who used the allowance in 2011 was significantly higher in immigrant communities in Stockholm (10 percent) (Skolverket 2017a, p. 194). This group could be characterised as mainly foreign-born women with a low level of education who draw the allowance and, therefore, postpone the age at which their children start preschool. Some of the children in this category may never attend a Swedish preschool before starting school.

**Fig. 1: Percentage of children enrolled in preschool in 2015 in different age ranges**



Source: Skolverket 2017a, p. 11

<sup>2</sup> No statistics could be found for 2016.

Only 2 percent of children aged one to five attend a type of family day care (Skolverket 2017a, p.191). The figure has remained low for a number of years with greater emphasis being placed on preschool. The low representation may be because of parental choice, where preschool is considered to be about ‘learning and education’ whereas family day care is traditionally about ‘care’ (ibid.). Alternatively, there is also a social norm that children will be enrolled in a preschool to encourage socialisation.

The number of children with a foreign background did, however, increase to around 16,200 in the autumn of 2016 (rise of approximately 13 percent) (Skolverket 2017b, p.3). This means around 20 percent of children in preschool had a foreign background. Foreign background refers to children born abroad or children born in Sweden with both parents born abroad (Skolverket 2017a, p. 196). Around 78 percent of children from a foreign background attend preschool, compared to 84 percent of children with a Swedish background (Skolverket 2017a, p.2).

After preschool, children can start preschool class at age six. Preschool class in Sweden has recently been made compulsory and is based within the school system. Municipalities are obliged to offer all six-year-olds access to 525 hours of preschool class during an academic year. The role of the preschool class is to stimulate children’s development and learning, and prepare them for further schooling.

Almost all six-year-olds (98 percent) go to preschool class. This means around 123,000 children (Skolverket 2017a, p. 20). A quarter (25 percent) of the pupils had a mother tongue other than Swedish, 41 percent of pupils received support in their mother tongue (Skolverket 2017a, p. 21). In Sweden, children are entitled to mother tongue tuition to facilitate their language development. The increase in children who speak a mother tongue other than Swedish is due to the growing number of refugee and immigrant families over the past few years.

## 1.3 Types of preschool

In 2015, there were 9,800 preschools across Sweden (Skolverket 2017a, p. 12). 73 percent of these preschools were run by the local municipality whereas 27 percent were run by private administration (Skolverket 2017a, p.12). Private administration could include independent schools (for-profit and non-profit) and parents’ cooperatives.

During 2015, 80 percent of all enrolled children attended a municipal preschool whereas the remaining 20 percent attended an independent preschool (private

or parents' cooperative) (Skolverket 2017b, p.9). Independent preschools can be for-profit (private enterprise) or non-profit (non-profit organisations, parents' co-operatives). During the 1990s, independent preschools became more common in Sweden which enabled parents to choose where to enrol their child. Independent preschools charge parents the same amount as municipal preschools. Since 2005, the proportion of enrolled children in independent preschools has increased from 17 to 20 percent (Sweden Statistics 2016). In one municipality, 93 percent of children attend an independent preschool (ibid.).

The market share of independent preschools is perhaps different to other countries. Today almost all of the independent education providers (93 percent) only run one preschool (Skolverket 2014b, p. 16). The most common form of independent preschool is a cooperative (43 percent), followed by a limited company (38 percent). Other types of independent preschools include non-profit associations (9 percent), foundations (3 percent), private firms (3 percent), trading companies (2 percent) and religious communities (2 percent) (Skolverket 2014b, p. 21).

Another point for consideration is parent choice of preschool. Parents are given the right to choose where they would like to enrol their child. The reason parents often choose a parents' cooperative over a municipal or a for-profit preschool is their dissatisfaction based on experience with municipal preschools or parents perceive the quality in parents' cooperative preschools to be higher (Vamstad 2016). Some parents also choose independent preschools if they cannot be guaranteed places in a municipal preschool. Pestoff and Strandbrink (2005) have shown how parents with children at parents' cooperatives perceive the staff at municipal preschools as being less involved and engaged with the children whereas staff at parents' cooperatives are more motivated and proactive. Parents switching from municipal to parents' cooperative preschools is not necessarily an indication of poor quality, but rather shows parents having different preferences for different pedagogies and how much parents want to take part and influence the care provided for their child (Vamstad 2016). The users of parents' cooperative preschools are more likely to have a higher education level (82 percent), compared to users of municipal preschools (49 percent) (Vamstad 2007). The users of parents' cooperatives also have higher income, with 60 percent of parents in the highest income category, compared to only 11 percent in municipal preschools (ibid.). The parents in cooperatives may also be more in a position to take on the role of active participants in the cooperative. Many parents' cooperatives require hours of volunteering and service each year, often during work hours. A large number of parents, however, are unable to make the considerable commitment that is required when founding or opting for a parents' cooperative (Vamstad 2016). This may mean that only certain types of parents can actually choose a parents' cooperative in Sweden.

Access to certain types of preschools can be problematic in some Swedish regions. While most of the parents' cooperative preschools are to be found nowadays in

the suburbs of big cities (unmet demand has meant a growth in parents setting up preschools), some of the initial parents' cooperatives were created in rural areas (limited supply where parents did not have access to municipal preschools). For example, some municipalities in rural areas struggle to provide social services for all children and families when communities are few and far between. When parents are given a preschool place they may be expected to commute to the preschool. The closest municipal preschool can be up to 50 kilometres away prompting parents to create a parents' cooperative preschool instead of having long travel times every day (Vamstad 2016). One of the oldest parents' cooperative preschools is located in the rural area of Hunge, in the municipality of Bräcke (Glesbydsverket 1995). Parents did not want to make a 25 km trip to the local municipal preschool and decided to set up their own preschool within the community. Parents today are given the right to form new parents' cooperative preschools if there is a community need.

## 1.4 Group size

Group size in Swedish preschool is determined by the preschool and the municipality. Sometimes groups can have children aged one to five whereas other groups may separate children into age ranges. The decision about organisation is made at the local level (municipality). Large preschool group size has been an important discussion point in Sweden in recent years. Significant media and research attention has been given to the issue that groups have too many children. In 2017, Skolverket (2017, p. 12) reported that the size of groups in preschool was 15.9 children on average. With children aged one to three, the average size was 12.8. Many parents are concerned that the group sizes are too big to allow proper interaction, supervision and safety, especially for the youngest children in care.

Group size is related to access. In some municipalities, preschools increase group size to meet the four-month deadline for finding children a place. Similarly, some preschools increase group size to generate extra income for the preschool. Larger group size may also be caused by the costs of hiring staff in preschool. For example, rather than employ two qualified preschool teachers and have a smaller group size, some preschools may have a larger group with one qualified preschool teacher. This reduces the costs of a qualified preschool teacher to one instead of two.

The statistics, however, suggest that the size of child groups has remained relatively unchanged for many years (even though enrolment has increased). Between 1990 and the beginning of the 2000s, the average group size in preschool increased from 14.4 children to just over 17. Since 2006, group size has remained relatively constant at just under 17 children (Skolverket 2017a, p. 12). These current averages, however,



are above the new benchmarks set by the National Agency for Education in 2016. The National Agency for Education recommended children aged one to three should be in groups of six to twelve children whereas children aged four to five should be in groups of nine to 15 children (SKOLFS 2017:6). These, however, are only recommendations. The municipality and preschool are free to decide about group size.

Group size is dependent on the area. In 2016, there were ten children per preschool teacher in rural areas whereas in suburban metropolitan areas there were 17 children per preschool teacher (Skolverket 2017a). This suggests that the ratios of adults to children are lower in rural areas than in metropolitan areas. Municipalities can choose group size within each of the preschools. Often decisions about group size are based on economic situations in the municipality. Sometimes it can be too expensive to employ an extra adult to bring down the group size ratio. One concern is that a recent school inspection survey of preschools (Skolinspektionen 2016a) found that only one-third of municipalities in Sweden took socioeconomic factors into account when allocating money to preschool for the year (Skolinspektionen 2016b). These municipalities were usually larger in size and had a socioeconomic distribution model. The remaining two-thirds of municipalities made funding decisions about preschools regardless of socioeconomic status, without a socioeconomic distribution model. If a preschool needed more resources because of socioeconomic status (including characteristics of the school population such as migrant background), this was not considered in the decision making for the year. This means that if a preschool wanted more money to bring down group size, some municipalities would not take the extra cost into account.

One explanation for the lack of understanding of socioeconomic factors has been how municipalities formulate specific goals for allocating resources to preschools. Municipalities are uncertain about what they want in terms of quality work, what this looks like in preschool and how they can follow up to determine the potential effects of change based on socioeconomic models.

## 1.5 Preschool staff characteristics

Concerns have been raised about the level of qualified staff working in Swedish preschools. Parents are worried that not all staff have the right qualification for teaching young children and may not understand the necessary pedagogy. Concerns about safety and supervision are also raised by parents. The data suggests that qualified preschool teachers work in middle socioeconomic status areas whereas unqualified preschool teachers work in low socioeconomic areas. Consequently, the quality of early childhood provision varies.

