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Swedish Early Childhood, Education and Care (ECEC) and integration. State initiatives and local strategie

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Expert Report

Anne-Li Lindgren, Tünde Puskás

Swedish Early Childhood, Education and Care (ECEC) and Integration

State initiatives and local strategies

Deutsches Jugendinstitut e.V. (German Youth Institute, 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 Center 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. More information on ICEC activities at www.dji.de/icec-en.

Impressum

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List of abbreviations and concepts

Bet., Betänkande: Committee report

BVC, Barnvårdscentral: Child health service

Dir., Utredningsdirektiv: Government directive

ECEC: Early Childhood Education and Care

Familjecentraler: Family centres

Fristående förskola: Private preschool (for profit & not for profit)

Frivilligorganisation: Non-Government Organisation, NGO

Kommunal förskola: Municipality preschool

Lpfö: Swedish National Curriculum for Preschool

Mot., Motion: Motion to parliament

Pedagogisk omsorg: Pedagogical care

Prop., Regeringens proposition: Government bill

Protocol, Riksdagsprotokoll: Protocol from parliamentary debate

Remissvar: Referral responses

Rskr., Riksdagsskrivelse: Parliamentary letter

Skolinspektionen: The National Schools Inspection, SI

Skolverket: The National Agency for Education, SNAE

SKR, Sveriges Kommuner och Regioner: The Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions, SALAR

SOU, Statlig utredning: Swedish Government official report, report by Government commissions of inquiry

Öppen förskola: Open preschool

All translations from Swedish to English were made by the authors.

Preface

Early childhood education and care (ECEC) is key to ensure equal opportunities for children, particularly for those whose mother tongue differs from the local language. Yet, disparities in ECEC enrolment based on childrens' ethnic origin persist, both in Germany and elsewhere. For this reason, the International Centre for Early Childhood Education and Care (ICEC) at the German Youth Institute (Deutsches Jugendinstitut, DJI) carries out research on unequal opportunities for children from migrant families to participate in ECEC. The LoKi research project on local governance and inclusive ECEC in migrant societies (*Lokale Steuerung und bedarfsorientierte Kindertagesbetreuung in Migrationsgesellschaften*; 2024-2026) explores the institutional interfaces of early childhood education policies and integration policies in Germany and Sweden – two countries that experience continuous migration. The aim of the study is to better understand local approaches and cross-sector cooperation in the making of inclusive ECEC service provision in the two countries.

Taking on a comparative perspective, a closer examination of the institutional context related to integration in the selected countries is needed, including current policies as well as key actors and their responsibilities. To this purpose, in addition to own desk research in Germany, the ICEC has commissioned an expert report on integration policy measures in early childhood education in Sweden. Prof Anne-Li Lindgren from Stockholm University, and Prof Tünde Puskás from Linköping University, have compiled the report at hand on current developments on this topic. We take this opportunity to thank Prof Lindgren and Prof Puskás for supporting our project with their valuable expertise and for a very fruitful and enriching cooperation.

München, March 2024

Antonia Scholz and Tabea Schlimbach

1 Introduction to Swedish ECEC and the report

This report takes its point of departure in a previous report on inequalities in access to Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) in Sweden (Garvis/Lunneblad 2018), and focuses primarily on the developments that have unfolded over the past five years regarding preschool and integration. In 2022, the school law regulating Swedish ECEC (SFS 2010:800) was revised to include more children (SFS 2022:833). The main group of children (and guardians) to whom it reaches out is children born abroad or with both parents born abroad, and who have been in Sweden for a maximum of five years (SFS 2022:833).¹ The new law was implemented for the first time in July 2023. The dual focus of our attention is, firstly, the political process resulting in this new strategy to enrol newly arrived² children aged three to five years in preschool and, secondly, how municipalities implement practices to reach out to parents of children (aged 1–5 years) who are not enrolled in preschool.³

Approximately 15 percent of guardians of 1–5-year-old children in Sweden are not using their right to a preschool place. In 2021, 50 percent of all one-year-old children were enrolled in preschool and 91 percent of all two-year-olds. Hence, it is mainly children aged between one and two years who are not enrolled in preschool, due to guardians' own choice to stay at home with their child, or if the offer of a preschool place does not match the guardians' choice.⁴ Ninety-four percent of

¹ The term guardian is used in the law and other official documents. Parent is used in debates and less formal documents. We use both.

² “Newly arrived” is one of several concepts in use to refer to non-Swedish-born children arriving in Sweden. It is a broad category that potentially includes “children born abroad”, “children born of parents born abroad”, “children with a foreign background”, “newly arrived immigrant children”, “migrant children”, “refugee children”, “asylum-seeking children” or “newly arrived children”. We use it as a broad category. In 2020, a definition of a “newly arrived child” was presented in SOU 2020:67, and that definition is used in the new school law (SFS 2022:833): “children born abroad or with parents born abroad, and who have been in Sweden for a maximum of five years”. When we use other concepts, such as “foreign background”, it is in line with the sources to which we refer. For example: According to Skolverket.se 2023a p. 7: “Children with a foreign background” are “Children born abroad or with both parents born abroad”. Statistics Sweden (SCB) uses the categories; “children born abroad”, “children born in Sweden with both parents born abroad”, “children born in Sweden with one parent born abroad”, and “children born in Sweden with both parents born in Sweden” (the two last categories are “children with a Swedish background”), SCB.se 2023c. As this shows, there is no consensus on which concept to use or what exactly it is referring to.

³ Today, in Sweden, all children are offered a place in preschool from one year of age in all municipalities within three months of their application date (Lenz Taguchi 2022).

⁴ The reasons for not enrolling a child aged 1–3 years vary, according to an interview study; the importance of bonding with a child to develop a strong attachment, norms about socialisation, effects on family life and being “parent strengthening” (Sw. föräldrastärkande), as well as social and economic reasons. Of the 31 interviewed guardians, 19 percent were born abroad, the rest were Swedish born (Lenz Taguchi 2022).

three-year-olds and 96 percent of five-year-olds are enrolled in preschool (Lentz Taguchi 2022). Accordingly, the revised new law is aimed at the four to six percent of children aged three to five years who are not being enrolled in ECEC. As shown in this report, the new law directly addresses newly arrived children.⁵ In the political process, Sweden's goal of integration is part of the argument for implementing the new law.

In Sweden, 350 000 children in the age group 3–5 years are already enrolled in preschool based on a guardian's request (SKR 2022), compared to 22 000 who are not.⁶ Of the latter, 5000 are enrolled in pedagogical care.⁷ Interestingly, the new law about direct enrolment concerns both those 17 000 children who are not enrolled in either preschool or pedagogical care and the 5000 who are enrolled in pedagogical care but not in preschool.

To be clear, the new law aims to enrol approximately 22 000 children (aged 3–5 years) in public preschool for 15 hours a week free of charge. According to the new law, the municipalities are obliged to reach out to children born abroad or with parents born abroad, and who have been in Sweden for a maximum of five years. In addition, the municipalities should *strive to reach* the other children, i.e., children of Swedish origin (SFS 2022:833).

As this report shows, the presence or non-presence of the Swedish language in Swedish ECEC is one of the key questions in the integration-preschool debate, and a key argument for the measures taken to include children with a foreign background in preschool at the national level. At a local level, the focus is on how to reach out to newly arrived families and incorporate them into open preschools, which are seen as the first step towards children's preschool enrolment.

In this introduction, we provide contextual information relevant to the scope of the report (sections 1.1–1.4), and present the research methodology used when writing the report. This, which was a three-step process: Step 1) identifying key actors at national and local level (sections 1.5 & 1.6), step 2) describing and analysing the political process at national level via documents such as government inquiries, bills and debates (section 2), and step 3) describing and analysing how municipalities work when implementing the new law via questions posed to a selection of municipalities (section 3). Section 4 is a conclusion summarising the findings.

1.1 Equality, quality and segregation

Between 2015 and today, Sweden has moved from a liberal to a restrictive migration policy. As the statistics from the SCB show (see Figur 1), the numbers of asylum

⁵ Even though the term “newly arrived” is not used in the law.

⁶ In the age group 1–5 years, 74 percent of the children have a Swedish background and 25 percent have a foreign background, Skolverket.se 2023a.

⁷ See Figure 1 and section 1.5.

seekers have varied over the past ten years, based on migration flows, the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic and restrictions in migration policies. The figure also shows that, over the past ten years, most asylum seekers have a Syrian background.

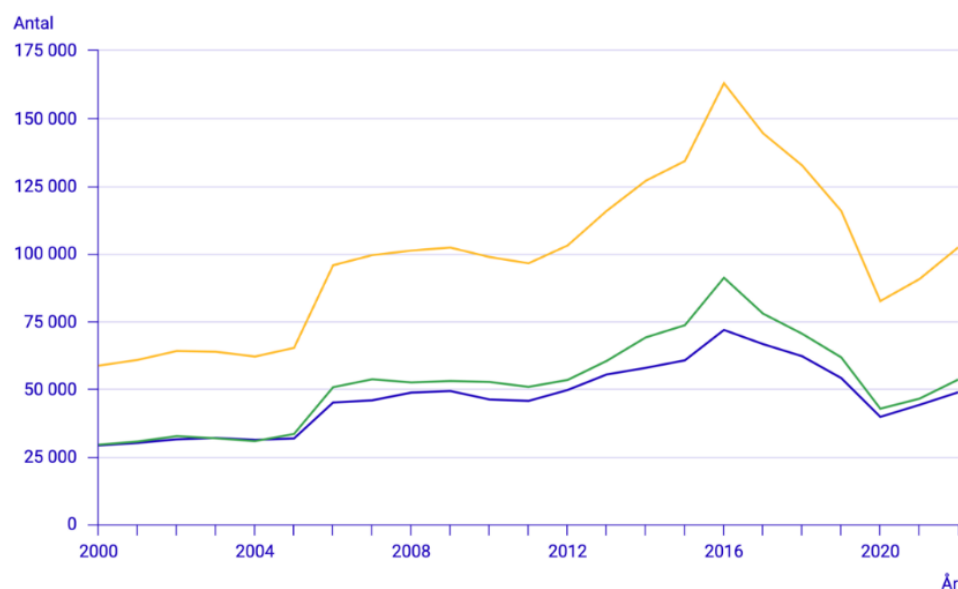
Figure 1: Asylum seekers 2013–2022

Year	Asylum seekers							
	Number	Women	Men	Of whom, unaccompanied refugee minors ¹			Most common citizenship	
				Number	Girls	Boys	Country	Number
2022	16 825	6 036	10 789	630	141	489	Ukraine	2 062
2021	11 425	4 224	7 201	507	126	381	Afghanistan	1 488
2020	12 991	5 081	7 910	500	157	343	Syrian Arab Republic	1 209
2019	21 958	8 825	13 133	902	257	645	Syrian Arab Republic	2 649
2018	21 502	8 573	12 929	944	249	695	Syrian Arab Republic	2 709
2017	25 666	10 031	15 635	1 336	293	1 043	Syrian Arab Republic	4 718
2016	28 939	11 587	17 352	2 199	435	1 764	Syrian Arab Republic	5 459
2015	162 877	48 149	114 728	35 369	2 847	32 522	Syrian Arab Republic	51 338
2014	81 301	26 484	54 817	7 049	1 363	5 686	Syrian Arab Republic	30 583
2013	54 259	19 496	34 763	3 852	668	3 184	Syrian Arab Republic	16 317

SCB.se 2023a

Nevertheless, these statistics also show that migration to Sweden has not significantly decreased over the past few years. If we compare Figure 1 with Figure 2 (below), we can see that, while the number of asylum seekers has significantly diminished over the past few years, due to recent restrictive asylum policies, migration to Sweden in percentage terms has held steady. Thus, the integration of newly arrived children remains a relevant task for ECEC.

Figure 2: Migration flows 2000–2022, number of immigrants since 2000



SCB.se 2023b

Green indicates men, blue indicates women and yellow includes both sexes

As Figure 3 shows, between 2011–2021 most people arrived from Syria, Afghanistan, Eritrea, Somalia, India and Iraq.

Figure 3: People living in Sweden according to place of birth

Land	Antal	Förändring 2011–2021	Höginkomst- (HI) eller LMI-land
Syrien	196 000	+174 000	LMI
Irak	147 000	+21 000	LMI
Finland	137 000	–30 000	HI
Polen	95 000	+22 000	HI
Iran	83 000	+19 000	LMI
Somalia	70 000	+30 000	LMI
Afghanistan	63 000	+45 000	LMI
Jugoslavien	62 000	–8 000	LMI
Bosnien och Hercegovina	60 000	+4 000	LMI
Turkiet	54 000	+10 000	LMI
Tyskland	53 000	+5 000	HI
Eritrea	48 000	+36 000	LMI
Indien	47 000	+29 000	LMI
Thailand	45 000	+11 000	LMI
Norge	41 000	–2 000	HI
Danmark	38 000	–6 000	HI
Kina	37 000	+12 000	LMI
Rumänien	34 000	+13 000	HI
Storbritannien och Nordirland	32 000	+10 000	HI
Libanon	29 000	+5 000	LMI
Övriga länder	718 000	+264 000	

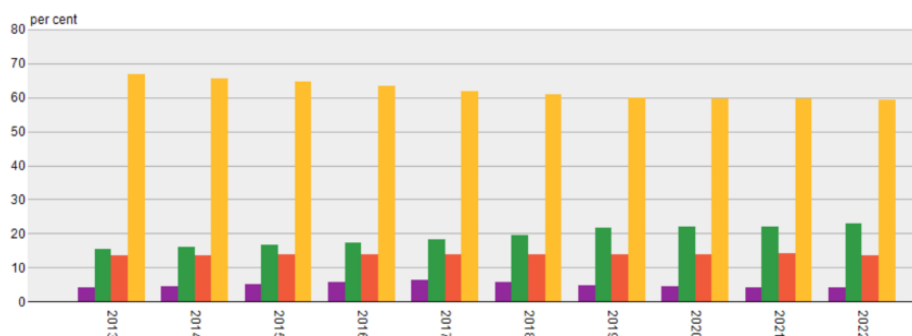
Elinder et al. 2023:4:21

Swedish ECEC has been part of the country's integration policies since the 1970s and it has attracted renewed and increased attention over the past few years (Bohme

Shomary 2022; Gruber/Puskás 2013). This renewed interest can be explained by the fact that, between 2010 and 2020, the proportion of children with a foreign background in Swedish preschools grew from 20 to 25 percent (Skolverket.se 2023a). Moreover, preschool segregation has shifted to the centre of attention in Swedish politics (Alm Fjellborg/Forsberg 2023). Owing to housing segregation, preschools in different areas experience diversity to different degrees. In some preschools, there are no or only a few children with a migrant background, while other preschools are characterised by a superdiversity in terms of the guardians' origins, skills, qualifications, languages and social status (Ibid.).

