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Selectivity of clientele in Finnish private early childhood education and care

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ABSTRACT

In accordance with the Nordic welfare model, the Finnish early childhood education and care (ECEC) system has traditionally been based on public provision and the idea of universalism. However, over the last twenty years the ECEC system has undergone market-oriented reforms. As a result, the share of private for-profit ECEC provision has grown significantly. By applying impression management theory, this qualitative research examines how representatives of private ECEC providers describe the selection and selectivity of their clientele and how they aim at managing the impression they convey through their descriptions. The study shows how three different mechanisms of selectivity are produced and legitimized in the interview talk. Furthermore, the study makes visible the cultural assumptions and expectations related to private ECEC provision and the potential selectivity it produces.

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Early childhood education and care; impression management; private provision; selectivity; legitimation

Introduction

Scholars have argued that during the neoliberal era welfare states have undergone a transformation characterized by intense marketization (Çalışkan & Callon, 2010; Djelic, 2006; Gilbert, 2002; Moss, 2014). This marketization has extended into education as well, including early childhood education and care (ECEC) (Adamson & Brennan, 2014; Rubiano & Urban, 2014; Vanderbroeck, 2006). Market-oriented reforms within ECEC services have been especially intense in liberal Anglo-Saxon countries (e.g. Adamson & Brennan, 2014; Mahon et al., 2012) and they are presented as a way to increase parents' freedom of choice by enabling them to choose the services they prefer from among many competitive providers. Thus, ECEC (or childcare) becomes conceptualized as a commodity purchased from markets (e.g. Ruutiainen, Alasuutari & Karila, 2020; Woodrow & Press, 2018). However, the accessibility and affordability of services in ECEC markets is often questionable (Vandenbroeck et al., 2008; Vandenbroeck & Lazzari, 2014). This, in turn, potentially leads to growing inequality of children and families (e.g. Brennan et al., 2012; Knijn & Lewis, 2017).

Unlike Anglo-Saxon countries, Nordic countries have traditionally relied more on public service provision and the idea of universalism¹ (e.g. Kildal & Kuhnle, 2005; Lloyd & Penn, 2014; Vlasov, 2018). However, neoliberal policy discourses have spread to Nordic welfare regimes as well (Brennan et al., 2012; Mahon et al., 2012), and there have been various shifts towards market-oriented systems (e.g. Dýrfjörð & Magnúsdóttir, 2016; Haug, 2014; Mäntyjärvi & Puroila, 2019; Naumann, 2011; Vlasov, 2018). For example, in Sweden roughly 20% (EURYDYCE, 2018) and in Norway around half (Jacobsen & Vollset, 2012) of ECEC is privately provided, with a growing focus on for-profit provision. Due to increased privatization and marketization, parents have become positioned as subjects ultimately responsible for ECEC choice and thus their choices become moral acts related to what is considered good parenting (Karlsson et al., 2013).

In Finland, the shift towards ECEC markets is evident in the increase of private ECEC provision. Until the 2010s, less than 10% of ECEC was privately

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This article has been corrected with minor changes. These changes do not impact the academic content of the article.

Transcription key

(...) excluded section

[] Author's comment

... sentence is not completed, address continues

, A short break, pause in speech, continues the speech

(-) Missing word or part of a word

(-) Missing section(word) Unclear word or section

underlining Stressed word or section

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provided (see Mahon et al., 2012), but in 2019 the share of private provision was already around 18% (FINEEC, 2019). At the same time, small local enterprises and non-profit providers were joined by rapidly growing ECEC chains. Between 2015 and 2019, the combined revenue of the three biggest for-profit chains increased from around EUR 46 million to EUR 146 million. During the same period, their staff increased from 1,033 to 3,566 employees (Asiakastieto, Financial information about companies -database, 2021). The growth of private provision is supported by public funding. Our previous study (Ruutiainen et al., 2020) demonstrated how municipal politicians and ECEC administrators commonly consider private ECEC accessible and affordable to all families and children. Their view was that contemporary development in Finland would not lead to differentiation of clientele between public and private services, even though the risk for this was identified. In this study, we turn to the private ECEC providers in Finland, inquiring about how they describe, in particular, their services and clientele from the viewpoint of selectivity.