In Swedish preschools, it is the role of teachers and staff to stimulate and support children's development and learning. According to the Education Act, the preschool teacher is responsible for teaching. Preschool directors are to employ qualified preschool teachers for teaching activities. In 2011, requirements for preschool teacher credentials were introduced in order to facilitate employment without a time limit. In 2015 105,800 adults were employed to work in preschools (Skolverket 2017b, p. 7). Around 39 percent of preschool employees have an accepted teacher qualification, 3 percent less than the previous year (*ibid.*). Around 28 percent of staff (teachers or assistants) working in the preschool did not have any training in working with children (increase of 3 percent over the previous year) (*ibid.*). The other staff have a qualification as an assistant (certificate qualification) (Skolverket 2017a). In independent schools, the proportion of staff without any experience was 40 percent whereas in municipal preschools it was closer to 25 percent. The highest proportion of staff with qualifications (50 percent) was found in rural municipalities whereas in large city areas the percentage was around 30 percent (Skolverket 2017b, p. 7). Staff in middle-class areas appeared to have more qualifications than staff in low socioeconomic areas. The variation in staff qualification based on location or economic area highlights differences in the quality of early childhood services in Sweden and contributes to parent decisions about whether to send their child to preschools in their area.

## 1.6 Parental income and education levels

Parental income appears to influence when children start preschool and their hours of attendance. Parents with high incomes have greater opportunities to take longer parental leave by balancing their own family's finances with the government parental leave scheme (Duvander 2006). Alternatively, high-income parents may also be forced to return to the workforce earlier if they are used to a higher standard of living than the parental leave rate or if there is a fear that absence from work could harm their career (*ibid.*).

Lower-income families may also have a weaker connection with the labour market. For some, it may mean they do not have a job to return to after parental leave. This may also delay preschool starting times (Duvander 2006). Since 2001/2002 in Sweden, parents on parental leave or who are unemployed have the right to three hours a day (15 hours a week) at preschool for their child. The goal here is either to assist all parents seeking a job or to support parents who are also at home on parental leave with a younger sibling.

Table 2 presents the average age of starting preschool based on the parents 'disposable income'. Parental income has been divided into deciles, i.e. income has been grouped into ten equal groups. There are relatively small differences between income groups in terms of when children start preschool (Skolverket 2017a, p. 195). Children in families with the lowest income begin later. For families in the lowest income group, the average start is 22.3 months (ibid.). The median age of starting preschool drops for children in families with middle income and then increases for families with high income.

**Tab. 2: Average age of starting preschool and family's disposable income in 2015**

Family's disposable income (decile)	Median age in months
1 (low)	22.3
2	19.3
3	18.0
4	17.7
5	17.3
6	17.4
7	17.5
8	17.8
9	18.1
10 (high)	18.1

Source: Skolverket 2017a, p. 194

Parent education levels are a contributory factor to preschool starting age as previously mentioned (Skolverket 2017a, p. 193), similar to parental income. Children born to parents with lower levels of education start preschool later. Parents with post-secondary or postgraduate education also send their children to preschool later compared to parents with secondary education. One explanation could be that parents with higher levels of education have more flexible work situations (Skolverket 2017a, p. 195). They are able to spend more time with the child before they start preschool.

## 1.7 Children's foreign background

Differences in attendance are also shown for five-year-olds based on foreign background. Table 3 gives the percentage of children enrolled in preschool at age five from different backgrounds<sup>3</sup>.

<sup>3</sup> No data are available for age ranges under the age of five.

**Tab. 3: Percentage of children enrolled based on background in Sweden**

	% of children aged 5
Foreign born	76
Domestic born with two foreign-born parents	91
Domestic born with a domestic-born parent and a foreign-born parent	93
Domestic born with two domestic-born parents	97

Adapted from original Source: Skolverket 2017a, p. 19

The Swedish National Agency for Education (Skolverket 2017a, p.196) also reports that children born abroad generally start preschool later than children born in Sweden. Children who are older when they immigrated appear to start preschool later than children who are younger. Table 4 gives the average age when children with a foreign background start preschool. The Swedish National Agency for Education (ibid.) notes that this finding relates to data analysed as at October 15, 2015. This means that most of the children who came to Sweden during the major influx in August 2015 probably did not start preschool during 2015 and are/were not, therefore, included in the analysis.

**Tab. 4: Average age of starting preschool for foreign-born children in 2010**

Region	Average starting age at preschool (months)	Children's average age at immigration (months)
Middle East	38.8	30.5
West Africa	33.5	26.7
Central, East and South Africa	34.4	26.1
North Africa	34.1	25.4
Rest of Europe	33.7	24.8
Oceania	32.9	24.1
EU countries	32.5	24.1
Asia	33.1	23.8
Central and South America	29.8	22.0
North America	29.3	21.9
Scandinavia	30.0	21.6

Source: Skolverket 2017a, p. 197

The national statistics also indicate that there are differences between the various groups. Children with a Middle East background start preschool at an average age of nearly 39 months whereas children with a Scandinavian background start preschool on average at 30 months.

There are major regional differences in the proportion of newly arrived immigrant children across Sweden. The percentage of newly arrived immigrant children ranges from 1 to 28 percent across the municipalities (Skolverket 2017b, p. 3). The highest proportion of newly arrived immigrant children is to be found in rural and regional municipalities (on average around nine percent) (Skolverket 2017b, p. 4). In urban and suburban areas, around three percent of children are newly arrived immigrants. Municipal preschools also have a higher proportion of enrolled children who are newly arrived immigrants than independent preschools and parents' cooperatives (ibid.).

## 1.8 Deprived groups

Research and official reports reveal that many children with a family history of migration are living under difficult conditions compared with the rest of the population. In most medium-sized and large cities in Sweden, there is currently a housing shortage. This means that rental costs and housing prices have risen sharply in recent decades. This is a situation that in itself generates economic and ethnic segregation in the housing market. The consequence is that refugees can only find an apartment in the most disadvantaged areas in major cities. This has contributed to a high concentration of people with limited economic resources and few connections to mainstream society living in areas that, in addition, are often isolated geographically from the central areas of the cities. In Sweden and the other Nordic countries, low-status areas are suburban areas. "The term 'suburbs' here is understood to refer to areas that typically are at the city outskirts with public housing and a large representation of people with immigrant backgrounds and low-income" (Öhrn 2012, p. 46). This can be compared to the United States and the United Kingdom, where schools with poverty and problems are often labelled inner-city schools. In Sweden, these "bad" neighbourhoods were built in the 1960s and early 1970s to provide housing for the working class and migrant labourers. Today, these neighbourhoods are known as 'immigrant areas', where sometimes up to 50 percent of the residents are on income support.

The segregation on the residential market has created tensions around school choice based on neighbourhood. School choice has to do with what types of peers a child will have. As such, location has become a strong signifier of class and ethnicity. Urban areas with residents who have low income, poor education and an immigrant background are often presented as being deprived and unsafe areas. Preschools and schools in these areas face a constant risk of losing children with high social and cultural capital to areas deemed to offer better quality. A neighbourhood with the reputation of being an "immigrant neighbourhood" is thus at risk of becoming

unattractive for people born in Sweden from a middle-class background. Preschool and schools in these areas run the risk of a continuous outflow of children and students, fewer resources, an even worse reputation, cuts in resources and difficulties in recruiting staff (Lunneblad et al. 2017).

Both private and municipal preschools operate in neighbourhoods presented as being deprived. The preschools have the same role as all preschools in Sweden – to provide access for all children. Decisions about funding and resource allocation are made on the municipal level. The municipality, depending on its decision making around preschool and whether or not it has a socioeconomic resource model, may or may not provide extra support for preschools in these areas.

## 1.9 Refugees

In Sweden, refugee children who have been given a residence permit are entitled to an introduction into Swedish society. Every municipality that receives refugees is responsible for drawing up an individual introduction plan for each individual child. The introduction plan is to be worked out in collaboration with the child's guardians and the institutions participating in the introduction. The introduction period extends over two to three years. It is initiated when the child's guardian reaches an agreement with the parties responsible for the introduction. The agreement is usually planned in collaboration with several partners, such as the preschool, the school and the unit responsible for civic information. However, additional local stakeholders, such as different voluntary organisations, may also participate. The preschool has a particular responsibility for children who have not yet begun school (The State of Public Investigations (SOU) 2010, p.16).

Providing new arrivals with a quality education is a major challenge for the Swedish education system. In 2015, around 70,000 asylum-seeking children arrived in Sweden (Migrationsverket 2017). Since then, the number of new arrivals has fallen sharply as a result of a more restrictive immigration policy. In 2016 there were approximately 29,000 asylum seekers of whom 11,000 were children. The school system has focussed its efforts on supporting the new arrivals of children both in the short and long term. The time of entry into preschool is dependent on the organisation within the municipality. In Sweden, each citizen has a personal number, which is the year, month and date of birth plus four control numbers. This is also the situation for children that are refugees. For staff in the municipality managing the queue for preschool, it is often difficult to obtain information about children as the only information given is the personal number. This means that it is difficult to give priority to certain groups in society. There is also a strong policy that children

should only be given priority access to preschool places (not having to queue for preschool) in extreme cases. This means that the majority of children have to follow the queue system for municipal preschools.