Figure 4 shows how the rates of five-year-old children with different backgrounds have changed during the period 2013–2022. Statistics Sweden (SCB) differentiates between the following statistical categories of children: children born abroad (violet), children born in Sweden with both parents born abroad (green), children born in Sweden with one parent born abroad (red), and children born in Sweden with both parents born in Sweden (yellow). As the figure shows, during the period 2013–2022, the biggest change occurred within the categories children born in Sweden with both parents born in Sweden and children born in Sweden with both parents born abroad, the category that in everyday discourse is often referred to as second-generation migrants.

Figure 4: Children according to background 2013–2022



Based on SCB.se 2023c.

At the same time, according to the “Guidelines and Recommendations Regarding Statistics on Persons with a Foreign Background” (2002:3), the umbrella term for children born abroad, together with children born in Sweden with both parents born abroad, is “children with a foreign background”. Children born in Sweden with one parent born abroad, and children born in Sweden with both parents born in Sweden are referred to as “children with a Swedish background”.

Statistics on children’s living conditions show that there are significant differences in living conditions between children with a foreign background and children with a Swedish background (SCB.se 2020). Children with a foreign background, to a greater extent than children with a Swedish background, live in areas with socioeconomic challenges, in families with low levels of income and education (Ibid.). In the autumn of 2023, Swedish Public Service Television broadcast a series of news items about preschools in

segregated areas in the city of Gothenburg. These news items show how a mother motivates her choice not to enrol her children in preschool by saying that staff at the preschools close to their home speak poor Swedish (SVT 2023-09-21a, b). When a representative from the municipality is interviewed a day later, she verifies the mother's view that integration in these areas "is going the wrong way" and that preschools in these areas "contribute to segregation" (SVT 2023-09-22).⁸ This report provides an understanding of how these challenges are met, at both the national and local levels.

1.2 Differences in living conditions and preschool enrolment

All children living in Sweden, regardless of their parents' employment or the family's situation in general, are entitled to public preschool. From the age of one year, children have a right to publicly subsidised ECEC provision (Sw. *förskola*): "From age one, children must be offered preschool to the extent necessary to accommodate their parents' work or studies, or if the child has an individual need due to the family's situation"⁹ (Skolverket.se 2023c). From age three, children have a right to ECEC provision that is free of charge for at least 15 hours per week (Sw. *allmän förskola*). In addition, children whose parents are unemployed or on parental leave with another child must be offered ECEC from age one, for at least three hours a day or 15 hours a week (Skolverket.se 2023c). Each municipality is responsible for following the "principle of proximity", which means that a child should be offered a place at a preschool as close to the child's home as possible (SFS 2010:800 15 §).

As far as the right to preschool is concerned, migrant children of preschool age, regardless of their refugee status, are treated equally with children who have Swedish citizenship. Asylum-seeking children, children who have applied for or received a residence permit with temporary protection, and children who are entitled to education under the Education Act as a result of EU law, the Agreement on the European Economic Area (EEA) or the Agreement between the European Union and its Member States, on the one hand, and Switzerland, on the other, have the right to enrol in preschool education (Migrationsverket.se 2023d; SFS 2010: 800; SFS 2022:833; Skolverket.se 2023c).

Nevertheless, while the right to preschool, publicly subsidised or free of charge, is generally not based on children's background, there are differences in enrolment rates. In 2022, of all the children enrolled in preschool, 74 percent have Swedish origins and 25 percent have a foreign background. Fourteen percent of children with a foreign background were born abroad, and 86 percent have two parents who were born abroad. A total of 4 980 children, 1 percent, have unknown background,

⁸ For more reasons as to why parents/guardians, foreign born and Swedish born, choose not to enrol a child in preschool, see Lentz Taguchi 2022. In that study, 29 women and five men from different parts of Sweden were interviewed. All had a higher level of education than the general population.

⁹ For example, if the child's parents are on long term sick-leave.

i.e., they are not registered as residents and lack a personal number (Skolverket.se 2023a).

The differences in enrolment rate and the processes of segregation have led to growing political and educational interest in newly arrived children and children with a foreign background who are not enrolled in preschool education. Owing to housing segregation, preschool children encounter very different linguistic realities depending on where they live and what language(s) their parents speak. In some preschools, there are no or only a few bilingual or multilingual children, while in others the great majority of children are bilingual or multilingual and have little access to Swedish-speaking peers. Moreover, depending on where a preschool is located, multilingual children may or may not have peers with whom they share a language, apart from Swedish (Puskás/Björk Willén 2017).

1.3 Differences in preschool quality and staff shortages

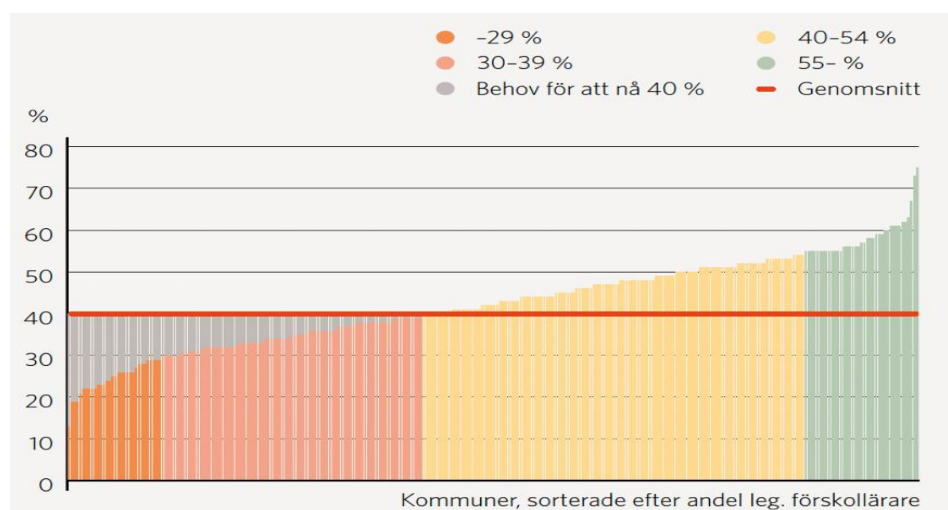
In Swedish preschools, it is the role of preschool teachers and other pedagogical staff to stimulate, care for and support *all children's* development and learning, regardless of gender or background (Skolverket.se 2018:5). Language is mentioned 26 times in the curriculum, and it is emphasised that developing competence in Swedish is especially important (Skolverket.se 2018:8). Yet, one of the biggest challenges faced by many municipalities is staffing. In 2022, there were 109 000 adults employed to work in preschools. Around 40 percent of preschool employees have a preschool teacher qualification (a 3.5-year university degree), and around 30 percent have a three-year, upper-secondary vocational training in childcare and leisure-time studies (Skolverket.se 2023a). Three problematic aspects of staffing are that:

- About one third of staff has neither a pedagogical university education nor childcare education,
- Between municipalities, the percentage of licenced preschool teachers varies between 13 and 75 percent, and the percentage of trained childminders varies between 6 and 49 percent,
- In many preschools (especially in segregated areas), many of the staff are in need of language training in Swedish (SKL.se 2019: 25; Skolverket.se 2023a).

The differences between preschools are also of interest. A handful of municipalities have at most one tenth of staff who lack training to work with children, while in seven municipalities, at least half of the employees lack such training (SKL.se 2019).

Figure 5 illustrates the spread and rate of preschool teachers distributed in 2018 across the country's 290 municipalities. The red line indicates that, on average, 40 percent of those who work in preschools are trained preschool teachers. In 2018, 121 of Sweden's municipalities had less than 40 percent of annual workers with preschool teacher education.

Figure 5: Rate of preschool teachers per municipality, spread and average¹⁰



SKL.se 2019 p. 27

The number of qualified staff (preschool teachers and assistants) working in preschools appears to be problematic in certain locations across Sweden. SKR's mapping (2019) shows that large cities, commuting municipalities and rural municipalities have the greatest difficulties recruiting trained preschool teachers. In these regions, the percentage of staff lacking training for working with children is usually high, while the percentage of preschool teachers with qualifications is low. At the same time, in large cities, preschools in socio-economically well-developed areas have more staff with qualifications than socio-economically poorer areas, leading to variations in quality (SKL.se 2019).

1.4 Multilingual policy and practice in Swedish preschools

The Swedish preschool curriculum stipulates that: "the preschool should provide each child with the conditions to develop both the Swedish language and their mother tongue, if the child has a mother tongue other than Swedish" (Skolverket 2018, pp. 14–15). This task has been included in the preschool curriculum since 1998 (Skolverket.se 1998, p. 98). Yet, the explicit language policy formulated in the Swedish preschool curriculum is difficult to enact in a way that allows all of the languages that children speak to be supported equally (Puskás/Björk-Willén 2017; Skolinspektionen.se 2017). Several reviews by the Swedish Schools Inspectorate have come to the conclusion that staff at many preschools feel that they do not have the knowledge or competence to drive language development work with children who speak languages other than Swedish. Preschool staff describe uncertainty in

¹⁰ Comment: -29% should read <29%, and 55-% should read >55%.

how they can work with children's mother tongues (Skolinspektionen.se 2010, 2017, 2018).

In addition, it has been acknowledged that there is not only a need for language training in Swedish among the children, but also among the staff (Papakosma 2023), and the government has directed the Swedish National Agency for Education to formulate general recommendations about the language requirements for staff working in preschools (Skolverket.se 2022). As far as staff members' competence in other languages than Swedish is concerned, there is very little information about how it is valued (Gruber 2013), while the focus of municipalities, especially in larger cities, over the past few years has been on testing the staff's competence in Swedish. For example, the municipality of Botkyrka, a municipality near Stockholm, requires a language test in Swedish for everyone who applies for a job in a preschool. Sufficient knowledge of Swedish is also required of those who wish to extend their temporary work (Vi Lärare 2021). Thus, staff members' mother-tongue competence is not prioritised, despite the fact that, in the 2010 Education Act (SFS 2010:800), the pre-school's mission was clarified to specify that children with a mother tongue other than Swedish may develop both the Swedish language and their mother tongue.

1.5 Report methodology: Identifying key actors for ECEC and integration at national and local levels

Sweden has a centralised process for designing the national curriculum for ECEC, as well as for policies and laws aimed at integration. At the same time, it is the municipalities that are responsible for providing preschool education for all children according to a new (revised) law (SFS 2022:833). The task of operationalisation is thus given to local actors, who deal with the implementation of policies at the local level. In this model of welfare pluralism, several actors are involved at both the national and local levels. This is why, at first, we identify key actors within the Swedish ECEC system in relation to the new law aiming to enrol more children in pre-school (Figure 6). Below, we provide a brief presentation of recent initiatives concerning Swedish ECEC and integration. In the second and third steps, we investigate the State and one government agency at the national level, as well as municipalities at the local level. Hence, this introduction aims to map several actors, while the rest of the report is more focused on specific actors from amongst these.

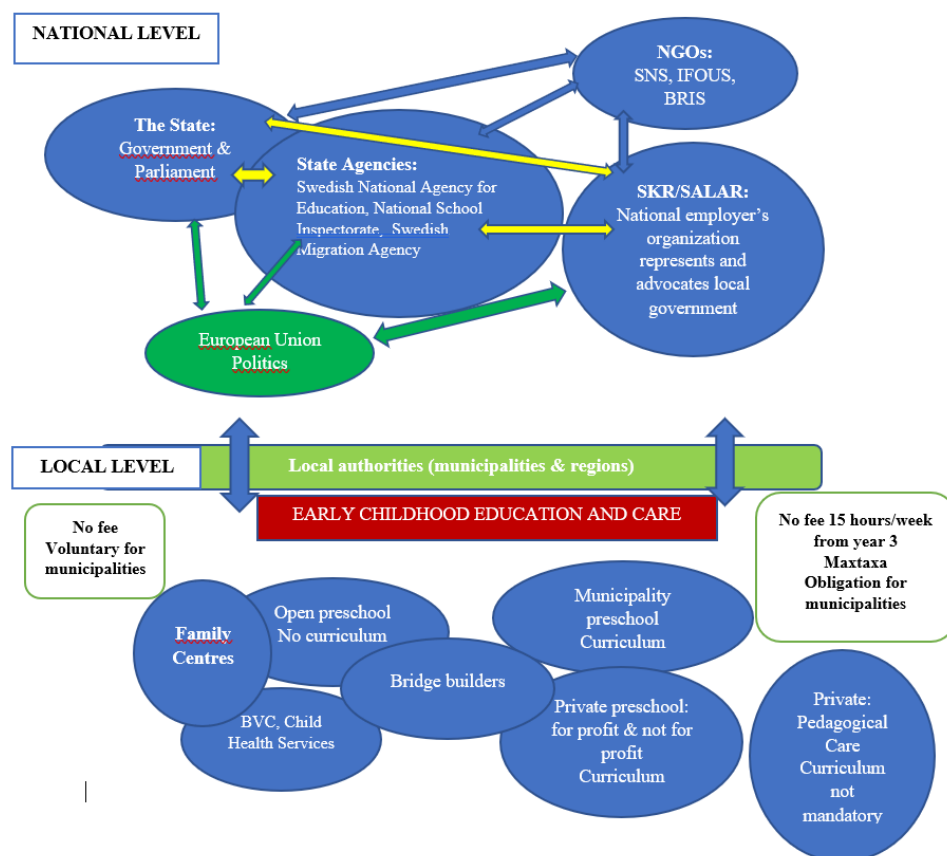
At the national level, four types of actors take a particular interest in the question of how Swedish ECEC can support integration. These are (see also Figure 6): 1) the State (government and parliament), 2) some state agencies (The National Board of Education, Skolverket; The National Schools Inspectorate, Skolinspektionen; and The Swedish Migration Agency, Migrationsverket), 3) non-governmental organisations (Children's Right in Society, BRIS; IFOUS; SNS), and 4) an employers' organisation that represents and advocates for local government (municipalities and regions) (Sveriges Kommuner och Regioner, SKR). In addition, the County Administrative Boards have been given the task of planning, organising and implementing efforts for newly arrived people (EU citizens, labour migrants and students from

abroad) and asylum seekers. This takes place at national, regional and local levels in collaboration with municipalities, government authorities, companies, organisations and associations. The County Administrative Boards, in collaboration with municipalities, have established so-called service offices. A service office (Sw. servicekontor) is a place where individuals can get help and information from several different government agencies: the Swedish Public Employment Service, Social Insurance Agency, the Swedish Migration Agency, the Swedish Pensions Agency and the Swedish Tax Agency. Service centres are run by the National Government Service Centre.¹¹ Some services, such as those provided by the Migration Agency, are only available at a limited number of offices. These offices are not involved in working with issues related to ECEC.

At the local level, the actors involved in supporting newly arrived children's integration, apart from municipal and private preschools, include the following actors: family centres, open preschools, child health centres and bridge builders. The arrows in Figure 6 illustrate the main connections between different actors in relation to ECEC and integration.