The reforms promoting the marketization of ECEC in Finland have been enacted on an already existing universal and public system (See Mahon et al., 2012; Vlasov, 2018). The organization of ECEC services in Finland is municipalities' obligation, but the municipalities are allowed to decide whether they provide the services publicly or purchase them from private organizations. As is typical in Nordic countries, the governance of ECEC in Finland combines information governance and national-level regulations, including national core curriculum and statutes about preschool staff qualifications and adult-child ratios (Act on Early Childhood Education and Care). The same legislation regulates both public and private providers.

Traditionally, municipalities have made purchase contracts with private ECEC providers, but today two different demand-side subsidies have almost completely replaced them: the private daycare allowance (PDAMS), introduced in 1997, and ECEC vouchers, introduced in 2009.² The features of the two demand-side subsidies differ somewhat. Vouchers are granted by municipalities. They are usually income-tested (Lahtinen & Svartsjö, 2018) and, according to legislation, their value should be 'reasonable' for the customer. The PDAMS combines a private day care allowance (PDA) granted by the Social Insurance Institution and a municipal supplement (MS) granted by municipalities. The PDA has fixed and income-tested parts and the MS can be either income-tested or fixed. In principle, income-tested subsidies enable customer fees relatively close to those in public sector.³ If the subsidy is fixed-sum, the customer fee is the same for every family regardless of their income level.

There is a growing body of academic literature about the marketization of ECEC, childcare⁴ and education and how they are enabled or promoted in policies and policy discourses (e.g. Mahon et al., 2012; Vanderbroeck, 2006; Ruutiainen et al., 2020; Woodrow & Press, 2018). The other stream of research has touched upon affordability, accessibility and availability or other characteristics of ECEC systems that potentially increase or reduce the selectivity of ECEC (e.g. Barnett, 2010; Lloyd & Penn, 2012; Mäntyjärvi & Puroila, 2019; Noailly & Visser, 2009; Vandembroeck & Lazzari, 2014; Van Lancker, 2017). The research on parents' ECEC choices, in turn, argues that successful choices in ECEC markets require skills and resources (economic and cultural). These skills and resources are not equally distributed, and thus, market conditions benefit some families more than others (e.g. Angus, 2015; Eika, 2006; Grogan, 2012; Kampichler et al.'s, 2018; O'Donnell, 2018; Vincent & Ball, 2006). Research has also started to pay attention to the reciprocal relationship between the ECEC system and parents' choices and how the two affect each (e.g. Meyers & Jordan, 2006; Vandembroeck et al., 2008).

However, regardless of the many perspectives researched around the potential selectivity related to ECEC markets, little is known, especially in Nordic contexts, about how private providers themselves see their role in relation to possible selectivity. A study by Vandembroeck et al. (2008) suggests that the admission policies of childcare settings can form an environmental constraint on the accessibility of ECEC. However, in their study, the state, municipal and private providers' policies rarely differed from each other. Mäntyjärvi and Puroila (2019) research in the Finnish context, in turn, indicates that some private providers value their freedom to choose their customers (e.g. only children in need of whole-day-ECEC) and resist public interference in that freedom. This qualitative interview study continues this branch of research by examining how representatives of private ECEC providers describe the selection and selectivity of their clientele and how they aim at managing the impression they convey through their descriptions. Furthermore, by applying impression management theory, we investigate the cultural assumptions and expectations related to private ECEC provision and the potential selectivity it produces.

Impression management

Impression management (IM) theory, introduced by Ervin Goffman (1959), provides a framework for wide-scale studies on both individuals and organizations. According to the theory, people use different techniques or tactics to manage the impression they wish to give in interactional situations.