Preschools are responsible for child-focused integration policies. Previously integration activities were organised on the municipal level for all children. The change in focus to being provider specific was intended to give preschools more independence in their support for integration.

For many refugee children and families transition to the Swedish preschool is the first encounter with a Swedish institution and members of Swedish society. The relationship and initial trust between child, family and preschool are important for all sides. This can be extremely complex for some families and their children if they have traumatic experiences from war and from their time as refugees. Angel and Hjern (2004) suggest that preschool is one of the most important initiatives for the development and learning needs of newly arrived children. Preschool provides newly arrived children with a structure in everyday life where both children and parents can access the support they need. It is also an opportunity for parents to meet other adults – an important resource for families who have left their old network behind and have not yet had time to establish new ones. Start days, contact days, parent-teacher meetings, relationships with staff and other activities are natural opportunities for parents to get to know other adults within the preschool and society (Lunneblad 2017). The introduction into preschool can have a decisive impact on children's later success in school and the full integration of families longitudinally within Swedish society. ECEC is the best economic investment in warding off the risk of social exclusion, marginalisation and alienation. Consequently, Swedish preschool staff play an important role in the families' long-term integration within Sweden (Angel/Hjern 2004).

The importance of parental interaction is stressed both in national and international research (Nilsson/Bunar 2016). In today's preschool, parents are expected to play an active role. Daily meetings between parents and teachers at preschool are situations where different ideas of what it means to be a parent are manifested along with how these beliefs carry meanings of class, gender, ethnicity and normality (Lunneblad 2017). The importance of cooperation and dialogue with parents is equally important for children and families who carry with them the memories of war and persecution. Research done in clinical psychology on refugee children's health highlights the role preschool can play in offering children a stable living environment. Studies show how preschool can serve as a support by offering them a structure in their daily lives and access to stable adults if their parents feel stressed/overwhelmed (Angel/Hjern 2004).

Educational research on new arrivals and children often focuses on multilingual development and mother tongue importance. The situation for many newly ar-

rived children is that they are expected to learn about a new culture while also learning a new language. Research (ibid.) has shown that the Swedish language is described as a key to getting ahead in Swedish society. In preschool, teachers assume the role of the bearer of Swedish culture and language. A linguistic regime is implemented based on language, i.e. children and families are expected to speak Swedish (Nilsson/Bunar 2016). Language is thus seen as a key determinant for the future of the refugee child. However, research acknowledges that more perspectives need to be in place for preschool to actually serve as a forum for integration (Lunneblad 2017).

Concerns are sometimes raised, however, about the social patterns of diverse groups. In Sweden, there has also been a debate about the fact that parental leave is counterproductive for some diverse groups. Refugees are often unemployed for long periods of time. This means that their children spend less time in preschool and have fewer opportunities to learn Swedish and gain “school training”. In Sweden, there has been much debate about the role of parental leave. For some immigrant families, giving birth to several children also contributes to the family economy. Women in this situation may have long periods when they cannot participate in opportunities to work or study (such as Swedish for immigrant classes). This may render the women less attractive for future positions in the labour market. They cannot contribute to their retirement pension during this time either. Their children spend long periods of time at home with their parents and may have irregular attendance hours in preschool.

## 1.10 Conclusion

Key points from this chapter on inequalities to access in Swedish preschools are:

- All children in Sweden have a right to attend a Swedish ECEC service. Attendance rates for children are generally high. Parents can choose the type of service their child attends. Parents can also be paid to look after their child at home if they do not opt for an ECEC service. There are differences in starting ages of children from a foreign background and in terms of their home country.
- Availability of preschool places is problematic in some locations because of a mismatch between demand and supply. Sometimes parents will start their own preschool to fulfil their needs of placement, known as a parents’ cooperative preschool. Sometimes ECEC service provision is difficult in rural areas because of geographic isolation. Likewise, in some suburban areas there is also a lack of ECEC services because of inadequate supply. While all children have access, preschool places also have to be available.



- Parental income levels and education levels determine a child's starting age at Swedish preschool, preschool type as well as the time they spend at the ECEC service.
- Two-thirds of municipalities do not take socioeconomic levels into consideration for funding allocations to preschools.
- Group size and teacher qualifications are related to access inequalities. There is a shortage of qualified preschool teachers in Sweden. Qualified teachers are more likely to work in middle socioeconomic areas than in low socioeconomic areas. Group size is sometimes increased to give more children access in the municipality. Parents are, however, concerned that increased group size influences safety and supervision at the preschool. Sometimes group sizes are increased rather than hiring more staff at a preschool, and this has an impact on quality.
- Segregation in some Swedish municipalities has resulted from market forces around schooling. Given that parents are free to make decisions about enrolment, preschool and school, areas perceived as having low socioeconomic status are exposed to a constant risk of losing children with high social and cultural capital to areas considered as offering better quality. While access is still available for all children, questions can be raised about perceived quality across the municipalities.
- The preschool has the potential to play a key role in the reception of refugee children and families. Preschools are often the families' first encounter with a Swedish institution and members of Swedish society.
- Since 2010, there has been a greater focus on refugee participation in the labour market. This has led to the withdrawal of a child-focused perspective within integration policy. In reality, this means that what was previously organised within municipalities around integration is now the local responsibility of the preschool.

# Multi-level governance of ECEC and access inequalities in Sweden

## 2.1 Introduction

The governance of ECEC services in Sweden is stipulated on the national level but implemented and controlled on the municipal level. This means that while there are national requirements around access to preschool, it is the municipality that provides overall access to ECEC for children. Each municipality is different because of the decentralised approach in Sweden where municipalities provide services based on the needs of the community. Services are funded through tax. Each municipality has a different income taxation rate. Chapter two begins with an overview of the role of the preschool, outlining the three purposes of Swedish preschools within society. The chapter then discusses the funding allocations of preschools and fee regulation, showing variation across the municipalities. Fee regulation is designed to afford all parents the right to ECEC services for their children. Fees are kept low to allow parents to work or study, rather than having to stay at home to look after their children. The final section in this chapter discusses the quality monitoring tools used by the municipalities.

## 2.2 Role of preschool

In Sweden, the political goals for preschool and the Swedish welfare system have changed over time. The role of the preschool has been dependent on which groups in society have been targeted by policies. The role of preschool has varied between: (a) a strategy to support the labour market (*arbetsmarknadsåtgärd*), (b) a strategy to achieve gender equality in society, (giving women the possibility to work) (*jämställdhetsmål*), or (c) a strategy in the field of education (*utbildningsinsats*) (Skans 2011). Today, the state (national levels) determines the overall goals and guidelines for the education system whereas municipalities are responsible for implementing the goals and strategies. Municipalities must follow the national curriculum and provide

a foundation for determining whether independent preschools meet the stipulated requirements. The governance of independent preschools is controlled by the municipality.

In the early seventies (1972), when the modern preschool was established, there was a clear view that the preschool should be an institution that aims to change the social conditions in society. The establishment of preschools was also viewed as an important step towards achieving gender equality. By creating preschools (building preschools on a large scale to support demand and supply), women would be given the choice to work and no longer be forced to stay home as housewives to look after their children. During this time, there was also a shortage in the labour force, with a need for women to work (earlier in the 1960s there was a labour shortage in many Swedish industries that was resolved through labour immigration. At this time, there was no debate around women working). Another strong argument during the seventies was that preschool would act as a support for disadvantaged families. The establishment of preschool was viewed as the next, logical step in the creation of the Swedish welfare society (Lunneblad 2006).

The strong link between the aim of preschool and the welfare state was also manifested by responsibility for the preschool being under the remit of the Ministry of Social Welfare (and not the Ministry of Education from 1972 to 1996). As part of the social welfare service, preschool was viewed as a complement to the family, supporting a child's socialisation into becoming a member of society. As such, preschool was part of the general support system directed at the family (Skans 2011). Preschool was also viewed as a support for individual children and parents. Access to preschool for children growing up in disadvantaged families and under difficult conditions was used as a vehicle by social workers (*socialsekreterare*) to support these children and their families. During the late 1980s, there was a shift to a greater focus on learning as opposed to care. However, the perspective that the preschool's overall aim was socialisation still dominated policy and public debate (Lunneblad 2006).

In 1996, the governance of preschool shifted from the Ministry of Social Welfare to the Ministry of Education. The recommendations from the Ministry of Social Welfare about content, pedagogy and leadership were replaced by a national curriculum under the control of the Ministry of Education. A stronger focus on education was seen within preschools. Today the curriculum has a focus on democracy and participation for children. Democratic practices are embedded in preschool practice with children's participation in all activities encouraged.

## 2.3 Access for all and fee regulation

In 1999, a statutory right was implemented to extend early childhood education for all children, including children of unemployed and non-working parents. This right meant municipalities had to provide a place for every child from age one within three months of applying for a preschool place. Preschool for children aged four and five became free of charge. In 2000, the national government set limits for parental fees, called the 'max-tax', to ensure affordability for all parents. Parental fees for preschool became income-based and did not exceed three percent of family income for the first child, two percent of income for the second child and one percent for the third child (Skolverket 2007). No fees are charged for further children.