¹¹ <https://www.statenssc.se/en>

Figure 6: Key actors for Swedish ECEC and integration at national and local levels¹²



Source: own research

1.6 Description of the actors in Figure 6

Actors at the *national level* enacting initiatives concerning preschool and integration:

Government and Parliament

Government and Parliament, the State, both initiates and hinders politics according to democratic procedures such as motions, government inquiries, government bills, committee reports, and parliamentary debates and decisions. Government might issue special tasks to specific government agencies. This is a key actor in the report, as will be presented in the next section.

¹² See also Garvis/Lunneblad 2018 for another way of presenting Swedish ECEC. Private actors receive public funding.

Government agencies

Government agencies are central administrative units with varying obligations related to upholding the quality and equality of ECEC. All agencies get their job descriptions from the government, which might change the job description for an agency, start new agencies or close down an agency. This is part of how policy is implemented. Agencies are responsible to varying degrees for disseminating information on how to interpret and implement the guidelines and regulations stated in the national curriculum and other policy and legal documents aimed at ensuring the integration of children with a foreign background. The three agencies identified in Figure 6 share information about preschool and integration. However, the Swedish National Agency for Education is the most active, and is the focus of part of our analysis in this report (section 2). The National Schools Inspectorate is, in the fall 2023, running an inspection of 30 preschools in disadvantaged areas, focusing on equality (Skolinspektionen.se 2023a; Skolinspektionen.se 2023b).

The Swedish Migration Agency indirectly presents the new role of municipalities when describing the school law (chapter 8, about preschool). Hence, the reform is almost invisible on its webpage (Migrationsverket.se 2023c). In addition, the agency presents projects about integration and preschool, such as the open preschool as an Integration Hub funded by the European Union, where new models for outreach activities are encouraged (Migrationsverket.se 2023a), Language Bath Preschool¹³ and Diversity in Preschool¹⁴ about the need to improve staff members' language proficiency in Swedish (Migrationsverket.se 2023b).

The agency's active involvement regarding young children and integration is mainly concentrated on working with the regions and municipalities in *reception centres*¹⁵ during the asylum-seeking process. The number of such centres has decreased during the last few years. In centres where the agency runs its own housing facilities, the collaboration with local actors is most developed and tuned into individual needs. However, regardless of this, there seem to be challenges to getting children of preschool age attending preschool, due to their parents' preference to keep them at home. How the new law described in this report will affect this situation is unclear (Interview, Child coordinator, Migrationsverket, 2023-11-01).¹⁶

SKR - The Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions

All of Sweden's 290 municipalities and 21 regions are members of SKR, which offers support and services to its members. SKR signs central collective agreements, strives to empower its members in their role as employers and supports local solu-

¹³ Sw. språkbäddförskola.

¹⁴ Sw. mångfald i förskolan.

¹⁵ Sw. mottagningsenheter.

¹⁶ In the interview, heads of reception centres (Sw. mottagningsenheter) were identified as important actors. The agency published a report about the conditions for making correct legal assessments regarding asylum-seeking children in families, where the children's best interests are taken into account (Migrationsverket 2022).

tions. SKR speaks for members in dialogue with the government, parliament, government agencies, the EU and other key organisations. It is a politically run organisation that strives to promote and strengthen local self-government and the development of regional and local democracy. SKR actively writes reports, including on preschool and integration (SKR 2018; SKR 2019a, 2019b; SKR 2020; SKR 2021). In collaboration with the government, SKR runs a project about open preschool as an Integration HUB (IHUB) 2018–2021 (SKR 2021), and provides information on its webpage about municipalities' new obligations in relation to the new law (SKR.se 2023a). In addition, a new collaboration with the government, to get more women born abroad into work via open preschool 2023–2025, is presented on the webpage, with a toolkit of activities, films and other support materials (SKR.se 2023b; SKR.se 2023c).

Non-Governmental Organisations

Non-Governmental Organisations are part of civil society and strive to influence national policymaking on specific issues. Generally, citizens have trust in such organisations.

The Centre for Business and Policy Studies (SNS) is an independent non-profit association, which brings together representatives of business, administration, academia and politics.¹⁷ Its activities consist of research, meetings and training on central social issues. A total of 280 of Sweden's leading companies, authorities and organisations are members of SNS. In 2018, SNS organised a seminar on "Preschool's role in integration", where research from Norway was presented as good practice on how children's language learning supports integration. Preschool is presented as an arena for learning about the new country as well as the new language. This seminar is available online via the SNS webpage, which also presents supportive material (SNS.se 2023).

Children's Rights in Society (BRIS), published a report about preschool's role in relation to children in the process of migration and critiqued Swedish ECEC for being too unequal. This report included the voices of children, professionals and parents (BRIS 2019:2), and recently a new report on the importance to children of being welcomed when in the process of migration was published. The new situation faced by approximately 13 000 asylum-seeking children from Ukraine is described, together with anxiety about children's situation during the migration process (BRIS 2023:3).

Innovation, Research and Development in Preschool and School (IFOUS) is an independent, non-profit research institute collaborating with SKR and independent national organisations for schools. The aim is to promote collaboration between research and practice. In 2022, IFOUS published a review on the need for more research and knowledge concerning how language acquisition can be improved in

¹⁷ SNS does not present itself as a think tank, since it claims to be independent of political/ideological preferences.

preschools where few or no people speak Swedish as a first language (IFOUS.se 2023a). In 2023, together with eleven municipalities, IFOUS initiated a three-year research and development project to meet the call for more knowledge about how to learn Swedish in preschool (IFOUS 2023b).

Actors at the *local level* enacting initiatives concerning preschool and integration, and particularly implementing government politics. These are general descriptions because the local actors reveal a variety of initiatives, as presented in the report (section 3):

Municipality preschools

The majority of Swedish preschools are run by municipalities (70%). In addition to general preschool (Sw. *allmän förskola*) that is free of charge depending on a child's age and needs, guardians have to pay to place their children in preschool (Sw. *förskola*), but the fees are subsidised and regulated by a system of maximum fees stipulated by the Education Act (SFS: 2010:800; SFS 2022:833). From the time a child turns three, s/he is entitled to 525 hours of free childcare per year. Moreover, all parents in Sweden receive universal child support for each child, which is congruent with the preschool fee. This is named "maxtaxa".¹⁸ This system of fees also applies to private preschools. The curriculum is mandatory. Municipal preschools have a higher proportion of children with foreign backgrounds compared to privately run preschools. Among all those enrolled, a total of 26 percent of children in municipality preschools have foreign backgrounds (Skolverket.se 2023a).

Private preschools

Private preschools are run by private providers such as corporations, cooperatives and foundations. Both private and public providers are allocated economic means through a voucher system administered by the municipalities. The curriculum is mandatory. Among all those enrolled, a total of 22 percent of children in private preschools have foreign backgrounds (Skolverket.se 2023a).

Pedagogical care

Pedagogical care is a complement to the comprehensive universal Swedish public preschool run by registered childminders. It consists of home-based day-care and the curriculum is not mandatory, even though it is governed by the school law. It is more common in rural areas and small towns than in metropolitan areas. The number of children in pedagogical care has steadily declined since the late 1980s and as

¹⁸ The fee that parents pay for childcare is based on household income. It is calculated as a percentage and in relation to how many children there are in the household, as well as whether they attend preschool full time or part time. For the oldest child in a family, childcare costs 3% of the household's gross income. For child number two it costs 2%, and for child number three it costs 1%. Starting with a household's fourth child, no further fee is paid for preschool or educational care. The reform of a maximum rate means that the municipality applies a childcare rate that is based on the household's total gross income (income before tax) and with specified ceilings for the rate (54,830 kronor per month beginning in January 2023). The fee is paid 12 months per year. <https://www.barnomsorgsguiden.se/maxtaxa-barnomsorg/>

of late 2023 ca 5000 children are in pedagogical care. Pedagogical care is regulated by the Education Act (SFS 2010:800). According to Chapter 25 of this Act (SFS 2010:800), the municipality shall strive to offer a child pedagogical care instead of preschool care if a child's guardian so desires. Pedagogical care must stimulate children's development and learning through educational activities. In cooperation with each child's home, it should promote their development into active, creative, competent and responsible individuals and citizens. Children must be prepared for continued learning and for education within the school system (SFS 2010:800).

Open preschool

Open preschool is a complement to the comprehensive universal Swedish public preschool. The first open preschools were established in the 1980s with the intention of providing possibilities for parents whose children are not enrolled in preschools to develop pedagogically oriented group activities together with preschool teachers. Municipalities can organise open preschool as a complement to pedagogical care and preschool. This is voluntary for the municipalities. In 2019, there were 501 open preschools across 218 out of 290 municipalities, six percent of which are private services. In more than half of the municipalities, open preschool is part of a family centre, meaning that it is co-located with child health services (BVC), as well as preventive individual and family health services. Ninety-seven percent of the staff are trained to work with children. There are no guidelines or curriculum in open preschool (see section 3.6).

Family centres

Family centres have been established since the 1990s as arenas within which several family welfare institutions are co-located and coordinated. They generally house an open preschool, as well as maternal and child healthcare (see section 3.3).

BVC, child health services (CHC)

BVC, child health services (CHC), offer preventive health surveillance, including language screening. The regions are responsible for BVC, and there are approximately 950 in Sweden. Every third BVC is run as a private facility. Eight out of ten are co-hosted with a healthcare facility (see section 3.4).

Bridge builders

Bridge builders, sometimes also called cultural interpreters, are professionals with immigrant backgrounds working as a link between families, the Swedish healthcare system and the Swedish educational system. They are employed and financed by municipalities. Bridge builders who work with families with young children are em-

ployed by municipal educational offices. Which language(s) and cultural background(s) are given priority depends on the demands within a municipality¹⁹ (see section 3.5).

As this mapping of the Swedish ECEC organisation at national and local levels shows, there are several actors who share an interest in integration. In addition, these actors form a kind of network making connections between levels.

After this mapping of key actors interested in Swedish ECEC and integration, we move on to the second step. In the next few sections of the report, we describe the political process that led to the measure of deciding the revised law implemented in the autumn of 2023 (SFS 2022:833). This is an in-depth analysis of how key concepts such as integration, newly arrived children,²⁰ the Swedish language and mother tongue are used in the discourse. We follow arguments supportive or critical of the proposal, and how the original idea about making preschool mandatory for all newly arrived three-year-old children shifts into a solution making direct enrolment and outreach activities mandatory for the municipalities. We also show how the new law is implemented via the National Board of Education.

Thereafter, in a third step, we focus on how municipalities operationalise the tasks outlined at the national level. The actors involved at the local level may differ between municipalities. This is why we describe the most relevant actors involved in implementation and thereafter illustrate the processes of implementation with examples from a selection of municipalities. In this approach of combining a horizontal (national and local level) approach and a vertical one, i.e., how the national and local levels communicate during the process and in the implementation phase, we adhere to the DJI analytical framework (Erhard/Scholz/Harring 2018).

¹⁹ For example, Sundsvall municipality employed two bridge builders with a Somali background <https://sverigesradio.se/artikel/6692175>. Bridge builders with a Romani background work, among other places, in Stockholm, Linköping and Göteborg <https://www.minoritet.se/4405>.

²⁰ See definition in footnote 2.

2 Key initiative at national level regarding ECEC and integration: The process of issuing a new law

In this section of the report, the state as an actor takes centre stage, together with the Swedish National Agency for Education. In order to trace the key arguments about preschool and integration, primary sources such as government inquiries, government bills, parliamentary debates and related documents are analysed. The focus is on how a new law aiming to get more newly arrived children enrolled in preschool is implemented in order to increase integration. In addition, we describe how a government agency presents support material to be used by local actors, mainly municipalities, when implementing this law.

The 2018 election resulted in an agreement between four parties supporting the government, the so-called January agreement.²¹ One of 73 activities on the list was to give the children of newly arrived migrants a right to mandatory language preschool for 15 hours a week free of charge within the framework of preschool. During the further processing of this agreement in the Education Committee and Parliament, it was decided to issue a government inquiry into how a mandatory preschool for language development could be implemented. In the directives for the inquiry, entitled: “More children in preschool for better language development in Swedish”, the government emphasises the importance of an expanded preschool, “particularly regarding newly arrived children, children with another mother tongue than Swedish and children in socioeconomically disadvantaged groups” (Dir. 2019:71).²²

In the motivation, children of newly arrived migrants are mentioned several times. It is argued that they rarely hear Swedish spoken at home, and for this reason education in Swedish is particularly important for these children. Municipalities should be able to organise the language preschool as they wish, as long as newly arrived children get to meet children who speak Swedish. How the staff’s proficiency in Swedish can be improved should also be investigated (Bet. 2018/19: UbU1:c; Rskr. 2018/19:104; Dir. 2019:71; SOU 2020:67).²³

²¹ Social Democrats (S), Centerpartiet (C), Liberalerna (L) and Miljöpartiet de gröna (MP), the January agreement 2018. The election of 2022 led to a new government and agreement, including Moderaterna (M), Kristdemokraterna (KD), Liberalerna (L) and Sverigedemokraterna (SD), known as the Tidö agreement 2022.

²² Sw. fler barn i förskolan för bättre språkutveckling i svenska; särskilt när det gäller nyanlända barn, barn med annat modersmål än svenska och barn i socioekonomiskt utsatta grupper.

²³ The directives refer to reports from State Agencies and EU policies when arguing for the importance of extended preschool and language development to enhance school success. We focus here on arguments relating to integration and language learning.

In line with the January agreement, the government decided to grant state funding of 100 million SEK to increase “language development” in preschools in 2019 and again in 2021. The aim was to increase participation among children with “another daily social language than Swedish”²⁴ via further education for staff to develop their skills in Swedish (Dir. 2019:558; Prop. 2020/21:1; Bet. 2020/21:UBU1; Rskr. 2020/21:141). The municipalities must apply for self-organised projects to receive part of the funding and the National Schools Inspectorate is responsible for following up how the funding is used (Dir. 2019:558).²⁵

A year later, in 2020, the government inquiry was published, under the title: “Preschool for all children – for better language learning in Swedish”,²⁶ with suggestions, and that was *not* to make preschool mandatory for this specific group of 3–5-year-olds because, according to EU regulations, this would be an act of discrimination (SOU 2020:67). To target a specific group with specific means circumscribing some guardians from their parental rights is discriminatory. To organise mandatory language preschools would add to negative outcomes, since such preschools already exist for “children with specific needs”.²⁷ To lump children with an origin other than Swedish together with children with disabilities now stood out as discrimination.²⁸ Instead, the solution proposed by the inquiry was to “directly enrol”²⁹ (direct enrolment) newly arrived children, meaning that their guardians would receive an offer from the municipality to enrol their child in preschool at the age of three. Importantly, the guardians could turn this offer down, and hence mandatory preschool for newly arrived children *is not* proposed as a solution.³⁰ However, it should be *mandatory for the municipalities* to provide a place for each such child, as well as to reach out to the guardians to explain the role of preschool in Sweden (SOU 2020:67).