Organizational IM, in turn, can be understood as actions purposefully trying to influence an audience's perceptions about the organization (Dutton & Dukerich, 1991). The techniques applied depend on what people think is appropriate in a certain situation. In other words, IM techniques used in a particular situation depend on the expectations and assumptions individuals presume that the other parties of an interaction have for them. According to Schlenker's (1980) widely quoted definition, IM is 'the conscious or unconscious attempt to control images that are projected in real or imagined social interactions'. Traditionally, IM research has focused on individual impression management behaviour, for example, in interviews, performance appraisals and career success (Bolino et al., 2008; Lievens & Peeters, 2008; Tata & Prasad, 2015). However, organizational-level IM by organizations' spokespersons and representatives has also been a subject of research (e.g. Bolino et al., 2008; Elsbach, 2003; Elsbach et al., 1998; Talbot & Boiral, 2018; Vaara & Monin, 2010). It has been suggested that organizations should be understood as unique social actors, or as a bridge between institutions and individuals, and therefore it might be more appropriate to use individual-level theories when constructing theories of them (King et al., 2010; Whetten et al., 2009). In this respect, individual-level IM constructs are possible in interpreting organizational action (Tata & Prasad, 2015).

Brennan and Merkl-Davies (2013) suggest four different perspectives for examining organizational IM: economic, psychological, sociological and critical perspectives. This study focuses on the sociological approach, which understands IM according to legitimacy theory as actions aimed to align an organization's norms and values with those of society (Brennan & Merkl-Davies, 2013). IM is, thus, understood as an instrument for organizations or organizational spokespersons in trying to increase the legitimacy of an organization or its actions (Elsbach, 2003; Elsbach et al., 1998; Ogden & Clarke, 2005; Ravasi & Schultz, 2006; Tata & Prasad, 2015).

Research at both the individual (e.g. Boeije, 2004; Bolino et al., 2008; Ellis et al., 2002) and organizational (Bolino et al., 2008; Mohamed et al., 1999; Talbot & Boiral, 2018; Tata & Prasad, 2015) levels often recognizes defensive and assertive IM techniques. At the individual level, assertive IM tactics may include self-promotion tactics, exemplification and ingratiation. Defensive tactics may include excuses, justifications and apologies (Ellis et al., 2002). At the organizational level, assertive IM tactics are often proactive and used to enhance the organization's image. To respond to threatening situations, organizations may adopt more responsive defending tactics (Mohamed et al., 1999). Such accounts may include excuses, justifications, denials and apologies (Brennan & Merkl-Davies, 2013;

Elsbach, 2003). In general, defensive IM tactics are used to minimize bad effects and assertive tactics to maximize good effects (Bolino et al., 2008). Moreover, IM strategies are used to promote credibility and maintain the social accessibility of companies (Lillqvist & Louhiala-Salminen, 2014) or to provide explanations, legitimizations and rationalizations of organizations' actions (Tata & Prasad, 2015).

This article draws on the notion of IM described above. Methodologically, following Vaara and Monin (2010) suggestion, the study adopts a discursive approach as a means to examine the sense-making processes through which organizational legitimacy is established.

Data and analysis

The data of this study consist of qualitative interviews with representatives (entrepreneurs, owners or managers) of private ECEC providers ($N = 12$) from seven Finnish municipalities in 2016. In order to capture different orientations to ECEC provision, the interviewees represented non-profit organizations ($n = 3$), ECEC chains ($n = 4$) and small local entrepreneurs ($n = 5$). All of the ECEC chains provided services in two or more municipalities and the size of their business varied notably from a few centres to dozens. The average duration of the interviews was 81 minutes. In total, the data comprise 126,643 transcribed words (156 pages).