For municipalities the maximum fee is voluntary, but all municipalities adhere to the fee regulations. This means that municipalities do not have identical fee structures and only the upper fee limits are defined by government regulation. Fees, therefore, vary across municipalities. Another variation is the type of preschool in the municipality (municipal preschool, independent preschool or parents' cooperative preschool). While municipalities generally set the same fee for all preschools, independent schools and parents' cooperatives can choose their own fee structure as long as it does not exceed the maximum fee stipulated by the Swedish government. This means that parents will pay the same regulated fee regardless of whether they choose a municipal preschool or a private preschool.

The maximum fee has improved the financial situation for most families in Sweden, where nearly all families have benefited from the introduction of the bill (Skolverket 2014a). The cost to families has decreased significantly and opened up opportunities for parents to work or study. This means that nearly all children can attend preschool because of the low cost, regardless of parental income or location.

## 2.4 Funding allocation within the municipalities

Parental fees do not cover the entire cost of a child to attend preschool. The remaining amount is subsidised by the municipality. The cost of a child in preschool during 2016 was SEK 144,300, an increase of 2.7 percent over the previous year (Skolverket 2016b).

The municipality receives funding from the state and also from local taxation. The municipalities are free to use funds as they choose, as long as local services, pre-schools, schools, aged care and social services comply with national standards. This means that each municipality makes decisions about the preschools in its area.

Funds for preschool generally cover all aspects of the daily running of the pre-school, including staff costs, building costs, food costs, cleaning costs, maintenance costs, heating costs and resources for the preschool. Funding is not determined by provider type. In practice, this means that each preschool unit has its own budget. On this basis, preschool directors calculate how many children there have to be in a group to cover costs.

Some municipalities have created their own socioeconomic model for the allocation<sup>4</sup> of funds to preschools to help with this. However, the models vary across Sweden, with some municipalities having no model at all. The models also focus on different areas (number of children with a foreign background for example, parental income). The same model is applied to both municipal and private preschools.

In 2015, the Swedish School Inspectorate initiated a review of preschool quality and funding across the municipalities. The initial review highlighted the fact that there are challenges on the municipal and senior levels that have repercussions for preschool management and the volume of activities that can take place. This may have consequences for the equivalence of preschool education and the overall goals for Swedish preschools in society (Skolinspektionen 2016). The key findings about municipality funding were (ibid, p. 8):

- Two-thirds of the country's municipalities have no socioeconomic model for their resource allocation. Half of them do not have any plans to introduce any such model. The remaining third has a socioeconomic model for resource allocation, however, they rarely analyse the results of previously allocated resources. Consequently, they cannot see if the expected effect has been achieved. It also seems that there are often no goals concerning which qualitative effects municipalities intend to achieve with targeted resources. Quality work is not linked to the distribution of targeted resources. This leads to unclear control and follow-up.
- It is difficult to define the results in preschool. The preschool's assignment and goals are broad and cannot be delimited to quantitative metrics. This means that municipality and senior leaders have difficulty determining what to demand in quality work and, by extension, determining which follow-up methods they need

<sup>4</sup> In the third of the municipalities that have a socioeconomic distribution model, common indicators are, for example, parents' educational level, their labor market attachment and whether they receive support for support, family composition and if the child is born in another country, of parents who also come from another country. Further information can be found at <https://www.skolinspektionen.se/globalassets/publikationssok/granskningsrapporter/kvalitetsgranskningar/2016/resursfordelning/socioekonomisk-resursfordelning-till-forskolan.pdf>

to use. Preschool directors, in turn, have unequivocal control of the distribution of resources.

- Several municipalities do not take clear and reliable decisions about measures for independent preschools. Local authority supervision of independent preschools often lacks both decision-making procedures and the follow-up of alleged deficiencies. The School Inspectorate's results also point to the fact that many municipalities are unsure about how to use the sanction funds of the school to correct and remedy deficiencies. There is, therefore, a risk that supervision is not sufficiently clear in indicating the development needs of the independent preschools that are being supervised and children may not get the preschool they are entitled to. The pedagogical quality of preschool based on curriculum development is included to a lesser extent in supervision than administrative procedures, premises and outdoor environments.
- Organisation of work, treatment, responsibility and communication need to be developed in some preschools to ensure children's safety and learning. Children's safety and opportunities for development and learning are influenced by the adults who work in preschool. Factors such as group size and staff qualifications are significant, along with the staff's skills and approaches to the assignment, and their interaction with the children.
- Several municipalities increased the number of children in existing preschool groups so as to comply with what is known as the place guarantee.

Overall variation across municipal funding can be observed throughout Sweden. This strongly influences the amount of access to Swedish preschools (including larger group sizes as part of the place guarantee requirement). As yet there is no national funding allocation model that involves municipalities taking their own funding decisions based on a decentralised needs basis. The philosophy behind this approach is that municipalities, rather than the national level, are the best decision-makers for their local community.

## 2.5 Role of the municipality

In Sweden, the state and the municipality share responsibility for preschool. The state defines the national goals and the School Inspectorate oversees the implementation of these goals. The School Inspectorate is the government's supervisory authority that controls and checks that the municipalities are working towards these goals. The municipalities themselves decide how much of the funding they receive from the state is to be used for preschool (economic framework). The municipalities are also responsible for the execution and organisation of all work to do with the preschools including local strategies. This includes the planning, explanation

and demand for preschool places, budgets for preschools, salaries for employees and responsibility for the work environment.

Parents/guardians applying for a place in a municipal preschool are supposed to have a preschool place within four months. If municipalities are unable to provide this service, they risk paying state fines. Often guardians will request a place in a preschool close to their home. Parents/guardians are entitled to choose five preschools. The four-month guarantee, however, applies to all of the municipality which means a parent could be offered a preschool place anywhere in the city. If parents/guardians refuse the place offered by the municipality, they go to the bottom of the queue. Parents who choose a place in a private school apply directly to the preschool.

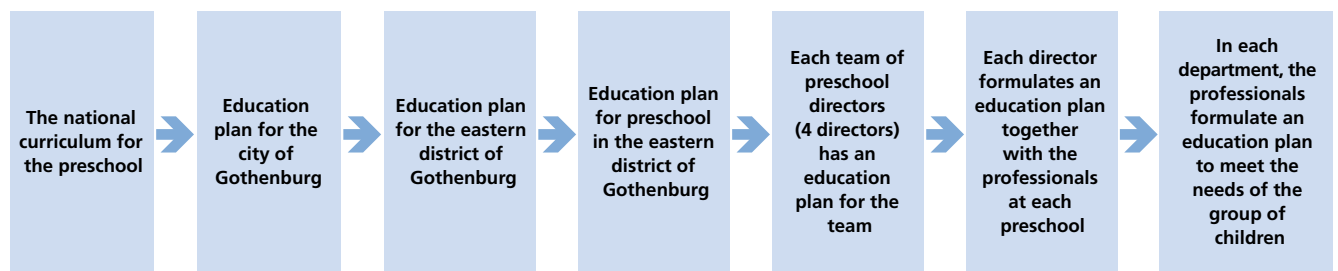
The municipalities are also tasked with negotiating staff remuneration with the unions. However, as there is a concomitant system of individual payroll, this has created a situation where preschools in the same district may compete for staff by offering different salaries. This means salaries can vary by type of preschool (public versus private) and by location (different municipalities have different salaries). Broadly speaking, the decentralisation of the public sector has meant that preschool today is characterised by municipal organisation, which is perhaps more similar to a company where market principles are becoming more common.

## 2.6 Quality monitoring of early childhood education and care

Quality monitoring also occurs across the Swedish municipalities. Each municipality implements quality monitoring in a different way. All municipalities do, however, share some basic foundations. For example, independent preschools are closely supervised and monitored. For independent schools, the municipality supervises and provides quality monitoring. Each year, all independent preschools are required to report a number of different factors to the municipality. These include staffing density (how many children in relation to the number of staff), proportion of preschool teachers, employee turnover and a verification report, confirming that the environment is safe for children. For municipal preschools, the School Inspectorate is responsible for supervision. The inspections undertaken by the School Inspectorate are on the municipal or district level, depending on the size of the city or the municipality. During 2015-2017, the School Inspectorate, on behalf of the Swedish government, conducted a large-scale inspection of preschools and their management across Sweden. The aim of this large-scale inspection was to draw attention to important areas of improvements needed within preschools.

Regular quality monitoring in the municipality occurs on various levels. Figure 2 gives an example of quality monitoring and reporting for the municipality of Gothenburg. The National Preschool Curriculum is used to draw up a specific education plan for the region of Gothenburg on the municipal level. The eastern part of the city then establishes an education plan based on the municipal plan. A plan is then created for preschools in the eastern region of Gothenburg. Preschool directors in the east then draw up an educational plan for the team. Each preschool director then creates an individual plan for each preschool with preschool staff. In each preschool, departments then establish ways of implementing the education plan in line with the needs of the group.

**Fig. 2: Quality monitoring in Gothenburg**



At the end of the year, the professionals on each of the different levels write a report about the work they have done to ensure that the goals have been accomplished. Areas requiring development are also identified in an organisational plan created to meet the associated challenges. The strength of this highly decentralised form of governance is that the professionals on each level can identify the group's local needs. One weakness is that the decentralised approach relies on professionals having the competence to articulate the challenges they face when implementing the policy.