The inquiry addressed the issue of integration in relation to both the national goals for integration and the role of language in integration. In this context, “language”

²⁴ Öka deltagande särskilt för barn ”med annat dagligt umgängesspråk än svenska”.

²⁵ According to one municipality, the short time available for applications, and the fact that the grant decision took several months, even though the funding should be used in the same year, caused stress and made it difficult to engage in long-term initiatives. Some money was further distributed to preschools applying for specific projects, and another initiative was to recruit skilled operational developers (Sw. verksamhetsutvecklare) focusing on language (personal information, Head of Preschool unit, Gothenburg). It would be of interest, we argue, to follow up on how different municipalities handled the temporary project funding from the government and its effects on integration (a different model for funding was introduced from 2022).

²⁶ Sw. Förskola för alla barn – för bättre språkutveckling i svenska.

²⁷ Sw. barn med särskilda behov. Specific needs due to disability.

²⁸ However, the Swedish state preschool politics discourse connected immigrant children and disabled children from the 1970s onwards; both ought to be in language preschools. As it were, the actual language preschools only targeted disabled children (Bohme Shomary 2022).

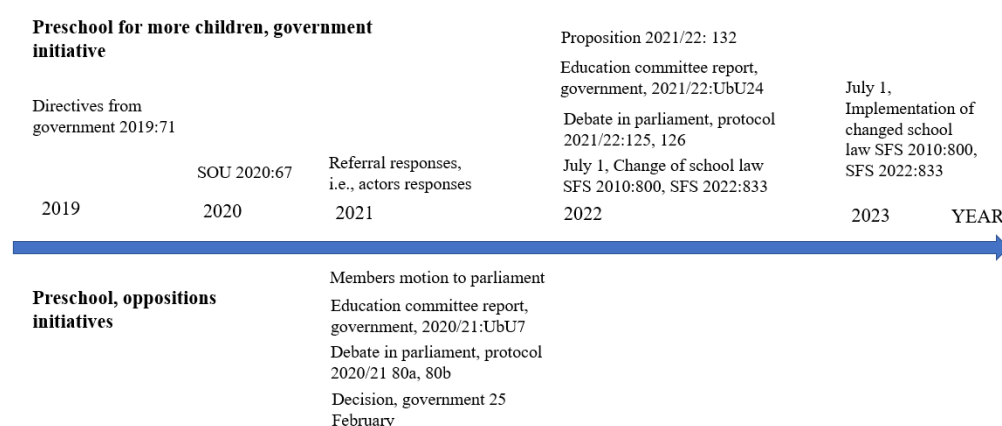
²⁹ Sw. direktinskriva.

³⁰ A suggestion to make preschool mandatory for all five-year-olds was also presented. This is not discussed further.

means Swedish, and the target for integration is newly arrived children coming into preschool (SOU 2020:67).

The timeline in Figure 7 visualises how the process of proposing and deciding upon the new law was a way to speak about preschool for more children. In addition, the timeline shows the opposition's parallel initiatives, named as preschool. In the following text, we describe the arguments concerning preschool and integration that were put forward during both of these parallel processes.

Figure 7: Timeline for the political process to decide upon a new law



Source: own research

2.1 Actors' responses to *direct enrolment*: Support and critique

Sixty-six actors were invited to give referrals to the government inquiry (SOU 2020:67). Government agencies are obliged to answer, but it is voluntary for others, even though they are invited to give a response (Remiss 2020:67). We have chosen to use four referrals from government agencies as examples, based on their potential interest in the topic of preschool and integration. We also include SKR, since we identify this national organisation as a potentially important actor (see Figure 6).

In addition, 29 municipalities were invited to give referrals to the inquiry. Of these 29 invited municipalities, 13 gave referrals, and we study eight of them. A majority of the municipalities, in addition to supporting the idea of direct enrolment if it is funded by the state, were positive towards the suggestion to make preschool mandatory for all five-year-olds, and the suggested improvements to further educate preschool staff in the Swedish language (SOU 2020:67). We do not cover those latter parts of the discussion here, since our focus is on aspects that are relevant to preschool and integration, i.e., direct enrolment. We have chosen to use the referrals from municipalities since this is an opportunity for them to become engaged and influence the democratic process.

All referrals are published on the parliamentary website as part of transparency in a public democratic process, and some are referred to in the upcoming Proposition

2021/22:132, as a way to argue for the government's suggestion. Our selection of referrals is independent of the choices made in the proposition. We use them to illustrate the kinds of support and critique the government received from different levels as part of the national political process. Other than the proposition, and as accessible knowledge for members of parliament, there are no official debates where the referrals are discussed.

2.1.1 Stakeholders from the national level – mainly government agencies

Referral responses from actors at the national level, such as government agencies, both supported and critiqued the governmental inquiry about direct enrolment. One government agency, Barnombudsmannen,³¹ was very positive about direct enrolment in general and supported the suggestion that it should include children in pedagogical care, and that direct enrolment is about a place in preschool (not in pedagogical care). Barnombudsmannen also supported the idea put forward by the Swedish Migration Agency (in its referral), that the agency should have an obligation to hand information to the municipalities regarding children of preschool age, including children without a residence permit, as is already the case for children of school age (Remissvar Barnombudsmannen 2021).

The Swedish Migration Agency explained that the governmental inquiry's proposal mainly concerns implementation of the school law and the municipalities' services regarding preschool, and therefore the agency's jurisdiction is limited. There is nothing in the proposal that affects the agency's work. If the government were to decide to include the agency, for example to automate the information to municipalities, funding would be required. The agency mainly commented on the situation for asylum-seeking children and had no opinion regarding the suggestion to directly enrol newly arrived children in preschool. According to the agency, the majority of municipalities have information about who these children are, via the settling information they receive from the agency. The agency also pointed out that children can be without guardians after their arrival in Sweden, if parents die, if their asylum application is rejected or if they leave the country. Such children are not included in the proposition (Remissvar Migrationsverket 2021).

Another agency (the Swedish Gender Equality Agency) pointed out that the proposal's effect on gender equality had been insufficiently investigated. Only newly arrived women are included in the analysis, and the effects on newly arrived men must also be taken into consideration. The agency supported the idea of implementing outreach activities that have the potential to involve guardians who otherwise have few contacts with Swedish society. The agency stood behind the proposal.

³¹ The Ombudsman for Children promotes and advances children's rights and interests on the basis of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). The agency monitors the implementation and interpretation of the CRC in municipalities, county regions and other government agencies (Barnombudsmannen.se 2023).

However, it stated that it is not acceptable for newly arrived children's need for preschool to be reduced to only being a question of language. Being displaced and a refugee often affects a child's sense of safety and trust, which can have long-term effects on both them and their guardians. Multilingualism is therefore an important resource to increase preschool staff's knowledge and understanding of this group's situation (Remissvar Jämställdhetsmyndigheten 2021).

One agency was particularly critical of direct enrolment. The Delegation against Segregation³² stated that, if direct enrolment were to become a general strategy, i.e., concerning all children in that age group, it might be positive for children's development, and particularly for children in socio-economically disadvantaged homes. However, the agency rejected the suggestion that newly arrived children should be singled out as a category, since the agency:

“(...) promotes equality-creating initiatives that include broad reforms that in themselves change the structures that create and maintain segregation, and not the establishment of special solutions for certain target groups with different needs and circumstances. For direct interventions to lead to increased participation in preschool, they need to be long term and have lasting effects. This requires more knowledge about the mechanisms that lead to and maintain segregation. /.../ The agency makes analyses based on different geographical levels and opposes the report's focus on the group of new arrivals as a special category.”

Remissvar Delegationen mot segregation 2021

Hence, the agency pointed out that direct enrolment is a discriminatory action, even when named direct enrolment, instead of a mandatory right. Moreover, the agency highlighted the need to conduct differentiated analyses of the needs of newly arrived children, taking into account where in Sweden they arrive, and into what socio-economic conditions, instead of focusing on when they arrived. The guardians should also have the same right to choose preschool for their child as any other guardian.³³ In addition, the agency pointed out the importance of giving newly arrived children the opportunity to develop their mother tongue, and that this ought to be stressed in the law for preschool, as it is in the law for school. It is also important, according to the agency, that preschool staff have multilingual competence (Remissvar Delegationen mot segregation 2021).³⁴

Another kind of actor at the national level, SKR, which supports municipalities and regions, was positive towards the proposal to give municipalities a new responsibility to organise outreach activities, which several municipalities are already practising.

³² The Delegation against Segregation (DELMOS) was a government agency founded in 2018 to lift socially vulnerable areas and break down structural segregation mechanisms, Dir. 2017:33. The agency was closed down in 2022 by the government, and SKR took over responsibility for the municipality network against segregation, SKR.se 2023d. The agency Building in Sweden, Boverket, took over the work against segregation in residential areas.

³³ Also raised by Diskrimineringsombudsmannen, the Equality Ombudsman, a government agency that works on behalf of the Swedish parliament and government to promote equal rights and opportunities and to combat discrimination.

³⁴ Sw. flerspråkig kompetens.

However, it was against the idea that municipalities should directly enrol children. Instead, SKR proposed that municipalities should offer preschool, and that guardians must decide whether they want to take up a place in preschool for their children, and be allowed to choose which preschool. Since there are large differences and variations between municipalities in access to resources (educated staff), this would create inequalities. The planning of preschool would become more problematic and there is a risk that places would not be used. SKR also suggested that pedagogical care ought to be a good alternative to preschool and that open preschool ought to play an increased role in language learning and integration. The Swedish National Agency for Education ought to be given directives to formulate national supporting guidelines to increase participation and support the transition to preschool (Remissvar SKR 2021).

Before continuing the description of how a proposal for a right to mandatory language preschool for a specific group of children was translated into direct enrolment that guardians could turn down after having been contacted by the municipality, we now present a parallel, ongoing process at the political level concerning preschool and integration.

2.1.2 Stakeholders from the local level – mainly municipalities

In the referral responses, the municipalities, *actors at the local level*, typically supported the idea of direct enrolment as an idea or principle: Children in need of better language development would benefit from direct enrolment. However, some municipalities raised the issue of how these children ought to be identified – *who* should do it and *how* should it be done? Most of the responses from municipalities foresaw the need for a growing administration to be able to implement this solution and pointed out that financial support is essential since the reform would lead to increased expenses. If no funding was added, they would not support the idea. Hence, at an ideological level, the municipalities in general supported direct enrolment – but only if its implementation is funded by the state (Remissvar: Klippan, Örebro, Ragunda, Ronneby, Svedala, Stockholm 2021).

Stockholm City explained that it was already working in the direction proposed by the report, including reaching out to the guardians of children who do not attend preschool (Stockholm). Of the 13 district councils included in the Stockholm City referral,³⁵ nine supported the proposal, of which two said it would have little effect in their own district but it would be “important in socio-economically disadvantaged areas”. Of the four districts that were not explicitly positive, one concluded that there was a need for more clarity regarding responsibility and catchment area, and one argued that direct enrolment should include all children at the age of three, including asylum-seeking children (Remissvar Stockholm 2021).

³⁵ Sw. stadsdelsnämnd.

However, two municipality responses reveal alternative interpretations. One municipality explicitly rejected the proposal for direct enrolment because it would not entail any real improvement to the current system, but only cause unjustified administrative work. The only differences would be to place a “care obligation”³⁶ on the municipality, and that guardians who preferred pedagogical care instead of preschool would be forced to abandon that option (Remissvar Kungsbacka 2021).

Another municipality, a big city, was supportive of direct enrolment in principal, as long as guardians can say no. It then listed the complications: identifying who these children are, reserving a place for children who do not show up is both complicated and costly, if a preschool is too far away from home the guardians will say no, and choosing which preschools should enrol these children is more complicated than suggested by the governmental inquiry. This municipality explained that it already contacts guardians and offers them a preschool place for their child, which the guardians turn down. What is needed now is therefore more knowledge about why guardians say no. This would support the municipalities in determining which action is best suited to different families. This municipality commented that other arenas, such as open preschool and family centres, are crucial for outreach initiatives, even though the municipalities are not obliged to organise such arenas (Remissvar Malmö 2021).

2.2 More initiatives in Parliament: The opposition’s initiatives argue for language preschools and open preschool

Interestingly enough, there were also other initiatives presented in Parliament about preschool’s role for integration that were put forward in parallel with the above-mentioned initiatives by the government and its collaborating parties. Almost 80 motions to Parliament about preschool were collected and answered by the Committee on Education in a report published in 2021, followed by a debate in Parliament, before all of these motions were rejected in accordance with the government’s suggestion (Bet. 2020/21:UbU7; Prot. 2020/21:80b; Prot. 2020/21:84). The argument for rejection was that there are ongoing initiatives already running (see above, Bet. 2020/21:UBU7, pp. 11, 17). We focus on how preschool and integration were handled in these other initiatives, mainly put forward by the political opposition, since this provides an understanding of how consensus developed regarding preschool and integration as a matter of focusing primarily on learning Swedish.

In the committee report addressing the motions, preschool is presented as an arena with “integration potential” because it can strengthen the position of the Swedish language, particularly in disadvantaged areas (Bet. 2020/21:UbU7, p. 31, L).³⁷ Preschool can steer children towards “successful integration” (Ibid., p. 39, SD), and it

³⁶ Sw. omsorgsobligatorium.

³⁷ Sw. integrationspotential. The letters refer to political party.

is suggested that preschool should become an “integration preschool” (Ibid., pp. 41, 43, C).³⁸ Another proposal, similar to those outlined in the directives to the ongoing governmental inquiry, was to organise mandatory language preschools for newly arrived children from the age of three (Ibid., pp. 14, 41, 44, M). And preschool should be for “all children” from the age of two, which would include children in disadvantaged areas who are in preschool to a lesser extent than Swedish children. This includes the issue of women’s equality, and their ability to enter the labour market (Ibid., p. 12, S). Other suggestions included: mapping vocabulary among “children with a foreign background”³⁹ (Ibid., pp. 31, 39 SD; p. 32 L), or revising the curriculum to “strengthen the position of the Swedish language” and to make it “clear that children’s development of the Swedish language is a priority”,⁴⁰ especially in disadvantaged areas (Ibid., pp. 12, 31, 32 L).