The interviews were conducted by a team of four experienced researchers so that in the actual interviews, only one interviewer and interviewee were present. All of the interviewers were trained and they used the same thematic interview template. The interview questions concerned the background of the organization, the economy and operating environment, pedagogical and ideological orientations, clientele and possible future visions. The interviews included explicit questions about the selection of clientele, the selectivity of customers, possible inequalities caused by the marketization of ECEC, and interviewees' considerations of critiques that have been directed at private ECEC providers or provision. The interviewees were also asked to describe their customer families.

Figure 1⁵ summarizes the premises of the analysis of this study. In this article, we analyse the talk of the interviewees that considers and relates to the present and potential future clientele of their organization and private ECEC in general. In such descriptions the interviewees, explicitly or implicitly, include or exclude families, parents and/or children in/from their clientele. Instead of using these expert interviews as a source of knowledge about the specific private ECEC providers, we approach them as accounting (see Nikander, 2012). By analysing such

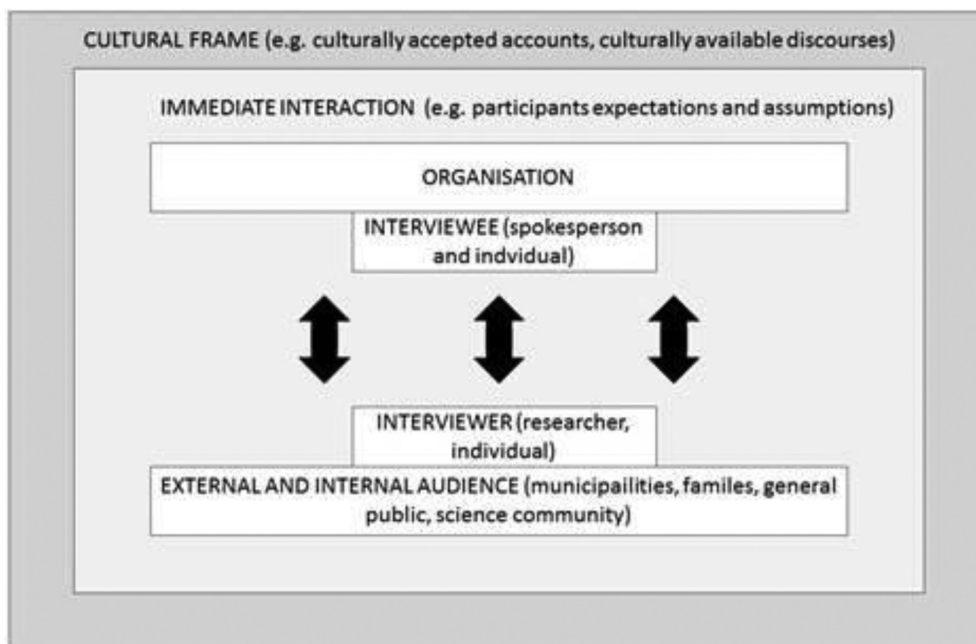


Figure 1. Organizational impression management in research interviews.

accounting, one is able to observe the generally approved cultural discourses that the interviewees draw on in their talk (see Tienari et al., 2003). Thus, although the research data consist of person-to-person conversation, it can be related to a wider cultural context (Wetherell, 2003).

The interviewees had a dual role in the interviews: they represented themselves but they act also as spokespersons and representatives for their organizations (Bolino et al., 2008; Elsbach, 2003; Elsbach et al., 1998). Because of this dual role, the audience (see Elsbach, 2003; Elsbach et al., 1998; Goffman, 1959; Parker & Warren, 2017; Tata & Prasad, 2015) of the interview talk can also be understood as twofold (Lillqvist & Louhiala-Salminen, 2014). The unseen (Goffman, 1959: 81) or the external audience includes members of other organizations, public interest groups and the general public, while the internal audience consists of, for example, employees or stockholders (Elsbach, 2003). The interviewer, in turn, comprises the immediate audience of the situation. Therefore, in keeping with Goffman's (1959) original metaphor, even if some 'backstage' moments might occur (see Lillqvist & Louhela-Salminen, 2013) in this study, the interview situations are understood mainly as 'official frontstage' performance (see Sinclair, 1997). As Tata and Prasad (2015) suggest, the IM used is expected to increase as interviewees interpret the interview situation containing public elements. Since the accounts and descriptions by the interviewees are expected to be directed to a wider audience, we are able to analyse the interview talk as

organizational IM. Hence, this study takes advantage of the view, sometimes used as a critique of interview data, that interviews contain features of a public performance (see Silverman, 1998).