Most preschools also carry out a staff survey each year. The survey is completed by employers who comment on their work environment. Similar to the quality reports created, findings are dependent on the professionals' ability to translate personal experiences into a perspective of strengths and weaknesses for an organisation.

Another way to measure quality in preschool is the parental questionnaire that parents fill out each year. The questions concern how parents perceive their child's social environment and the quality of the preschool's learning environment. The weakness of the questionnaire as a measure of quality is that many parents have little experience with Swedish preschools and have limited knowledge about preschool objectives. It is difficult for parents who lack knowledge about preschool pedagogy to identify preschool activities that are related to the preschool learning objectives. Often response rates are also lower in areas where parents have a mother



tongue other than Swedish, and have relatively low educational attainment levels. This means that the way the local objectives are set and quality is measured are dependent on well-educated pedagogues and conscious and interested parents. There is a clear risk that parents with immigrant backgrounds are disadvantaged by the current ways of measuring quality.

In quality monitoring, children's individual achievements are not measured in Sweden. Likewise, it is not common to separate children from a disadvantaged background within quality monitoring. Background, as an identifier based on demographic characteristics, is uncommon. Monitoring is, therefore, dependent on the goals set within each municipality to meet the needs of the community. While this approach is based on catering for the needs of the local community, it can be problematic, however, when looking at Sweden as a whole as there is no national monitoring or agreed standard on what policy implementation actually looks like. With regard to access, this means that meeting the requirements of the place guarantee (four months) may be a priority or a goal in some municipalities whereas in others it may not because of a lack of places. If the place guarantee is not met, the Inspectorate can demand that the municipality complies with this obligation. If this does not happen, the municipality may have to pay a fee to the state. Meeting access requirements may also depend on the strength of parent complaints and advocacy in each of the municipalities seeking to ensure that all children are given a place at preschool in time. Variation can, therefore, be seen again across the municipalities.

## 2.7 Conclusion

Key points from this chapter on inequalities to access in Swedish preschools are:

- Fee regulation in Sweden is designed to ensure all children have access to preschool. Fee regulation is a sliding scale based on parental income and the number of children in the family. The fee regulation cannot exceed a stipulated amount set by the national government. Municipalities can choose how much they will charge parents but they cannot exceed the national guidelines for fee regulation. This means that some preschools charge parents the set amount whilst other preschools offer parents lower fees. Fee regulation appears to be a significant contributor to high attendance rates in Sweden.
- The fee paid by parents does not cover all of the costs of the child at preschool. The municipality provides funding for each child to cover the extra costs associated with ECEC.
- There is no national socioeconomic model for funding allocation to preschools. Decisions on funding allocation are made by the local municipality that is deemed

to be the best decision maker for their local community. Municipalities, therefore, make local decisions about child access to preschool based on their funding allocations. Some municipalities are known for increasing group sizes to ensure children have a place (Skolinspektionen 2016).

- Quality monitoring varies across the Swedish municipalities around Swedish ECEC services. Quality monitoring may or may not take access into account within each of the municipalities. It is dependent on the goals within the municipality and the advocacy of parents around the place guarantee (four-month requirement).

# 3.

## ECEC in the context of welfare policies and public debates on welfare

### 3.1 Introduction

The third chapter discusses welfare policies and public debates in the context of ECEC. The chapter begins with an overview of social policies and shows how family policy and ECEC policy work together. Attention is drawn to a focus on multicultural policy where the concept of interculturalism is introduced to illustrate how the concept of intercultural pedagogy has not been part of the national Swedish curriculum. Mother tongue policy is then discussed to show how Swedish pre-schools need to support children with a different home language. The influence of marketisation on Swedish ECEC is also discussed to illustrate how ECEC services try to achieve equal access within public management ideals. The chapter concludes with a review of current public debates on ECEC.

### 3.2 Social policies

One of the goals of Swedish family policy is to combat child poverty (SOU 2001:24). Since children are not viewed as personally responsible for their economic situation, the state is seen as a safety net for all children. Swedish family policy and ECEC policy therefore overlap. Parents will spend the first year at home with their child on parental leave before the child has access to subsidised ECEC services when the parent returns to work or study. By giving support to parents which enables them to work and earn an income, parents can be supported out of poverty.

Sweden has a highly developed paid parental leave scheme that encourages both parents to spend time with their children. Paid parental leave was introduced in 1974. Together the mother and the father are entitled to up to 16 months paid leave per child (480 days). Close to 90 percent of fathers also take paid parental leave. Thirteen months are funded by the government (80 percent of the parents' wage), with the remaining three months remunerated at SEK 180 a day. Each parent has a non-transferable two-month entitlement, meaning paid parental leave must be shared (currently three months is being discussed in government). Both parents can take 30 days at the same time. To encourage both parents to be involved in caring for their child, a gender equality bonus was introduced in 2008. Parents who both take leave are entitled to the extra bonus. This scheme recognises the importance of shared parenting and affords all parents the opportunity to participate.

In 2012, the employment rate for women was 71.8 percent, close to men's participation rate in the workforce of 75.6 percent (European Commission 2014). The employment rate of mothers of children under the age of six is the third highest in the European Union. The gender pay gap in Sweden is also lower than the European Union average (European Commission 2014).

Respect for parents on parental leave also seems to be strong within Sweden. In a survey conducted by the Swedish Social Insurance Agency on employer attitudes to parental leave, only 10 percent of employers found it problematic that employees were on parental leave whereas 70 percent believed they should motivate employees to share parental leave equally between parents (Försäkringskassan 2013). The findings highlight how important this is as the "support of social parents and employers is necessary for the successful promotion of parental leave among fathers" (Eurofound 2015).

In Sweden, around 3.1 percent of GDP is spent on financial benefits for children and families (European Union 2014). The high employment levels of families have led to low child poverty rates among children. In addition to parental benefits, other measures have also been introduced to reduce the financial burden of raising children in Sweden. They include:

- Pregnancy benefits of 80 percent of a mother's wage for working mothers who are unable to work during pregnancy because of the physically demanding nature of their jobs;
- Child allowance (*barnbidrag*) amounting to SEK 1050 per month and child. Each additional child receives an added subsidy (*flerbarnstillägg*). A family with five children for example receives a total amount of SEK 7,614 per month. Payment continues until the child turns 16. Parents can choose how they use the child allowance each month.
- Low-income families with children can also apply for tax-free rent subsidies (*bostadsbidrag*).

- Parents are entitled to 120 days' leave a year to care for a sick child under the age of twelve. Parents receive 80 percent of their wages. Some employers also top up parents' salary to 90 percent of their original wage.
- Although the state encourages divorced and separated parents to agree on child support payments, it is more common for the primary parent to receive child support payments from the government (*underhållsstöd*) who collects money from the other parent. All single parents receive the same amount, regardless of their former spouse's income. The amount is equal to SEK 1,273 a month.
- Families or those who still fall below a locally determined (nationally regulated) minimum standard of living can apply for additional income support from their local social welfare office.

As previously stated, parental fees may not exceed three percent of a family's monthly income. The parental fee covers on average only eleven percent of the actual cost of a preschool place, with the rest heavily subsidised by the government. There are no tax reductions for having children in Sweden. Everyone is expected to pay tax with the money redistributed to all children to help reduce child poverty. All parents have access to parental leave, child allowance and caring for a sick child allowance. When the child starts in an ECEC service, parents pay a regulated fee (similar in amount to the child allowance). The municipality also pays for the child to be supported in the ECEC service. All children at preschool are given free food (breakfast, lunch and snacks) and resources.

Health care (including dental care) and all schooling is also free for all children up to age 18. Sweden has a decentralised health care system run by 20 county municipalities and regions, each governed by a political assembly responsible for ensuring equality and quality within health care. Preschool children are offered free health check-ups and there are approximately 2,000 paediatric nurses available to give advice and support. A full-time paediatric is responsible for providing basic programmes to 450–500 children aged zero to five years. The Swedish child health care system also has a range of delivery methods. Nurses make home visits, examine babies, talk about breastfeeding as well as other problems. Children with their parents attend child health centres for regular and structured visits (14–20 times during the first year and then once a year until the child starts school).

Most children are screened for language problems between the ages of two and a half and three. At age four, children are assessed for mild intellectual disabilities or other cognitive problems. The purpose of the examination is to prepare children for starting school. Any developmental problems can be identified beforehand.

Mothers of new-born babies are screened for postnatal depression at their local health centre. Clinic nurses also screen for child access to passive smoking child abuse and look at lifestyle habits to safeguard the child's early development. Preventative screening provides early intervention opportunities.