In addition, it was suggested that open preschool should be an arena for integrating the newly arrived, both children and guardians (mainly mothers). Open preschool is essential for integration. In open preschool, the newly arrived can come into contact with Swedish society and learn Swedish (Bet. 2020/21:UbU7, pp. 23, 26, 34, 39, SD, M, KD). In the arguments for the different proposals, learning Swedish, or not being able to speak Swedish, is a key argument. One motion mentions the importance of also learning one’s mother tongue, but “the main focus should be that they learn to communicate in the language of their new home country” (Ibid., p. 31, L).⁴¹ In the comment from the Education Committee concerning open preschool’s role in stimulating children’s language development in relation to integration, the answer is that initiatives concerning open preschool are positive and welcomed, but there is no need to take further action (Ibid., p. 26). The committee refers to the action taken by SKR and the government, where EU money is being used in a project involving open preschool: “Open preschool for language and integration”.⁴² The task is to “produce and disseminate supportive and learning examples as well as inform about the possibility of applying for state funding”. The project was to report back one year later, in 2021 (SKR 2021).⁴³

³⁸ Sw. lyckad integration; Sw. integrationsförskola.

³⁹ Sw. barn med utländsk bakgrund.

⁴⁰ Sw. stärka svenska språkets ställning, så att det tydligt framkommer att barnens utveckling av det svenska språket ska prioriteras.

⁴¹ Sw. men huvudfokus ska vara att de lär sig kommunicera på sitt nya hemlands språk.

⁴² Also named *Integration Hub – Open Preschool* (iHUB), IHUB.se 2023. The project has three goals: 1) to map open preschools in all municipalities and the municipalities’ needs, 2) to find examples of how open preschool can be used for language learning and mothers’ establishment on the labour market and to enrol their children in preschool, and 3) to inform about how to apply for state funding for initiatives concerning immigrants. In 2020, the project shifted its focus to the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, SKR 2021.

⁴³ The report confirms how useful open preschool is for reaching out to foreign-born women aged 20–44, with newborn or small children, who have been and are at home and miss contact with society. The problem is, that this important arena for integration is voluntary and dependent on short-term financial support (SKR 2021, pp. 5–6). Toolkits about how open preschool can serve as an integration hub have been published, for example SKR 2019a, SKR 2019b.

2.3 Continuing debates in Parliament: Swedish language for integration

In a follow-up discussion with the Prime Minister in Parliament, he was asked if he would support language requirements for preschool staff, in order to increase preschool's quality and equal access. There are disadvantaged areas where only half of six-year-olds have mastered the Swedish language, and such a reform would improve the quality and equality. The Prime Minister was vague and imprecise in his answer, but referred to the "Swedish model". He also expressed the idea that preschool is important for integration, saying:

"I will have to leave the answer to the question of exactly what to do, whether there should be language requirements or not. But we think, of course, that integration is important, and both schools and preschools are a basis for this. We want as many as possible to attend preschool, and once they do, they should of course also have the opportunity to learn the language properly."

Protocol 2020/21:80a, p. 47

In the following parliamentary debate, in February 2021, about *the Education Committee's report*, the Members of Parliament referring to mandatory language preschool supported the idea of direct enrolment (Protocol 2020/21:80, pp. 86, 96, 102, M, L, C).⁴⁴ One member supported the idea because it is particularly important "for those children who have recently moved to Sweden" (Ibid., p. 103, MP). The debate actually started by stipulating a new kind of truth: the importance of acknowledging the role of the Swedish language per se. This is paralleled with a presentation of a deficit in Swedish society, namely the lack of tools to learn Swedish:

"Everything begins with language; we know that now. That is why it is rather unbelievable that we in Sweden do not have the right tools to discover early on, and hence support, children in need of special language interventions to learn Swedish."

Protocol 2020/21:80b, p. 86, M

Every municipality ought to offer support to guarantee good language education. The problems in preschool are immense and more action is needed, according to the arguments presented. The importance of strengthening Swedish language skills was supported by the next speaker, who also highlighted the problems in Swedish preschool. The need to improve children's knowledge of Swedish is only present, however, in disadvantaged areas and not in the countryside or other, as they were described, well-functioning areas. Mandatory preschool for younger children (under six) should only be applicable to certain children in disadvantaged areas (Protocol 2020/21:80b p. 89, SD). As a comment, another member pointed out that preschool

⁴⁴ The source is a parliamentary debate, 11 February 2021. The letters in parentheses refer to political parties.

staff need to be educated and that requirements for language proficiency in Swedish⁴⁵ among staff ought to be implemented as a means of improving integration (Ibid., p. 95, L). This member argued that extra support for learning Swedish is applicable to all areas. However, disadvantaged areas were simultaneously highlighted since children there would benefit more than other children if such a reform were to be implemented:

“We must further educate, we must train further and we must introduce a national language requirement for all pedagogical training regarding preschool if we are to succeed in reversing exclusion, improving integration and, not least, giving children in disadvantaged areas a real chance to acquire the vocabulary, quality and language development that preschool actually should provide according to the curriculum.”

Protocol 2020/21:80b, p. 96, L

Once again, the idea of organising “integration preschools”⁴⁶ was launched, where parents can learn Swedish while their children are in preschool. It was argued that such an initiative would provide “a good start” for children coming to school, and to Sweden, and that it would benefit both them and their parents (Protocol 2020/21:80b, p. 102, C).

We have focused here on what was said about preschool and integration in the parliamentary debate about the *Education Committee’s report* “Preschool” – a result of almost 80 motions and several claims, mainly actualised by the political opposition (Bet. 2020/21: UbU7). During this process, a growing consensus developed, pertaining to the idea that the *Swedish language is the key* to integration, and that preschool must address this fact. However, a majority of the members who spoke also highlighted other problems related to preschool; for example, the issue of the need to provide more pedagogical care. There was also a consensus among the opposition that a new major governmental inquiry ought to be launched by the government, in addition to the ongoing one about preschool for all for improved language learning. In the end, the government’s proposal was decided upon, and that was *not to* accept the proposals, mainly from the opposition (Protocol 2020/21:84; Rskr. 2020/21:196). Hence, the government turned down all the propositions about how preschool could be used for integration, as suggested mainly by the opposition parties. The discussion shows, however, that there is an ongoing interest in this issue among both governing and non-governing parties.

⁴⁵ While there are no national requirements for language proficiency in Swedish, in recent years several municipalities have introduced language testing for staff seeking employment/working in preschools.

⁴⁶ Sw. integrationsförskola.

2.4 From direct enrolment to “an offering” to “some children”

The political process of turning the governmental inquiry “Preschool for all children ...” (SOU 2020:67) into a decision to change the law follows a script. The inquiry was first presented, together with referrals in a governmental proposition (Prop. 2021/22:132), and secondly in an Education Committee report (Bet. 2021/22:UbU24). Both were debated in Parliament and eventually decided upon in June 2022 (Protocol 2021/22:125; Prot. 2021/22:126; Rskr. 2021/22:363).⁴⁷ We have identified a shift in language discourse, from using direct enrolment to presenting “an offering” to “some children” during this ongoing process. We will now explain how this shift took place.

The government’s line of argument was challenged, as shown this far by the opposition, with ideas about organising language preschools and placing more emphasis on pedagogical care and open preschool, in addition to preschool itself. However, the government continued to argue for direct enrolment and preschool’s role in integration in its own proposition (Prop. 2021/22:132). This reform is related to the national goals for integration, which are equal opportunities, obligations and rights, regardless of ethnic or cultural background, and the expected outcome is: good education for children improves integration, more children can access better conditions for developing their Swedish language skills, more foreign-born children taking part in preschool increases their ability to succeed at school, which benefits integration. More children in preschool are an incentive for guardians to start work or study, learn more Swedish and thereby develop stronger trust in Swedish society, which supports children’s living conditions. The conclusion is that the reform contributes to the pursuit of the integration policy’s objectives (Prop. 2021/22:132).

When we look for trends in the use of words in the three key texts, some observations stand out as important.⁴⁸ “Open preschool”, singled out by the opposition as important for integration, is not mentioned at all in the final committee report. “Language preschool”, also important to the opposition, is mainly referred to in the final committee report when addressing suggestions from the opposition and turning them down. It is also explained that the directives for the SOU inquiry included language preschools, an idea that was dropped during the process of finalising the SOU. In addition, there is a major reduction in the use of the phrase “direct enrolment”, which is only mentioned once in the final committee report. The reconceptualisation during this process was to present the same idea as “an offering”.⁴⁹ The term “mandatory” was also dropped and, when used at all, it is mainly to refer to what is mandatory for the municipalities and not for guardians or their children.

⁴⁷ Just before the election in September 2023.

⁴⁸ Word use is correlated to number of pages in the varying texts: SOU (2020) 372 pages; Proposition (2022) 69 pages, and Committee Report (2022) 58 pages. The method of searching for key concepts was inspired by Fairclough (1992).

⁴⁹ Sw. ett erbjudande.

“Integration” stands out as a concept that is used more at the end, as well as “Swedish language”, which increases by 60 percent (SOU 2020:67; Prop. 2021/22:132; Bet. 2021/22: UbU24). This suggests that the government’s use of preschool for integration at a national level has narrowed down to one solution: *to learn the Swedish language via municipal preschools*. The initial critique that this is discriminatory is downplayed by framing the reform as an offering to, mainly, guardians.

In the parliamentary debate that followed the publication of the report, the shift in language use becomes even more prominent. When discussing the proposition for a new law stipulating preschool as a right for more children, the member of the governing party did not mention language preschool or obligation (mandatory). Instead, the proposal was framed as a suggestion for improved equality “in our society”, and that the role of politics is to create equivalent conditions “for all children and their right to reach their full potential”.⁵⁰ Still, “children who have lived in Sweden for a short time or have guardians who have lived in Sweden for a short time”, are the main target group.⁵¹ These children “must be provided with a reserved preschool place, even if the parent or guardian has not requested it” (Protocol 2021/22:125, p. 76, S).⁵² As the choice of wording shows, referring to being foreign or living in disadvantaged areas is now *not part* of the government’s argument.⁵³ Instead, time spent in Sweden is used as referent. In addition, “other children”,⁵⁴ i.e., Swedish children who need a place in preschool to improve their language development in Swedish, should, if possible, also be included in the target group. Hence, there is a deliberate use of Swedish children to normalise the proposal and avoid fuelling images of discrimination. In the debate, the reform is targeted at “some children”, not foreign children, children born abroad or children with foreign guardians.⁵⁵ “Some children” include Swedish children with specific needs.⁵⁶

The opposition continued its demands to implement mandatory language preschool “for all children in need of it”, such as for newly arrived children or children who “never hear Swedish in their home”. This is particularly important in disadvantaged areas, where exclusion is inherited. Access to the Swedish language ought to be self-evident and a right for all (Protocol 2021/22:125 p. 80, SD; p. 81, C; p. 84, L).⁵⁷ The position of the Swedish language in the curriculum ought to be strengthened, a demand to which the government agreed (Protocol 2021/22:126). Hence, indirectly,

⁵⁰ Sw. för alla barn och deras rätt att nå sin fulla potential.

⁵¹ Sw. till barn som har bott i Sverige kort tid eller har vårdnadshavare som har bott i Sverige kort tid.

⁵² Sw. ska tillhandahållas reserverad förskoleplats, även utan att vårdnadshavare anmält önskemål om det.

⁵³ Once, the phrase “foreign-born women” is used, to emphasise how beneficial preschool can be for them and their potential to become economically equal.

⁵⁴ Sw. andra barn, Skollagen 2022:833 kap. 8 14a §, Prop. 2021/22:132 p. 50.

⁵⁵ Sw. vissa barn. Also used in the government’s proposition 2021/22:132.

⁵⁶ However, in the proposal for the law, the term “foreign” is used.

⁵⁷ In the debate, L and C stuck to the idea of language preschool, even though they are part of the January Agreement with the government. However, they voted in favour of the government’s proposal.

there is a consensus, regardless of political party, about highlighting the importance of learning Swedish in preschool. The difference concerns the role of language preschool, which was abandoned by the government but not by the opposition. Another difference is the way in which the new law has been implemented. According to the opposition, with the new law proposal, the government is increasing its efforts to exclude all forms other than preschool from the ECEC sector, such as pedagogical care: “Not only is the government trying to control the municipalities in detail, it is also trying to control the country’s parents in their choice of childcare facilities” (Protocol 2021/22:125, p. 77, M; see also p. 78, SD; pp. 82–83, KD).⁵⁸ Hence, the opposition partly transformed the proposal, from being about integration to being about who should make decisions about children – the state or their parents.

2.5 A new law: An offering to guardians and obligations for municipalities

In the parliamentary voting, the government’s suggestion gained a majority and the new law about offering a preschool place to children in need of support to learn Swedish was enacted. In addition to what was already applicable, namely for a municipality to offer a preschool place when a guardian wishes, the municipalities now have this obligation also if a guardian is not making a wish of a place for their child in preschool (SFS 2022:833 §12). What is also new is that the municipalities have to reach out to all guardians of children aged 3–5 years (including children in pedagogical care) to inform them about what preschool is and what it can offer, and tell them that preschool is “a right for your child”. A new contact should be initiated each spring if the guardian says no to the offer or does not respond (SFS 2022:833 §12a). Hence, reaching out to these guardians is now a recurring activity for each municipality. How these reaching-out activities are organised is not stipulated in the law. However, the Swedish National Agency for Education provides information about how this can be done on its webpage (see section 2.6, below).

The municipalities also need to *reserve a place in preschool* for such children, even if the guardian has turned the offer down (Ibid., §14c). Moreover, the new law contains a new paragraph about “A special offering of a place for increased language development in Swedish”. This paragraph is a specification about the municipalities’ *obligation* to make an offer of a place in preschool without such a wish being expressed by a child’s guardian. This is applicable if⁵⁹: 1) the child was born abroad and has been in Sweden for a maximum of five years, or 2) the child’s guardians who are living in Sweden were born abroad and have been in Sweden for a maximum of five

⁵⁸ Sw. Inte nog med att regeringen alltså försöker styra över kommunerna i detalj, vill man också styra landets föräldrar i deras val av barnomsorg.

⁵⁹ This is not applicable for children without a residence permit, or if it is obvious that the child is not in need of a place, §14b.

years.⁶⁰ In addition to this obligation, the municipalities “ought to strive to also [make this] offer to other children”⁶¹ in need of better language development, or a place in preschool, without such a wish being expressed by the child’s guardian (SFS 2022:833 §14a). A municipality is allowed to make this offer via a place in a private preschool (SFS 2022:833, §12). A private preschool has no obligation to agree to the offer from a municipality (not even if it receives funding from that municipality, SFS 2010:800, §18). Hence, the municipality preschools are indirectly made more attractive to the municipalities, since they cannot say no.

The new law was implemented on 1 July 2023. In conclusion, it singles out children and adults who were born abroad as a new target group for the municipalities’ outreach activities. For other children, i.e., Swedish children, making such an offer is not mandatory, but instead something to strive for. Hence, the new law, in its aim of increased integration, stipulates different goals for “all foreign-born children” versus “other children”.