In the analysis, we first carefully read the interviews and distinguished the talk related to the clientele of ECEC. This talk could be categorized in three thematically different types of talk in relation to the potential selectivity of private ECEC (see Braun & Clarke, 2006): screening of clientele, families' financial situation as a reason for selectivity, and cultural and ideological selectivity. Then, by applying tools of discourse analysis (Wood & Kroger, 2000) and using Deborah Tannen's (1993) ideas about expectation frame as a guideline for analysis, we examined the linguistic characteristics of the talk to identify the forms of IM used in it. We categorized descriptions that function to foster the organizations' image or legitimacy as assertive IM. These descriptions were often brought out without the interviewer presenting an explicit question about the issue, and they included, for example, overtone of pride, examples of high morals (e.g. aim for non-selective services) and descriptions of how the organization contributes to the benefit of families or municipalities. The IM interpreted as defensive comprises accounts that function to protect the organization's legitimacy or image. These accounts included, for example, justifications and excuses (e.g. Bolino et al., 2008). The identified IM allowed us to analyse the cultural assumptions regarding the selectivity of the ECEC system (Table 1).

Table 1. Impression management (IM) used as analytical tool.

IM	Tactics	Function
Assertive/proactive	Self-promotion Exemplification Ingratiation Other linguistic/rhetoric means	Enhancing the organization's image/legitimacy To create the desired image or impression
Defensive	Justifications apologies excuses	Defending from expected accusation Protecting organization's image

Legitimizing selection and selectivity of private ECEC's clientele

Every interview included discussion about the selectivity of clientele. Eight interviews touched upon features of clientele's screening, in 10 interviews the selectivity was considered in relation to families' financial situation, and in 10 interviews selectivity was rationalized through cultural and ideological issues. Overall, the talk about selectivity comprised both assertive and defensive IM. The assertive IM was used to promote an organization's legitimacy and defensive IM to protect it.

Screening of clientele

Screening of clientele refers to talk that expresses how the provider is active in selecting the customers and excluding particular children and families from the services. Selecting or excluding customers was discussed in eight interviews. Selecting customers was based on children's age, gender or the hours they would attend ECEC per day. Exclusion, in turn, was linked to the organization's decision not to offer particular services, in most cases, special educational support. Even though the private providers positioned themselves as intentional in *screening of the clientele*, the reasons for it, even pragmatic ones, were presented so that they would strengthen the impression of an organization that aims at the best interest of children. In addition, the screening was justified by stating that the provider's hands were tied for external reasons (such as the subsidy system or municipalities' choices). Only *defensive IM* tactics were used in the context of screening of clientele.

When the selection of clientele is associated with children's best interest, the interviewees present justifications concerning daily ECEC routines, the provider's limited resources, group structure and financial realities. Excerpt 1 demonstrates how these different viewpoints may be brought together to justify or excuse an organization's decision to favour families in need of whole-day ECEC at the expense of those families who use the service for part-time ECEC.