## Multicultural policy

In an European context, Swedish multicultural policies, together with those of Belgium and the Netherlands, are often presented as being some of the most progressive. In Sweden, the trend started in the 1960s with labour-market related immigration and continued during the 1970s with numerous groups of political refugees that have arrived over the past four decades. Since the beginning of the 1970s Swedish educational policy has been part of immigration policies, and since the 1990s it has been part of integration policies (Prop. 1975:26; Prop. 1997/98:16). Since the beginning of the 1970s Swedish preschool has been part of immigration policies, and since the 1990s part of integration policies in Sweden (Prop. 1997/98:16; Prop. 1975:26; SOU 1974:69). In the 1972 report from the Swedish Child Care Commission, preschools are seen as important meeting places, and a first introduction to Swedish culture and society (SOU 1972:26). In 1975, Sweden received its first official act directed at immigrants and ethnic minorities, on the basis of multicultural principles. Resources and support were extended to ethnic groups to preserve their language and culture.

In the 1990s, this multicultural policy was strongly criticised. The argument advanced was that a multicultural policy contributes to an atmosphere of “us, the Swedes, and the other, the immigrants” and hinders the integration of immigrants. This led to the formulation of a new integration policy in 1996, with a greater focus on diversity and universal principles. In public discourse, media, debates, and so on, diversity was still often associated with immigration from outside Western Europe. However, in official documents, diversity has a broad definition, as the aim of Swedish integration policy is to give general support to the whole population (Hellman et al. 2017, p. 92). In today’s policy documents, preschool is defined as an arena for social and cultural interaction, seeking to strengthen the children and prepare them for a life in an increasingly internationalised society:

Det svenska samhällets internationalisering ställer höga krav på människors förmåga att leva med och förstå de värden som ligger i en kulturell mångfald. Förskolan är en social och kulturell mötesplats som kan stärka denna förmåga och förbereda barnen för ett liv i ett alltmer internationaliserat samhälle. Medvetenhet om det egna kulturarvet och delaktighet i andras kultur ska bidra till att barnen utvecklar sin förmåga att förstå och leva sig in i andras villkor och värderingar. Förskolan kan bidra till att barn som tillhör de nationella minoriteterna och barn med utländsk bakgrund får stöd i att utveckla en flerkulturell tillhörighet.

Swedish society’s internationalisation places high demands on people’s ability to live with and understand the values of cultural diversity. Preschool is a social and cultural meeting place that can strengthen this ability and prepare the children for life in an increasingly internationalised society. Awareness of their own cultural heritage and interaction with other cultures will help children to develop

their ability to understand and interact with other people's concepts and values. Preschool should support children who identify with the national minorities and children of foreign background should receive support in the development of a multicultural identity (Skolverket 2016b, p. 6).

A concept close to "multicultural" is intercultural pedagogy. However, in Sweden the concept of intercultural pedagogy has not been part of the national curriculum. Still the concept has often been used in documents and policy recommendations of The Swedish National Agency for Education and the Swedish School Inspectorate (*Skolverket* and *Skolinspektionen*). The difference between multi- and inter-cultural is that multicultural can be read as multi that indicates a quantitative description, whereas inter in intercultural specifies a relation, an interaction or a description of an intercultural action. The meaning of the concept may, therefore, be based on the understanding of a movement or a process rather than something fixed. This is one way of avoiding the perception of culture as something that is determining. The emphasis is instead on the dialogue and the processes where meaning is created in the encounter between people. (Lunneblad 2006).

The concept of interculturalism has a history from the United Nations dating back to the 1970s. Interculturalism was used in the debate on how education could create peace and understanding between nations and people. In Sweden, these early definitions of intercultural education were promoted as an understanding of immigrants' ethnic characteristics. Courses in "immigrant culture" can be seen as an example of how negative attitudes towards immigrants were processed through the dissemination of knowledge. There are also similarities between intercultural education and what were known as classes in an 'immigrant childhood' in a previous teacher training programme (Lunneblad 2006).

Intercultural education is still a central concept in relation to the multicultural society of Sweden. The term is usually used to highlight cultural learning and development factors and contribute to an understanding of how different cultural contexts affect teachers, children, students and parents. Intercultural learning is seen as learning that takes place through meetings and social interaction between several individuals from different cultural and/or ethnic backgrounds. The term refers to a process of mutual respect, tolerance, equality and social justice. The concept is based on the normative assumption that education in a pluralistic society must be imbued with democratic values, equality and respect for other humans and minority rights. An intercultural approach can help to visualise how stereotypes, prejudice, racism, discrimination and social inequality impact people's lives. Another purpose is to broaden the understanding of how knowledge is constructed in intercultural learning processes, the skills that are perceived as important and how to use the similarities, differences and boundaries of these knowledge structures. The intercultural perspective has also been criticised as utopian and idealistic, and without any real foundation in social reality. Some of these criticisms suggest that issues relating to power and racism are avoided (Lunneblad 2006).

### 3.3 Mother tongue language policy

Another policy for consideration is mother tongue language policy. Given that 20 percent of preschool children speak a mother tongue other than Swedish, extra support is required in preschool and schools (Skolverket 2016c). The section on preschool in the Swedish Education Act has a paragraph on special language provision for children with a mother tongue other than Swedish and this is further developed in the Curriculum Guide for Preschools (Skolverket 2016b). This is extended to all languages other than Swedish. Here it is stated that “[t]he preschool should strive to each child with a mother tongue other than Swedish develop their cultural identity and the ability to communicate both in both Swedish and their mother tongue” (Skolverket, 2016c, p.10). Research suggests that children who receive mother tongue tuition have a higher scholastic success rate in school. Under the terms of the School Education Act, Sweden’s municipalities also provide mother tongue tuition for children in preschool and school. The national curriculum for preschool states that children with a mother tongue other than Swedish should be given the opportunity to develop their mastery of their mother tongue as well as the majority language. A mother tongue teacher can come to the preschool once or twice a week and lead sessions with children such as signing, drawing, playing and reading nursery stories. The mother tongue teacher must also lead the entire preschool class in traditional songs and games, helping to bridge cultures between children from Swedish backgrounds and children from non-Swedish backgrounds. The intention is for children to develop a sense of identity.

In school, mother tongue is a school subject in its own right (two to three hours of tuition a week). Children can be supported in the development of their mother tongue language as well as other school subjects. Children in school who have also recently moved to Sweden and have not learnt enough Swedish to be able to follow lessons can have the content of the class explained to them in their mother tongue.

To apply for mother tongue support, parents work with the school and municipality authorities. It is parents, and not teachers or staff, who decide whether to apply for mother tongue support and what type of support is needed. Preschools and schools must, however, inform parents that they are eligible to apply for mother tongue support. Mother tongue support and mother tongue instruction in schools are non-compulsory, with no cost to parents.

Municipalities bear overall responsibility for the provision of mother tongue support. They can choose how they wish to organise mother tongue tuition. A municipality must provide mother tongue support if there is a group of at least five students wishing to register for instruction. Different preschools and schools may work together in order to create student groups of sufficient size.



## 3.4 Tendencies towards marketisation

In the last two decades, new public management has been the ‘dominant paradigm’ in the public sector. This has enabled the adaptation of radical changes in how education is viewed and how it should be managed. Since the early 1990s there has been a transformation in public service provision with public administration being replaced by a set of neo-liberal policies that have prioritised free choice and a management ideology originating from the private sector (Imsen et al. 2016). The shift has seen the development of educational quasi-markets in which educational institutions are meant to compete with one another to attract parents as consumers (Rönnberg 2014; Hall 2013). Researchers have argued that marketing has led to the emergence of a different morale and ethics, turning pupils and parents into consumers and preschools and schools into the producers of the education product (Lunneblad et al. 2017). Within Sweden, municipalities have been decentralised to meet the demands in the new public management ideology (Bunar/Ambrose, 2016). This management thinking is closely connected to marketing and has changed the values governing school/preschool from bureaucratic professionalism to entrepreneurship and competition (Ball 2012).

The emergence of the private sector under the free choice movement has, however, generated more access in some communities where parents can set up a parents’ co-operative preschool or where a private provider has opened to help meet the strong demand by providing access for more children. Given that private preschools cannot charge fees to parents above the amount of the municipality fee (fee regulation), the private sector does not appear to have undergone the same growth as in other countries.

The role of the preschool director has changed under the new public management ideal. In Sweden, the preschool director has, until recently, been a civil servant responsible for the reproduction of knowledge and the cultural values of society, and has served the interests of the citizens of society. Today, the preschool director has to encourage change and improvement, as a visionary team leader and as the economically responsible individual in front of the education board (Lunneblad et al. 2017).

In a recent study of municipality preschool directors, Lunneblad and Garvis (2017) found that preschool director roles have been strongly influenced by new public management ideals. Preschool directors had to take on the role of coach but at the same time be the ‘ultimate boss’ in decisions for the preschool. This was difficult as it impacted trust between the director and preschool teacher. Accountability also emerged as an important topic with preschool directors having to defend decisions to parents about group size, staff qualifications and the volume of learning activities possibly taken because of budgetary considerations. Preschool directors also spoke about the importance of the public image to parents and the role of the parent satisfaction survey in making decisions in the preschool. Limited data is

available on the role of preschool directors in private preschools. It can, however, be assumed that they are also influenced by new public management ideals, including strong accountability to parents.