The municipalities are expected to reorganise their administration to meet these new demands without extra funding from the state (Bet. 2021/22: UbU24; Prop. 2021/22:132), even though state funding was raised as an argument by the municipalities in their referral responses, to support the proposal (see section 2.1.2).

2.6 Implementing the new law: Information via government agencies

The Swedish National Agency for Education (SNAE)⁶² should provide support materials for the municipalities, and these were published on its webpage in August–September 2023. The Schools Inspection is responsible for supervision. The Swedish Migration Agency (SMA) links to the information on SNAE.

Both the SNAE webpage and SMA refer to the new law as “an offering”. The term “direct enrolment” is not used. A search for “direct enrolment” results in zero hits on the agencies’ webpages. On the SNAE webpage (Skolverket.se 2023b), the new law is presented as “Municipalities’ work to get more children into preschool”⁶³:

“From 1 July 2023, all municipalities must work to increase the number of children attending preschool. This responsibility consists of two parts: outreach activities and offering preschool places to certain groups of children. Here you will find support for planning, organising and implementing the work in your municipality.”

Skolverket.se 2023b

⁶⁰ In SOU 2020:67 and Prop. 2021/22:132. 1 & 2 is referred to as part of a definition of the category “newly arrived child”, since there is no such formal definition. We note that “newly arrived” is not used in the new law (2022:833).

⁶¹ Sw. ska sträva efter att erbjuda även andra barn.

⁶² Sw. Skolverket.

⁶³ Sw. Kommuners arbete för fler barn i förskolan.

It is explained that the purpose of the new law is to ensure that more children are enrolled in preschool and gain opportunities to improve their language development in Swedish.⁶⁴ The SNAE webpage presents information for municipalities on: how to provide information to guardians via outreach activities; examples of how to work with outreach; how to use SNAE's information sheets; examples of how some municipalities work with outreach; offering a place in preschool even if guardians have not requested one; when you have to make a special offering of a place; a manual for municipalities: finding the children who should be offered a place in preschool; links and more tips; questions and answers (Skolverket.se 2023b).

A cartoon image presents the Swedish preschool as a calm, intimate and friendly place to be in (Figure 8). The preschool environment is child friendly, reading is performed sitting on a carpet, with a small group of children and one child sitting in the staff member's lap, and not like in school, where a larger group of children sit on benches. There are books available for the children, as well as tools for drawing, scissors to cut with, building blocks to build with, and some toys. Posters with letters in Swedish signal that this is a place encouraging language learning. Children of different skin colours and ages are mixing together and they sit still and listen actively to the adult reading from a book.

Figure 8: Image, together with texts, presenting preschool as a place for more children to learn the Swedish language in a friendly environment



Skolverket.se 2023b

On the first webpage, it is also explained that guardians have a right to turn down the offer of a preschool place, and that they themselves can choose if they want to participate in the different outreach activities that “you” (municipalities) implement (Skolverket.se 2023b).

In the following sections, it is explained what the municipalities' responsibilities are, and what is different from before the new law was enacted. There is a big change in

⁶⁴ Sw. nya bestämmelser som syftar till att fler barn ska gå i förskolan och få möjlighet till en bättre språkutveckling i svenska.

that the municipalities previously had an obligation to inform⁶⁵ guardians, and now they have an obligation to reach out⁶⁶ to guardians. The municipalities can choose what methods to use. The most important point is to adapt the methods to each guardian's circumstances and needs. Examples of methods are: home visits, other personal meetings, phone calls or information sessions (Skolverket.se 2023b).

The municipalities are encouraged to use the SNAE folder "Welcome to preschool", which is aimed at guardians or professionals such as social workers, BVC staff, or staff in open preschools who can contribute to encouraging more children into preschool. The folder for guardians has been translated into eight languages, which are all available on the webpage as pdf files. These languages, in addition to Swedish, are: English, Arabic, Dari, French, Persian, Russian, Somali, and Ukrainian. On the back of each folder is a QR code linking to more information about education on the SNAE webpage (Skolverket.se 2023b).

The section about offering a place in preschool even if guardians have not requested one describes when this is applicable and becomes a duty for the municipality. This is when a child is resident in Sweden and: the child was born abroad and has been in Sweden for a maximum of five years, or when a child's guardians were born abroad but have since lived for a maximum of five years in Sweden. In the latter case, the obligation applies whether the child was born in Sweden or abroad. There is an exception from the obligation, and that is if the child's living conditions or situation make a place in preschool unnecessary. For example, if the child lives with a Swedish-speaking family from Finland, or if guardians born in Sweden have returned from a stay abroad. There is also one addition. The municipality should strive to offer a place in a preschool to other children who need preschool to improve their language development in Swedish, even if their guardians have not expressed a desire for them to do so. For example, this may involve children who have a mother tongue other than Swedish and who do not spend much time in an environment where they encounter the Swedish language. But it may also involve children whose mother tongue is Swedish and who need preschool to improve their language development. Another example may be children with a language disorder who have a greater need of support for language development than can be provided at home (Skolverket.se 2023b).

The offer of a place in preschool should be delivered prior to the autumn of the year in which the child turns three, and at least three months before the child can start. If the guardians turn the offer down, the municipalities must send out a renewed offer prior to each autumn until the child turns six. The offer should include information about the preschool in which the child has been allocated a place and when s/he could start. The place should be reserved until one month has passed since the child should have started. After one month, or if the guardian turns down the offer, the place no longer needs to be reserved (Skolverket.se 2023b). There is no mention of a lack of places. This could be because the law is very new, and

⁶⁵ Sw. Informera

⁶⁶ Sw. uppsökande verksamhet

municipalities have the obligation in any case, or due to an expansion in preschool places.

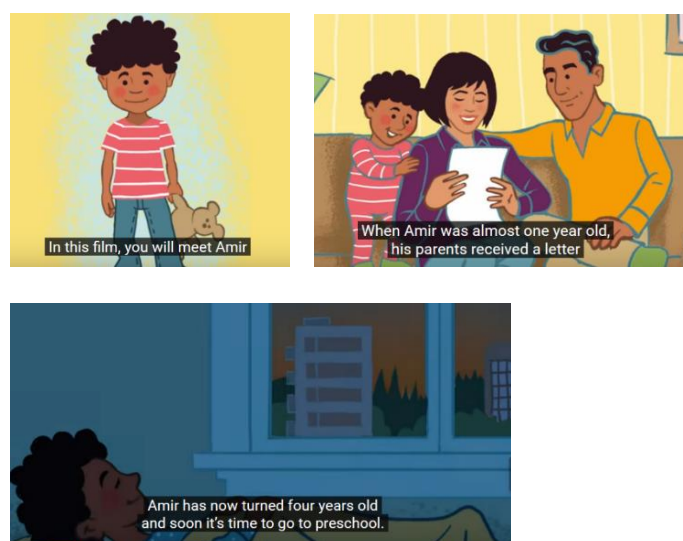
There is a manual describing how municipalities can identify the children who should be offered a place in preschool. One option is to use the same system that municipalities already use to enrol children in the mandatory preschool class. Another option is to use a tool provided by the Swedish Tax Agency, which is available to all public actors for retrieving information about citizens' residence digitally, called the Hub (Sw. navet). This tool is simple to use, fast and safe (Skatteverket.se 2023). The list from Navet should be cross-referenced with the children already enrolled in preschool, including children waiting for a place. Then there will be a list of children aged 3–5 who are not enrolled in preschool or on the waiting list for a place. Via this list, it is possible to access information about the guardian's place of birth, postal code and date of immigration. The date of immigration for guardians and children should be a maximum of five years previously. The children on the list must be offered a place in preschool at least three months before the autumn semester starts (Skolverket.se 2023b).

Municipalities are encouraged to take into account GDPR rules, and to document the process. A follow-up of the process should include determining whether there should be changes before next year. It is also important to delete data and to have routines for this.

The section “Links and more tips” on the webpage includes a four-minute animated movie entitled: “Preschool is here for your child”. According to the webpage, this film answers the most frequently asked questions about preschool and is aimed at parents and guardians who have children of preschool age but have not been in contact with Swedish preschool before. It is available in nine languages in addition to Swedish: English, Arabic, Dari, Persian, French, Romani Chib, Russian, Somali and Ukrainian (Skolverket.se 2023b).

The film follows Amir, a black boy with dark eyes and black hair, during “an ordinary day” in preschool. He is happy (Figure 9a). In fact, the film covers more than a day. A voiceover guides the viewer, who follows Amir from his first contact with preschool when his parents receive a letter of enrolment, when Amir is not quite one year old (Figure 9b). This letter includes information about which preschool has given him a place and when he can start. The viewer then follows Amir, via his introduction when he and his parents meet the staff and other children, up until the age of four (Figure 9c).

Figure 9a–9c: The boy Amir and preschool



Skolverket.se 2023b (images have been cropped)

In the film, the values of Swedish preschool are highlighted, such as the importance of introducing the child and their parents to preschool, for the child to have practical clothing, for the parents to take part in development meetings, that being in safe natural spaces is important, to wash one's hands, that the food can be adapted to the child's needs, to report if the child is sick and will not be attending preschool that day, that the staff and parents communicate when the child is picked up, that the children can communicate about their experiences in preschool, that boys and girls of different ethnicities interact on equal terms, for the child to develop social skills and democratic values, as well as creativity and language – both Swedish and other mother tongues. In preschool, children develop, learn and play, and the groups are small – three to four children involved in each activity (Skolverket.se 2023b).

In addition, the preschool welcomes the viewer with open arms and the staff members are a mix of genders, ethnicities and religions (Figure 10a). The staff are trained to work with children. Moreover, the child is welcomed personally by a member of staff, who is happy to provide him with a safe and happy start to the day (Figure 10b). Both the mother and father leave to pick up Amir at preschool, and the father carries a briefcase, which signals that he is working in a white-collar job. Hence, the value of gender equality is presented via the staff and the parents related to preschool. Preschool ensures that women and men, parents and staff alike, care for children, is a clear message.

Figure 10a–10b: A diverse preschool greets foreign children and parents



Skolverket.se 2023b (images have been cropped)

As shown this far, at national level the image of preschool is of a well-functioning service providing childcare for guardians and children. Preschool is well organised and is a safe and calm environment where children can play, learn and receive care. Preschool is a societal service supporting equality and integration.

3 Key initiatives at local level regarding ECEC and integration: Municipalities as executors of national policies and as initiators of local strategies

The policies that affect integration in Swedish ECEC are stipulated at the national level and implemented at the municipal level. Thus, the actors implementing national policies are of primary importance for the policy outcomes. This is why, in this part of the report, we place extra emphasis on the actors who are of primary importance for the municipalities' work in the integration of newly-arrived children and their families. This part of the report is based on primary data generated through a qualitative questionnaire consisting of free-text questions. It was sent to 25 municipalities that represent a variety of Sweden's 290 municipalities. Eight municipalities replied: four of them have long experience of working with integration in socio-economically segregated areas, while in the other four municipalities segregation has not presented a problem, and in these municipalities the number of children covered by the new law is very low. As far as the primary data is concerned, all individuals and places have been anonymised. Secondary data in the form of internet-based published reports were collected from additional municipalities. The primary and secondary data is discussed in relation to both previous research and national and regional policies.

3.1 Municipalities' work with direct enrolment

Direct enrolment is stipulated by national actors as a tool for children's integration. To a question on what role the preschool plays in societal integration, we received the following answer:

"The preschool has an extremely important role today, both as an integration arena and for the lives of individual children and families. The daily meeting that takes place between children, their guardians and pedagogues/staff at the preschool builds trust and confidence, gives an insight into Swedish social institutions and lays the foundations for the children's continued education and school success, e.g., through early language development and through becoming active and democratic citizens. /.../

We need to continue to develop working methods that both provide a good quality of health, learning and education for every child who goes to preschool, and offer compensatory and early interventions (often in collaboration), while we also need to have good working methods to reach out to the families who today do not have their children in preschool, or in various ways have low attendance.”

Municipality 6⁶⁷

This opinion is representative of how the Swedish preschool has been conceived as an integration arena at both national and local levels. However, while municipalities seem to share the general opinion that the enrolment of children in preschool contributes to societal integration, none of the ones answering our questionnaire consider direct enrolment of children to be an important step in the integration process. What is considered important, as the above quote reveals, *is good quality of health, learning and education for every child who goes to preschool and [to] offer compensatory and early interventions (often in collaboration).*

As explained above, it is mandatory for municipalities to offer preschool to children who need it in order to experience better language development in Swedish. Direct enrolment means that, without the guardians having applied for it, municipalities must offer children a place at a preschool before the autumn term of the calendar year in which the child turns three. As described above, to achieve improved language development in Swedish, municipalities are obliged to make an offer of a place in preschool without such a wish having been expressed by the child’s guardians if: 1) the child was born abroad and has been living in Sweden for a maximum of five years, or 2) the child’s guardian who resides in Sweden was born abroad and has been residing in Sweden for a maximum of five years (section 2.5; SFS 2022:833).

According to the municipalities that answered our questionnaire, municipalities find it relatively easy to identify which children aged 3–5 years are not enrolled in preschool. The questionnaire answers indicate that, either they already had a system for identifying children not enrolled in preschool, or they found relatively easy ways to identify individual children in the target group.

For example, our informant from municipality 2, which is situated in Southern Sweden, close to the Swedish–Danish border, described direct enrolment as follows:

“We receive a list of children, aged 3–5 years, who do not attend preschool and have not applied for a place. The list states where the children live. We sort the children by age and area, then we look for possible channels for contact with guardians. We send information letters every term to guardians of children who have not applied for preschool. The letter is in Swedish and there are QR codes in the letter to read it in seven different languages. We collect new statistics once more during each semester to monitor the new children who have moved to the municipality, and send letters only to the new ones. We noticed a difference the second time, when we sent the information let-

⁶⁷ We, the authors, have translated the municipality responses into English.

ter with the application to public preschool and a stamped envelope. We received contact from some guardians who wondered if it is mandatory to fill out the application, why they had received the letter, some wanted help to fill out the application, and some who wanted to inform us that their children do not live in Sweden or go to preschool in Denmark.”

Municipality 2

Another municipality, on the east coast, described how it had been working with information campaigns to get more children enrolled in preschool even before the legal requirements came into force.

“Today we have a good system (Edlevo), where we can quickly produce documents/lists of children who do not have a placement and/or are to be directly enrolled in preschool. The system facilitates our work. Centrally, we produce lists of unplaced children who are covered by the new legal requirements and contact the secretary/deputy principal at the preschool concerned (the person responsible for placements). The preschool concerned in turn offers a place and informs guardians about the new legal requirements. We do this at regular intervals, 2–4 times a year.”