The demands to continuously perform, on a collective and an organisational level, as preschool and, on the individual level, as director, teacher and pupil is a prominent feature in the transformation towards a market. Preschool directors, teachers and pupils face a tide of rating, inspections and evaluation criteria that have to be dealt with. In reality, this has meant responsibility for preschool directors. Preschool directors are responsible for employing new staff, having control over economic aspects and educational development. This also includes working with dissatisfied parents, handling extra costs when catering for children with special needs, and managing unexpected changes in the financial framework specified for the operations. Ball (2012) describes this as the self-interest of the agents in the educational system becoming a governing force.

The amount of funding for a preschool depends on allocation. The municipality receives money from the state and from resident's taxes in the municipality. The municipality then allocates money across districts. The district will then determine how much money each preschool is to receive for each child. A private preschool will receive the same amount (*grundbelopp*) as other preschools.

Since preschools in Sweden are financed as an allocation for each child, there is always a risk of children with special needs being turned into risk ventures, where the extra support and use of resources that children might need may cost more than the funding the children bring to the preschool (Lunneblad et al. 2017). As previously mentioned, there is no funding allocated specifically to preschool. This means that there is no extra money for children with special needs. Instead, this becomes an issue of redistribution of the internal resources from the preschool units' budget. It is only after the preschool has applied for extra funding for a child with special needs and an investigation has been undertaken that extra funding is given (that can be both timely and costly). If the preschool cannot keep to its budget, resources from other sectors in the municipality have to be allocated. The preschool director is still responsible for the accountability of the curriculum and compliance with the Education Act. Overall, the research highlighted the impact of the public management system on preschool leadership and the problematic role played by preschool directors.

Market adaptation is something that has especially influenced the situation for children, teachers and school leaders in the most exposed areas and preschools and schools in the cities. Preschools and schools find themselves in a situation where freedom of choice drives them on to a market where pedagogy is diminished in comparison to symbolic values like status and reputation. The effects of this are most obvious for secondary schools, but there is also evidence that the free choice

system influences parents' choice of residence and preschool. A report from the National Agency for Education (2012) shows that there is an array of reasons for parents to choose a different school from the closest one in their neighbourhood. Many pupils want to enrol at another school and switch from the city's outskirts to a city centre school which is deemed to be more successful (Skolverket 2012).

### 3.5 Public media debates

Public media debates on access inequality of preschools have generally focussed on group size requirements (discussed in Chapter 1), waiting times for entry into preschool (queue system for parents) and the differences in free preschool hours across the municipalities (15 hours is the minimum although some municipalities have more). In recent years, debates have also focused on multi-cultural education. There have been no specific debates about access and diverse groups in society.

During 2016 and 2017 the media reported the long queues for some preschools in some of the municipalities. In Uppsala, it was reported that over 100 children were still to be given a preschool place (SVT Nyheter, 6 February 2017). As a result, some parents will be offered preschool places that are not within their local area to accommodate the four-month placement legislation (parents may suggest five preschools but all of these requests may be rejected by the municipality if no places are available). The media reports parents becoming stressed as they need to start full-time employment. This aligns with reports from SOU (2013:41 *Förskolegarantin*) that between ten and 50 municipalities could not offer a parent a preschool place for their child within four months of their applying. This suggests that access is problematic in some regions in Sweden.

Public debates have also addressed the hours of participation to which children are entitled. While the legal requirement is 15 free hours a week, the Stockholm municipality has increased the amount to 30 free hours a week (Stockholm Stad 2017). Other municipalities, however, are only able to provide the required 15 hours. The difference in hours has prompted an overall discussion in the media about differences across the municipalities and whether the base amount (15 free hours) should be increased. Different municipalities can charge different amounts depending on funding. It is generally accepted in Sweden, however, that municipalities provide different services based on the needs of the local community.

The recent influx of refugees has also triggered a debate about Sweden as a multicultural society. Parts of the debate have also focused on the role of preschool and school in supporting integration policy. In the discussion of Sweden as a multicultural society,

there is a common understanding that Sweden has undergone a transformation from being a culturally homogeneous society to a culturally heterogeneous society.

Given the changing nature of society, debate has also centred on Swedish national identity. The past 10 years in Sweden have seen a growing debate about the relationship between immigration and internal national problems related to segregation and xenophobia. Recent political developments show that The Sweden Democrats, a distinctively xenophobic political party, is attracting many voters. Recently we can also see trends towards more restrictive immigration policies (Lunneblad/Johansson 2012).

In this debate, the perception of the Swedish identity is often forged around the use of the Swedish language and notions about norms such as gender equality and social equality. The “immigrant family” is positioned as the opposite and a threat to Swedish values and is often used to visualise a society, consisting of a large number of different ethnic groups that are living in a fragile community in danger of disintegration. Researchers have discussed this point of view as an expression of a notion of ‘Swedishness’ as something fixed where there is a clear distinguishing line between what is Swedish and what is not (Lunneblad/Johansson 2012). In this debate, preschools are viewed as a vehicle to help immigrant children and their families become Swedish. The children’s mother tongue is not accorded much importance in this debate and the kind of Swedish used in the ‘multicultural’ suburb is not considered adequate. This concern about proper Swedish also has a dimension regarding norms and values and a concern that the local variation of the Swedish language consists of homophobic and sexist expressions. In research, this has been discussed as the image of the ideal Swedish child and family as a yardstick. The expectation is for everyone to be part of this image of ‘Swedishness’. In this encounter between the preschool and school and the child and family, the latter comes out as defective (Lunneblad 2017). However, at the same time, we can identify many attempts to counteract these xenophobic tendencies and to create a tolerant, pluralistic and democratic society. There is also a growing debate on the need to develop strategies for creating less segregated and polarised societies. It is also important to see how the public debate on preschool education in relation to immigrants and refugees is part of a larger political perspective shift. Since the 2010s, there has been a strong focus on refugees coming to Sweden, quickly entering the labour market and becoming self-sufficient. Much of the former multicultural politics where diversity is highlighted as an asset have been silenced as the right-wing parties have occupied more space in the public debate. In Sweden as well as in other countries, there has been a debate about some common cultural competence and language tests to receive citizenship. The perception of what is ‘Swedishness’ is more apparent than when previously linked to employability, and is considered a prerequisite for a democratic community. This trend can also be seen in a number of European countries, where the former multicultural policy is now being criticised. Economic growth coupled with people becoming poorer has fuelled populism. Not least from a number of right-wing groups voices about the importance of shared values and

national identity have become increasingly apparent and have been seen as a solution to contemporary problems. This means the role of preschool has changed for immigrant children. It is now considered a place for immigrant children to become Swedish as well as prepare for school.

## 3.6 Conclusion

Key points from this chapter on inequalities to access in Swedish preschools are:

- Family policy and ECEC policy work together to support children and parents. The generous parental leave scheme entitles parents to spend time with their children before they start ECEC services (all children have access to ECEC services). A monthly child allowance is available for all children. Parents are also entitled to a payment to care for sick children (120 days a year) when they have to take time off work. When the child is better, the child can return to preschool and the parent can return to work.
- The concept of intercultural pedagogy has not been part of the national curriculum. Still the concept has often been used in documents and policy recommendations of the Swedish National Agency for Education and The Swedish School Inspectorate (*Skolverket* and *Skolinspektionen*).
- Marketisation has created opportunities for the private sector for preschools to help provide supply for unmet demand. Due to fee regulation, private preschools cannot charge more than municipal preschools. The free market allows parents to choose either a municipal preschool or a private preschool (providing access to both markets for all parents).
- Marketisation has changed the role of the preschool director who has taken on a more administrative role within public management. This includes greater accountability to parents and trying to find workable solutions for group size, staff qualification levels and funding for resources within the preschool.
- Mother tongue policy gives all children the right to develop their mother tongue while in preschool and school.
- According to public media, access to a preschool within four months is difficult in some municipalities. Some children have to wait longer, with parents not being able to return to the workforce, study or actively look for work.
- Different municipalities offer different hours of attendance at preschool creating variation across Sweden. While 15 free hours is the minimum requirement, some municipalities offer more hours.
- The changing role of integration policy has meant the role of preschool has also changed. Today, one of the roles of Swedish preschool is to help immigrant children become 'Swedish' and prepare for school.

# Reflections on the relationship between the welfare state, the structure of ECEC governance and access inequalities in Sweden

## 4.1 Introduction

In Sweden, preschool is part of the education system. Municipalities are required to provide preschool for children aged between one and five. In 2016, almost 94 percent of children aged four and five attended preschool and 98 percent of six-year-olds attended preschool class. Since the 1970s, Swedish preschool has played a significant role in social policy and the political agenda for an equal society. It has been embedded in various social policies (such as parental leave and health care) in order to create a supportive welfare state.

Today, the preschool system faces new challenges of working with children from diverse backgrounds, finding suitably qualified staff, staff-child ratios and working within a public management agenda. The final chapter reflects on the inequality in access to Swedish ECEC, multi-level governance barriers and current public debate on welfare policies in Sweden. It concludes with a call for a national quality monitoring system in Sweden to provide an overall benchmark for ECEC quality and to reduce the variation across the municipalities.

## 4.2 Inequality in access to ECEC

Since the 1970s, the number of children enrolled in preschools in Sweden has increased, with universal access policy allowing all children to attend. This suggests that current policies enable many families to access preschool, regardless of their socioeconomic background. Thus, only a small proportion of families still choose to keep children at home before primary school.