Municipality 3

Representatives of a municipality in close proximity to Stockholm, the capital, described the process of direct enrolment as follows:

“In our municipality, we have involved a special pedagogue and two departments at the municipality. At first, we discussed how to interpret the law on direct enrolment. We have also contacted other municipalities and organised network meetings on how they interpreted the law and how they proceeded with direct enrolment. We informed all preschool principals in both municipal and private preschools at an early stage that this process had started. The principals were also told that we did not know what direct enrolment would imply in practice. The municipality has to offer 15 hours a week to children (3–5) not enrolled in preschool, but we do not know if they will come or not. We implemented the following protocol: we checked where the children not enrolled in preschool lived, which preschool was closest and whether that preschool had a place to offer. We contacted the principals of these preschools. No one objected to our suggestions. Then we created a folder with documents in different languages that we sent to the children’s guardians. The folder included the information that their child was enrolled at a preschool and what the decision meant. We have not heard that much after this. There are a few who did not accept the offer. We will see if they [the children] will come or not.”

Municipality 8

As it turns out, while the municipalities find identifying children who are not enrolled in preschool a relatively easy and straightforward procedure, none of the informants found direct enrolment to be an easy or straightforward way of getting these children into preschool. At the same time, the above informant draws attention to the importance of exchanging experiences between different municipalities. Such an exchange mainly concerns how to reach out to families whose children are not enrolled in preschool. The answers reveal that all eight municipalities have tried various strategies of incorporation and were active in outreach activities even before the law on direct enrolment came into force. Thus, the municipality representatives do not see the availability of places as a major obstacle as far as newly arrived children’s enrolment in preschools is concerned.

As pointed out above in the referral responses, some municipalities raised the issue of how these children ought to be identified – *who* should do it and *how* it should be done. Most of the responses from these municipalities also foresaw the need for a growing administration to be able to implement this solution and pointed out that financial support is essential because the reform will lead to increased expenses (Remissvar: Klippan, Örebro, Ragunda, Ronneby, Svedala, Stockholm 2021). None of these concerns appear in the answers provided by the municipalities about how they proceeded with direct enrolment. None of the respondents mentioned that the work with direct enrolment would require the recruitment of new staff. Three municipalities described how the representatives from the municipal educational offices work together with preschool principals to identify free places available for direct enrolment. In order to spread the risks, they reserve one or two places per preschool unit. None of the municipalities that answered raised the issue of not having sufficient resources or available free places. What they seem to be concerned about is whether the system is attuned to the requirements of parents with an immigrant background, and how they should approach families who experience barriers between the Swedish education system and their family. The answers indicate that the main concern for municipalities is how to make Swedish societal institutions more accessible and attuned to the needs of immigrant families whose children are not enrolled in preschool.

3.2 Municipalities' outreach activities

As explained in section 2.5, compensatory and early interventions (often in collaboration between different institutions) are seen as essential for reaching out to families who today do not have their children in preschool, or have low attendance. If a child who is registered in Sweden has not been enrolled in early childhood education before the autumn of the year s/he turns three, municipalities are obliged to reach out, contact the guardians of these children and inform them about the purpose of preschool and the child's right to a place at preschool. Municipalities should also inform guardians that they have the right to request a place at a particular preschool and how the application is made (SFS 2022:833).

According to the information provided by the Swedish National Agency for Education, the municipalities' responsibility for outreach activities differs from their obligation to inform guardians about education in preschools, because these outreach activities have a specific focus on families who might need help with their children's preschool enrolment. After the municipality makes the first contact, before the autumn of the year in which the child turns three, it must renew that contact before every autumn and every spring if the child does not yet have a place in preschool. The last contact must be made before the spring of the year in which the child turns six (section 2.6).

By law, all municipalities must actively search for guardians and provide information about preschool in an adapted way. The Swedish National Agency for Education suggests, as we have also described above (section 2.6), that the methods of contacting guardians should be adapted to local needs and conditions, as well as to the

needs of individual guardians (Skolverket.se 2023b). Some of the methods mentioned on the Agency's homepage are home visits, telephone calls and information meetings. It is emphasised that the guardians themselves must choose whether they want to participate in the various activities that the municipalities carry out within the framework of the outreach programme.

The answers to our qualitative questionnaire reveal that municipalities surrounding the major cities (Stockholm and Gothenburg), which have had longer experience of residential segregation, have a larger repertoire and more established ways of contacting the guardians of children who are not enrolled in preschool than municipalities with less experience. This was also a comment in referral responses from municipalities in big cities (Stockholm and Malmö), and also in some smaller municipalities (section 2.1).

In the questionnaire, answers to the question about which actors are involved in the outreach activities reveal a great variety of roles assigned to different actors. The following answers from three different municipalities illustrate the variety of strategies:

“We have a lot of cooperation with the library, but also with child healthcare, the midwifery clinic, the citizens' office, vocational and study guidance counsellors, Sfi⁶⁸ and with others in the prevention sector.”

Municipality 1

“We have two native-language teachers in the group who have worked longer in the city and know several languages, they play a bridge-building role in our business. They have been to libraries, family centres, open preschools, churches, mosques, associations, adult education and so on.”

Municipality 2

“The starting point for the outreach activity was to start from existing outreach work that already takes place in preschools and via open preschool, as well as to develop cooperation with other activities that meet the target group, such as the Integration Centre and BVC, as well as with functions that are bridge builders.”

Municipality 5

One municipality advertised for preschool enrolment on the city's buses, another contacted families via phone and home visits. Among the institutional actors, family centres, child health centres and open preschools were mentioned most frequently, while among individual actors so-called bridge builders were specified as important factors for success. This is why we consider it important to describe these actors and their role in greater detail.

⁶⁸ Sw. Svenska för invandrare [Swedish for Immigrants].

3.3 Family centres – centres for interprofessional collaboration, integration and language development

“A family centre is a meeting place for families with children aged 0–6. There is a childcare centre, open preschool, social services and maternal healthcare. Everything is gathered under the same roof.”

Municipality 2

As this quote indicates, a family centre is a meeting place for all families with children aged 0–6. The history of family centres goes back to the 1970s when collaboration between medical, social and educational institutions was initiated. In the 2000s, family centres have undergone a rapid expansion and are currently found in around one in three Swedish municipalities. In a recent survey conducted by the National Board of Health and Welfare and the Public Health Agency of Sweden, 246 family centres or family-centre-like businesses were identified (Socialstyrelsen/Folkhälsomyndigheten 2023). A family centre must include, by definition, maternal healthcare, child healthcare, open preschool and social services (Socialstyrelsen 2008). Evaluations indicate that collaboration between these actors has produced good results in terms of social prevention work (Bak/Gunnarsson 2000).

The investment in family centres has traditionally been realised locally, initiated by personnel in the relevant professions and local politicians, without any national or regional control (Almqvist et al. 2011). However, over the past two decades, the interest in family centres and its individual parts has increased, not least from a perspective of integration, at both the regional and national levels. All family centres are publicly financed. The very idea of family centres is that the municipality and region will coordinate their resources to enable easily accessible cross-sector cooperation. Thus, the establishment of a family centre requires collaboration and co-financing of services and actors organised at regional (healthcare) and municipal (education) levels (Familjecentraler.se 2023).

In 2022, the Association for the Promotion of Family Centres published its national guidelines “National Guidelines. Family Centres. Cooperation for the Good of Children”.⁶⁹ This document includes guidelines for how to start, manage, finance and develop family centres. The guidelines also specify that, apart from the family centres’ four basic activities: maternal healthcare, child healthcare, open preschool and social services, other actors can also become part of the collaboration, for example libraries, dental care and bridge builders (Cesares Olsson 2022).

Family centres situated in areas where many families have a foreign background may also include, apart from the four basic collaborative units, employment agencies and integration services. The presence of integration services can be explained by the fact that family centres have become part of municipal integration policies and strategies. That the integration of children and their families is a concern not only for

⁶⁹ Sw. Föreningen för familjecentralers främjande 2023.

ECEC but also for healthcare can be traced in a recent report from the National Board of Health and Welfare, in which the Public Health Agency's family centres are described as "an arena for integration and language development" (Socialstyrelsen/Folkhälsomyndigheten 2023:17). In addition, the national guidelines also mention the "strengthening of integration" as one of the tasks of family centres (Abrahamsson/Bing 2011; Abrahamsson et al. 2014; Cesares Olsson 2022). In its guidelines for family centres, Region Skåne in Southern Sweden explicitly states that:

"Through family centre work, the chance to discover and meet the needs of future parents, children, [existing] parents and other important adults around the child can increase. In addition, it is an arena for working with language and integration as well as outreach activities to stimulate more children to attend preschool."

Skånes Kommuner 2021)

3.4 BVC, Child Health Services (CHS)

All of the municipalities that answered our questionnaire mentioned CHS as important actors in their work with the integration of newly arrived children in general, and with outreach activities in particular. At the same time, the following example illustrates that there are few specific details of the practices of child health centres.

"The open preschools that are co-located in a family centre have a higher number of visitors than independent premises, so interprofessional work and information from the CHS about what the open preschool has to offer is important."

Municipality 6

"We inform about the importance of preschool through child healthcare and our open preschools/family centre. They [parents] get the same information. We make no distinction between the target group of guardians."

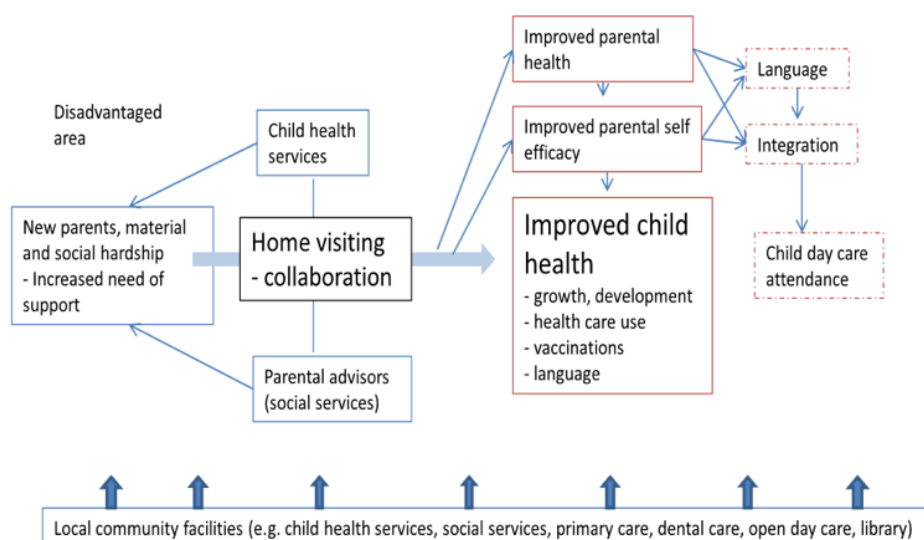
Municipality 5

As these quotes reveal, child health services, co-located with other institutions, are assigned the role of informing new and newly arrived parents about what preschool has to offer their children. At family centres, CHS works in close proximity to open preschools and other institutions that serve the needs of newly arrived families.

In Sweden, health services, including child health services, are the responsibility of regions (county councils). Child health services are aimed at children from birth to five years old and at their parents, with the aim of contributing to promoting children's health, development and well-being. The focus of CHS is to develop collaborative relationships with parents, and a central task of child healthcare is to increase parents' participation and confidence. CHS nurses have the responsibility to carry out the Swedish national child immunisation programme and to collaborate with other healthcare professions and child-related actors in society, such as the open preschool and preschool (Rikshandboken.se 2023). The Swedish CHS is a trusted institution and all families with children (0–5 years old) are reached by CHS (Socialstyrelsen 2014). Research has shown that even immigrant parents appreciate the CHS programme, and receive information and advice, as well as the offered home visits shortly after the birth of a child that is a well-established practice in Sweden (Mekhail Tiinenen 2022).

From the answers, we conclude that CHS in general, and in particular those that are part of family centres, are seen as an integral aspect of the municipalities' work with integration. This assumption is strengthened by the following program logic model presented by Burström et al. (2017):

Figure 11: Program logic model



Burström et al. 2017, p. 3

The program logic model was employed in a local intervention, the focus of which was outreach activities in home visits to immigrant families. An expanded home visit programme was implemented in Rinkeby, an immigrant-dense area in Stockholm municipality, during the period 2013–2014. This intervention aimed at strengthening parents' self-efficacy and improving both their and their children's health. Additional intended outcomes of the intervention were increased integration into Swedish society through language learning and the child's enrolment in pre-school (Barboza et al. 2018). The intervention was financed by the Public Health Agency of Sweden, based on the assumption that:

“CHS nurses have a natural connection to new parents, as everybody is offered a home visit after the birth of their child. /.../ During home visits, the new parents can be informed about other related activities available in the neighbourhood (dentists, open preschool and library). Thus, an expanded home visit programme can contribute to better parenting skills, and better parental and child health. It can also contribute to language learning, integration and ensuring that those children are enrolled in pre-school.”

Karolinska Institutet 2017:10

The evaluation report of CHS's outreach activities concludes that outreach activities in the form of extended home visits were appreciated by both the participating professionals and new parents. The report also shows that immigrant parents are in need of information about Swedish society and the institutions that are available for young children and their parents. The report does not reach any conclusions as to

whether or how better parental and child health contributes to childcare enrolment, as the model (Burström et al. 2017, p. 3) envisioned.

At the same time, the intervention was based on a model indicating that CHS are seen as an essential part of the municipalities' integration strategies. At family centres, child health services, which are the responsibility of regions, work in close cooperation with social services and open preschools. Child health services are available at all family centres (Socialstyrelsen 2023). According to a national mapping of Swedish child healthcare, approximately 40 percent of the over 900 CHS are part of a family centre, where they even cooperate with social services (Socialstyrelsen 2020).

In their outreach activities for preschool enrolment, the municipalities consider cooperation with CHS an essential part of providing information to immigrant parents about the importance of preschool. All CHS monitor children's growth and language development (Socialstyrelsen 2020). Child health services offer preventive health surveillance, including language screening, at two-and-a-half to three years, with the aim of identifying children at risk of cognitive difficulties related to language and/or interaction, such as autism or language impairment. In a recently published PhD thesis, a modified language screening model has been developed which is recommended for bilingual children who do not pass the screening at the age of two-and-a-half in Swedish. The language screening of children whose mother tongue is not Swedish is conducted in the child's mother tongue, or in both mother tongue and Swedish (Nayeb 2022). CHS can also recommend preschool if a child otherwise has little opportunity to be exposed to Swedish (Rikshandboken.se 2023), and according to our data this propagates for preschool enrolment in general.

Based on the program logic model (Burström et al. 2017, p. 3), and the questionnaire answers from municipalities, we can conclude that newly arrived families' contact with child health services is seen as the first step towards not only improved health, but also linguistic integration and preschool enrolment.

3.5 Bridge builders

Another idea of family centres is that children can meet playmates in the open preschool while adults can make contacts and get advice and support in their role as parents. In some municipalities, "bridge builders" (Sw. brobyggare), professionals with immigrant backgrounds, are employed by and at family centres.

Bridge builders, sometimes also called cultural interpreters, are professionals with immigrant backgrounds working as a link between families, the Swedish healthcare system and the Swedish educational system (Abrahamsson 2007; Socialstyrelsen/Folkhälsomyndigheten 2023). They are seen as cultural and linguistic experts with special expertise in the social and cultural contexts within which families with certain backgrounds live. Initially, bridge builders were recruited to work in healthcare institutions. As of today, there are no binding standards for them, but an evaluation report of a bridge-builder project in Southern Sweden stated that the following criteria were found to be essential for a bridge builder:

- Well anchored in Swedish society and in their own culture. Previous training in healthcare, childcare or other training that is valuable in work as a bridge builder.
- Preparatory training with a similar content to that included in the bridge-builder project.
- Gender – both men and women are needed.
- Bridge builders should be recruited from the large language groups within the municipality.
- A suitable personality and democratic values (Abrahamsson 2007).

It appears that language competence in a minority language spoken by a large group in a given municipality is one of most the important aspects of bridge building, as well as cultural competence in both Swedish and the minority culture. Over the past few years, attempts have been made to formalise the list of competences that bridge builders are expected to have. In 2022, the Swedish government assigned the Swedish National Agency for Education and the National Board of Health and Welfare to develop and make available an education for Romani bridge builders during the period 2022–2024. The Roma are one of Sweden’s five national minorities.⁷⁰ The formalisation of education in Romani indicates that bridge builders are seen as important actors in the integration of the Romani minority. The assignment text states that the programme’s aim is to provide education “for individuals with Romani language and cultural competence for work in preschool, preschool class, school, leisure centres, adult education and social services or healthcare” (Regeringen Ku2022/00786). In other languages and cultures, no initiatives have been taken at the national level, but at the municipal level employing bridge-builder initiatives seems to be a common practice. Bridge builders working within the education sector are usually employed and paid by the municipality.

In relation to preschool enrolment, bridge builders have the task of informing immigrant parents about preschool and open preschool. Their work is particularly important in those cases where the parents have not visited the open preschool. At the same time, open preschool is seen by many municipal actors as a springboard towards preschool enrolment for children, and employment for their mothers. Bridge builders may use informal networks and public places, such as playgrounds in segregated areas, to establish contact with newly arrived families. The use of informal networks draws upon the bridge builders’ own knowledge of the social context in which they operate.

In Municipality 2, bridge builders are employed to reach out to families who do not visit the open preschool and whose children are not enrolled in preschool:

“Our bridge builders started to call guardians. If we find a phone number, during the phone call we ask questions about why they don’t send their children to preschool,

⁷⁰ In Sweden, five groups – Jews, Roma, Sámi, Swedish-Finns and Tornedalians – are officially recognised as national minorities. For a language to qualify as an official national minority language in Sweden, two conditions must be met: it must be a language, not a dialect, and it must have been spoken without interruption for at least three successive generations, or 100 years.

discuss how they support their children at home, inform them about general preschool, that it's free, and offer help with the application. The bridge builders have visited families and knocked on the door, most have not opened it, but they left flyers in the mailbox.”

Municipality 2

Also in Municipality 6, bridge builders play an important role in the municipality's outreach activities. It describes the role of bridge builders as follows:

“Bridge builders are given the task of disseminating information about preschool and open preschool, guiding newly arrived families to dialogue meetings and study visits (in preschools). Bridge builders are engaged in outreach activities, together with staff from open preschool, in prioritised areas. The strategy for communication within the outreach activities has been to adapt the information to the target groups we have identified and to focus on meeting the guardians in different arenas, creating trust, explaining and responding to questions and any concerns. Written material has been used as a supplement, to attract attention, spread facts and invite dialogue.”

Municipality 6

“Prioritised areas” refer to neighbourhoods characterised by a high degree of socioeconomic segregation. In these areas, according to the municipalities' responses, the work of bridge builders is especially important.

3.6 The open preschool

The open preschool in Sweden is a complement to the comprehensive universal Swedish public preschool. The first open preschools were established in the 1980s with the intention of providing opportunities for parents whose children are not enrolled in preschool to develop pedagogically oriented group activities together with preschool teachers. It is the parents, or other accompanying adults, who are responsible for the children during their stay in the open preschool. Thus, open preschools offered a free platform for families to participate in pedagogical activities for both children aged 0–5 years and their guardians. Another idea of the open preschool was that educational activities would be connected, within the framework of family centres, with social and medical services for families with children (Skolverket 2005).

The open preschool was envisioned as a local meeting place, a place for preschool educational activities, services, advice and support for parents, and a resource for childminders and their children. The adult visitors to open preschools are also expected to participate actively in the business of these preschools. The activities, which are free of charge, must be built on the visitors' needs and based on the nature of the preschool's open enrolment and the nearby area. This leads to large variations between open preschools and their operational content. Examples include targeted activities for special parent groups, such as single parents or parents with an immigrant background. The staff at the open preschool are usually preschool teachers, but other professional groups are also represented, such as social workers and childminders. Open preschools can be run by either municipalities or private actors. Over 90 percent of open preschools today are run under municipal auspices. Of the privately run ones, the Church of Sweden is responsible for just over half. Other

organisers include the Mission Church, the Baptist Association and parent cooperatives (Skolverket 2005).

Open preschools are centres for young children and their parents to meet other individuals in a similar situation. Nevertheless, Swedish parents and immigrant parents may have different ideas about, and engagement with, the preschool's activities. The staff at open preschools are often the only contact immigrants have with Swedish society (Lindskov 2009). In many cases open preschools are the only places for parents with an immigrant background and Swedes to interact with each other; and yet, ethnographic studies show that both Swedish and immigrant parents tend to primarily socialise with each other (Bak/Gunnarsson 2000; Lindskov 2009).

All eight municipalities that answered our questionnaire stated that open preschools are important arenas for integration. However, as the answer from a municipality on the west coast shows, not all target families visit the open preschools:

“In general terms, there are groups that visit our open preschools less than others, according to a large citizen survey conducted in 2021. These are:

- People who were born abroad (especially those who also have low education and low income).
- People who were born abroad in combination with having come to Sweden in the last five years, i.e., new arrivals.
- Some countries with a mid-range Human Development Index (HDI), such as Syria, Iraq, India and Pakistan, have a particularly low frequency of visits. It is more common for people from countries with a low or very high HDI to visit open preschool, such as Afghanistan, Eritrea, Somalia, Turkey, Poland and Norway.
- Other groups are young parents and fathers.”

Municipality 6

This answer reveals that some immigrant groups have been especially difficult to reach and offer ECEC to. As the respondent describes, families who arrived recently from Syria, Iraq, India and Pakistan are the ones who have lowest attendance at open preschool. At the same time, as Table 3 shows, these countries are among the ones from which many people migrated during the period 2011–2021.

As shown above, in these cases, bridge builders and the child health centre play an important role in trying to persuade parents, especially mothers, to visit the open preschool together with their children. As a representative of Municipality 5 put it:

“At our open preschools, we offer parental Swedish, for example, the purpose of which is to give the parents the opportunity to practise their language so that, after parental leave, they can enter working life and be part of our society. The preschool's daily meeting with guardians is an asset. At the same time, our mission in preschool is not aimed at the guardians. Preschool is there for the children.”

Municipality 5

This quote shows that, while the open preschool is assigned to be there for both the parents and the children, it fulfils a broader role aimed at parents, i.e., to be a place where they (especially mothers) can learn and practise Swedish. Other municipalities presented similar descriptions and emphasised the aim of being a welcoming place where the participants can make new connections. These are described as key factors for integration:

“Open preschool is aimed at guardians with children, aged 0–6, who do not have a place at preschool. Our role is to create a safe and welcoming environment for both children and adults. This is done, among other things, through building up social relations. We also give lectures on parenthood and other activities. This is a place where children and adults can make connections with other visitors who live nearby. In our open preschool, teaching in Swedish for adults is offered one morning a week. It is also important to have the opportunity to speak and listen to the Swedish language in the open activities.”

Municipality 7

“Preschool and open preschool are two very important factors for successful integration. I think the initial meetings, which can be either informal or formal, are very important. They enable the building of stable and trusting relationships with the home/parents and, by extension, for the successful schooling of their children. Newly arrived families come into contact with open preschool and preschool at a fairly early stage, and then it is important that the first meetings and contacts are positive and that we build trust and respect for each other. Here, we have the great benefit and support of a well-structured school reception unit with a high level of competence and service.”

Municipality 4

Another answer covers the open preschool’s role in the integration of parents as a means to create equal conditions for their children via learning Swedish – both for the parents and the children. This is a way to enrol more children in preschool:

“Our open preschools in the seven most disadvantaged areas have an ongoing project providing language training for newly arrived women. The overall goal is to promote the integration of the parents of young children, but also to create good and equal conditions for the children while growing up. The staff at open preschools noticed that parents have become more aware of the importance of the Swedish language and the importance of guiding their child into the linguistic world. They have also seen that accompanying children have gradually become safe and enrolled in Swedish preschool activities, which will facilitate enrolment in regular preschool in the future.”

Municipality 8

As these answers reveal, the open preschool is seen as one of the first steps towards integration, and especially the parents’, more concretely the mothers’, societal integration. At the same time, the open preschool is also seen as a first step towards preschool enrolment.

Open preschool is considered a very good arena for coming into contact with the target group of foreign-born women with children aged 0–6, while at the same time offering their children an educational activity that can contribute to the children’s development (SOU 2008:131). The fact that the percentage of unemployment is particularly high among foreign-born women, compared to other groups, is a major gender-equality problem. Being able to support yourself is the path to an independent life. Thus, open preschools may be regarded as an attempt to bridge the gap between the preschool system aimed at parents who work and study on the one hand, and children at home on the other. The open preschool is seen as a gateway for children to become enrolled in preschools, and a gateway to employment for their mothers/guardians.

As presented above, in 2018 the Swedish government and Sweden's Municipalities and Regions agreed on a joint initiative to reach out to foreign-born women with children aged 0–6 years. The agreement covers the years 2023–2025 and has two main policy goals: to increase the proportion of foreign-born women in the labour market and to increase the enrolment of children with migrant backgrounds in preschools. The open preschool offers parental Swedish, the purpose of which is to give parents the opportunity to practise their Swedish so that, after parental leave, they can enter working life and become part of Swedish society. Thus, learning the Swedish language is seen as a tool for both education and societal integration. However, at the municipal level, there is concern about how children will learn Swedish in preschools where the majority of children and practitioners are non-Swedish speakers.

4 Concluding discussion: Integration via learning the Swedish language in preschool

ECEC is one of the largest publicly financed institutions in Sweden, both in terms of costs and number of employees (SKR 2022). At the same time, there is a strong public consensus that good-quality preschool has a compensatory effect on the education of children with socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds. This is why, over the past few years at the national level, the integratory role of ECEC has preoccupied politicians, policymakers, state agencies and NGOs. As this report shows, the debates and initiatives at the national level are directed towards enrolling all (newly arrived) children in early childhood education. Direct enrolment is statutory to the extent that it obligates all municipalities to directly enrol children aged between three and five who are not yet enrolled in ECEC for 15 hours a week free of charge.

This report shows that the law on direct enrolment (SFS 2022:833) was preceded by an intensive period of investigatory work led and discussed by politicians and stakeholders with different political views. All parties to the case seem to share the view that newly arrived children are in need of compensatory measures to assist them in learning Swedish. From the political and policy debates at the national level, we can also conclude that education is seen as a path towards children's linguistic integration, which will in turn lead to better educational opportunities for all children. At the same time, the policy measures are largely based on the assumption that the preschool's language environment will contribute to better conditions for learning Swedish, which in turn will facilitate children's integration.

It is important to note that, while the Swedish Preschool Curriculum explicitly states that "Children with a mother tongue other than Swedish should be given the opportunity to develop both the Swedish language and their mother tongue" (Skolverket.se 2018, pp. 9), the political and policy discourse about direct enrolment focused exclusively on the importance of acquiring the Swedish language. Direct enrolment of newly arrived children seems to have one primary goal: to integrate children who are not yet institutionalised into the first stage of the Swedish educational system, preschool, where they can learn Swedish.

In the process that led to the revised school law – i.e., new law – the political debate shifted from talking about direct enrolment as an obligation for guardians into an obligation for the municipalities to "offer" "some children" a place in preschool. This shift in language is visible on the state agencies' webpages, where the phrase "direct enrolment" is not used in the implementation phase. The new situation is presented as an offering to children born abroad. As part of this process, and to support the municipalities in implementing the reform, Swedish preschool is presented as a calm and safe environment that welcomes children and their parents, and as a place where children can learn Swedish.

This report has examined the actors and their actions at both the national and local levels. At the local level, it is the task of municipalities to ensure that all educational activities are conducted in compliance with state regulations and guidelines. The report shows that, at the municipal level, the primary focus is on the integration of newly arrived families, rather than newly arrived children. In addition, enrolment in preschool is brought into a direct relationship with integration into other welfare institutions, of which child healthcare holds a particularly strong position. We have examined the outreach activities directed towards families whose children are not enrolled in preschool and found, as Figure 11 also illustrates, that the linguistic integration of newly arrived families is envisioned to start with the parents', particularly mothers', involvement with health services. Child healthcare services are seen as an actor that contributes not only to improved health but also to learning the Swedish language and thus becoming integrated.

Child health services reach out to all parents and at the local level these services are often used as a gateway towards informing parents about the benefits of preschool. This report shows that, over the past few years, family centres – where child healthcare and open preschool are co-organised – have been increasingly seen as actors that are important for the integration of newly arrived families. Yet, unlike the idea of direct enrolment as an offering that envisions children's enrolment in preschool as a single step, in the practices of municipalities, according to the municipalities' answers, a three-step model is emerging: 1) family centres where child healthcare and open preschool is co-located, which open up opportunities for language courses for migrant mothers; 2) migrant mothers whose children are not enrolled in preschool learn Swedish and become employable, while their children become acquainted with preschool practices in open preschool; 3) children are enrolled in preschool while their mothers start to work. In addition, bridge builders seem to play an important role in making connections between municipal actors, parents and children. Hence, at local level, there are more actors involved and more co-operation going on than is visible at the national level. More complex solutions are being sought to achieve integration, in addition to enrolling children in preschool.

To conclude: national and municipal actors have the same goal, to integrate newly arrived children, but different ideas about how best to realise that goal. Direct enrolment as an offering was practised by all the municipalities, but none of them had high hopes for the policy's success. This can be explained by the municipalities' own prior experiences of reaching out to families whose children are not enrolled in preschool, as well as in providing preschools of good quality, not least in terms of their linguistic environment. Moreover, at the municipal level, actors providing both education and health are resources in the integration-through-preschool process. At the national level, only actors for education are acknowledged.

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