There are relatively small differences between different social groups or income groups in terms of the age at which children start preschool. However, children in families with the lowest income and parents with low levels of education start later than children from middle-income families. This means that many children with a foreign background start preschool later than children with parents born in Sweden.

In Sweden, 73 percent of preschools are run by the municipality whereas 27 percent are run as private preschools. Private preschools can include independent schools and parents' cooperatives. Most independent preschools are to be found in suburban and metropolitan municipalities, with few independent preschools located in rural areas. Parents can choose the type of preschool (free choice) and do not pay more than the listed fee regulation amount. The users of independent preschools are more likely to have attended higher education and be high earners, compared with the parents who choose the municipal preschools. In a study by Vamstad (2016), some parents perceive private preschools as being of better quality. However, this is not backed by the official statistics. There is a need for more evidence on parental access to preschools in Sweden. The available data on parental attitudes to preschool access is limited.

In Swedish preschools, approximately 39 percent of staff working with children have completed approved teacher training (mainly preschool teacher qualifications). Municipal preschools have a higher number of staff with the required training than independent preschools. But there are also regional differences. The highest proportion of qualified workers is to be found in rural municipalities whereas the metropolitan areas and specifically socially disadvantaged areas have the lowest proportion of trained personnel. This is worrying since children living in socially disadvantaged areas have the greatest need for support. There are also regional differences in the staff-child ratio in preschools. In 2016, the average for rural areas was ten children per preschool teacher. In metropolitan areas, the ratio was 17 children to one preschool teacher. Staff-child-ratios are considered as important for child interaction, safety and supervision.

## 4.3 Multi-level governance of ECEC

In Sweden, the state lays down the overall objectives and guidelines for the education system whereas the municipalities are responsible for implementing objectives and strategies. Since 1999, all children have had a legal right to attend preschool. For children aged one to three, enrolment in preschool is subject to a fee. The fees for preschool are calculated on the basis of family income. The maximum fee is voluntary for the municipalities, and the fees therefore vary across the municipalities. Preschool is free for children aged four and five.

The national preschool is subject to the compulsory school curriculum. Different subject areas are incorporated into the curriculum, with aims oriented towards basic values, development of social skills and play. These objectives are designed to encourage every preschool to strive to ensure that children learn and develop. Since 2010, there have been revisions to the preschool curriculum that have contributed to a stronger focus on learning.

One of the sections on preschool in the Swedish Education Act contains special language provisions for children with a mother tongue other than Swedish. It states that children who are native speakers of a language other than Swedish should be given the opportunity to develop their ability to master their mother tongue as well as the majority language. In order to support the children's mother tongue, parents can apply for mother tongue training during their time at preschool and/or school and the municipality have to provide training in the child's mother tongue if there is a group of at least five students who wish to register for this training.

## 4.4 ECEC in the context of welfare policy and public debate on welfare

Historically, the policy goals for preschool and the Swedish welfare system have been part of labour market policy, gender equality, with an emphasis on education. Preschool is part of a well-developed welfare system. Parents are entitled to paid parental leave for thirteen months. Examples of how the Swedish welfare system supports children and their families are: pregnancy benefits for women who can't work during pregnancy; child support up to age 16; additional allowances for families with several children; rent allowances for low-income families, and free health care for all children up to age 18.



Over the last few decades however, the idea of a beneficial strong welfare system has been challenged by neoliberal ideology, where priority is given to freedom of choice and the conviction that quality is best achieved through competition. In Sweden, the municipalities have been decentralised to meet the requirements of this new public management ideology. This has changed the management of preschools on several levels. While quality is monitored within the municipalities, there is no national quality measurement system for preschool quality.

Media reports about Swedish preschools are not very common. However, in recent years news reporting and debates have centred on preschool funding and issues related to access and quality. Public media debates on access inequality for preschools have generally focused on the size of the children's groups and waiting times for access to preschool. In some municipalities, this would seem to suggest that, given the large numbers of children attending preschool, legal accessibility to preschool is being challenged. While municipalities are able to meet access requirements by increasing group sizes, concerns are raised about groups becoming too large. There has also been public debate about the hours of attendance to which children are entitled. Again, however, access and hours of attendance are dependent on the municipality and vary across Sweden. Organisation on the municipal level in Sweden has, therefore, emerged as an important factor regarding access inequalities within Swedish ECEC.

The latest reception of refugees has also triggered a debate about Sweden as a multicultural society. About 20 percent of the children in Swedish preschools have a foreign background. The number of children who speak a mother tongue other than Swedish has also increased over the past 20 years (22 percent of the children speak a language other than Swedish). The last ten years in Sweden have seen a growing debate on the relationship between immigration and internal national problems in connection with segregation and xenophobia. In this debate, reference is often made to the Swedish identity in its relation to the Swedish language and concepts of standards such as gender equality and social equality. However, as previously discussed, cultural diversity does not have the same positive connotation today as it did from the 1970s up to the beginning of the 2000s. Today, preschool is viewed as an important way for children with an immigrant background to become Swedish and to prepare for school.

## 4.5 Conclusion

The concept of equivalence has been central to Swedish education. The term describes how education works to support all children and promote social equality.

The Education Act stipulates that preschool fulfils this aim when all children are offered a place in high-quality preschool. Preschool is, therefore, an important topic for society, especially for parents and politicians who often discuss preschool issues in the media. Swedish preschools are generally considered to be of high quality. In Sweden, there is a preschool education program for children who have the right to participate from age one. In addition to having access to a preschool place, there are also a number of other welfare policies (for example parental leave, child allowance, allowance to care for a sick child) that operate as a support system aimed at compensating unequal conditions for children and their families.

By world standards, Sweden is able to provide high-quality ECEC that is available to all children. However, national reports have highlighted a number of challenges for the municipalities that have consequences for preschool quality, especially around access inequality. In one-fifth of the preschools evaluated, the staff did not have the opportunity or the ability to pay enough attention to all children. The reasons for this are both the overly large groups (to meet access requirements) but also the staff's lack of required training (it is cheaper for preschools to employ an unqualified teacher to work with larger groups of children). Two-thirds of the country's municipalities have no socioeconomic model for resource allocation. Even if children require extra support and resources, it is the responsibility of the preschool to organise and to do so within the usual funding allocation. In several municipalities that used a resource allocation according to economic principles, implementation and outcomes were not evaluated. It is also apparent that what the municipalities seek to achieve with targeted resources and quality work is frequently not linked to the distribution of these targeted resources. Some municipalities also struggle with providing places for all children within the designated time limit, with parents forced to wait until a preschool place becomes available. This then impacts parents' participation in the workforce. Clearly, the decentralisation of preschool imposes high demands in terms of well-educated staff. Given the difficulties in hiring trained teachers in the most socially vulnerable areas, this is problematic. This leads to a situation of random control and difficulties in determining what needs to be improved and followed-up. For the individual, this creates difficulties in determining the level of quality and thus deciding which follow-up methods are needed to improve his/her work.

The role of the municipality in providing access equality and availability for all children is important across Sweden. Different municipalities are governed in different ways to fulfil the requirements of the Education Act, meaning children and parents have different experiences depending on where they live in Sweden. As decisions about preschool are taken and governed on the municipal level (budgets for preschool, queue system, children's group size, hours of access), there are variations across Sweden. This also means that variation occurs across individual preschools, based on decisions by the preschool director. It should be noted that all children are treated the same in the Swedish preschool system on the grounds of equality.

Furthermore, the individual targeting of diverse groups in society that happens in other countries does not occur in the Swedish context.

In Sweden, the marketisation of education (including the free choice system where parents can choose any preschool) appears to favour the middle class whereas the residents from the most socially disadvantaged areas - often with immigrant backgrounds - have encountered the downside to the transformation of the welfare state. Despite universal access to preschool as a vehicle to achieve equality, we see that the free choice market, coupled with segregated housing, has created differences in children's living conditions. Consequently, universal access (as part of the education system) cannot compensate for the increasing differences in children's life conditions. However, in international comparison, the Swedish educational system is still considered to be of high quality with strong equality.

Many of the problems mentioned are discussed on the local and national levels, with lobbying groups sometimes being successful in persuading key policy makers to provide more funding and support to preschool. On the local level, however, this is again dependent on municipality governance and how much money the municipality has to support preschools. As there is no national accreditation for quality in Swedish preschools that could establish an overall standard, responsibility is born on the municipal level. Sweden might benefit from a national quality monitoring system for preschool with a view to developing a national benchmark for preschool access and quality. While there is equivalence monitoring for schools nationally, a similar design is needed for preschools. School equivalence uses standardised tests, amongst other things, to assess children's learning outcomes. This approach is not suitable for the early childhood context. However, group size, staff qualifications and access could all be part of the quality monitoring process in preschools. It is acknowledged, however, that this kind of monitoring is difficult as municipalities are supposed to provide individual, need-based support with scope for variation.

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**Deutsches Jugendinstitut e. V.**

Nockherstraße 2  
D-81541 München

Postfach 90 03 52  
D-81503 München

**Telefon** +49 89 62306-0

**Fax** +49 89 62306-162

**[www.dji.de](http://www.dji.de)**