Excerpt 1

1 *Mainly I try to offer only whole-day care since the*
2 *part-time children sort of break it, how to*
3 *say this, also the week programme, and then it*
4 *should always be considered that if these one*
5 *or two children aren't present in the afternoon*
6 *they'll always miss something. And further,*
7 *since my programme is so full, this week pro*
8 *gramme, the parents can't actually decide, and*
9 *then they say that is because all the days are so*
10 *good that it's not possible to be away from*
11 *anything. Until now I've strived to offer only*
12 *whole-day-care and the private daycare*
13 *allowance doesn't even recognise half-day care*
14 *(...) But then it is hard to plan the staffing,*
15 *that how those 20-hour-children (part-time) could*
16 *be present so that the [legal] ratio isn't*
17 *exceeded. (...) Well, it's kind of true that why*
18 *would we accept [part-time children]? But I have*
19 *a few families that are going to start maternity*
20 *leave and sure we'll continue their customer*
21 *relationship. Obviously I don't chase them away.*
22 *But... because, in principle, I think that it's*
23 *not a wise decision to halve the day, and we,*
24 *however, choose the customers, so I do rather*
25 *take whole-day children so that the group isn't*
26 *burdened that there then is, because it should*
27 *run in the same way with those two children*
28 *than with that one child.*

In excerpt 1, the interviewee explains that children's part-time ECEC (20 h per week) would make it more difficult to plan pedagogy for all children and that children would miss some pedagogical activities (1–3). Furthermore, a little later the interviewee says that having part-time children in the group would burden it and increase the group size (13–14). Both reasons for selection are hence justified by presenting them as serving children's best interest. In a similar manner, the justification of the child's best interest was produced by another interviewee, who stated that the selection of customers can be based on the child's age, gender and language 'profile' so that the selection serves the group's 'needs' as well as the aims to facilitate the group's functionality, enhance ECEC quality and support the staff's motivation.

In Excerpt 1, the interviewer also invokes the inflexibility of the subsidy system (6–7) and the regulation of ECEC to account for the selection by stating that children’s part-time attendance of ECEC would complicate following the regulations regarding the adult–child ratio (7–9). From an IM perspective, the regulation and inflexible subsidy system serve as external reasons for the selection and thus the account functions as an excuse.

The interviewee also mentions in passing the public subsidies’ role in decisions about excluding part-time children from the clientele (6–7). This indicates that financial aspects play a role in the selection. Elsewhere in the data, the selection of customers is related to the administration and financial management of the enterprise and pedagogy. However, as in Excerpt 1, when the financial aspects related to selection are touched upon it is done rarely, vaguely and briefly, and only when asked about explicitly. This caution around the theme indicates interviewees’ assumptions about the cultural sensitivity of the subject and is thus understood as a form of defensive IM.

Financial aspects were, however, invoked when justifying the exclusion of children with special educational needs (SEN). The Finnish education system has a three-tiered support system: general, intensified and special support (Heiskanen et al., 2018). The legislation obligates municipalities to provide educational support () for the children with SEN. However, the role of private providers is not explicitly specified. Thus, practices related to public–private partnerships in providing educational support vary between municipalities. Some municipalities may pay increased subsidies for children with SEN and/or offer consulting services (special education teachers) to private providers. Municipalities can also try to obligate private providers to provide special support or they can decide not to direct children with SEN to the private sector at all. If a SEN appears when the child is already in private services, the practices to address it are diverse. The existing literature suggests that especially the educational support, which requires resourcing, is provided mainly in the public sector (Eskelinen & Paananen, 2018). When financial aspects were mentioned regarding the exclusion of children with SEN, the private providers stated that they would actually benefit financially if they accepted children with SEN, but the organization still excluded them, because the public ECEC was considered better resourced to support the children than private providers are. The talk about finances functioned to strengthen the credibility of the argument regarding the child’s best interest, which was expanded to justify the exclusion of children with special educational needs.

Some interviewees also explain that their organizations’ decision not to offer special educational support is made in mutual understanding or in

cooperation with municipalities’ ECEC administration. This shifts at least part of the responsibility for exclusion from private organizations to the public sector, so such accounts thus serve as excuses.

Another way to account for the decision to exclude children with special educational needs is to represent the municipality as responsible for the restriction. In our data, the reasons that interviewees mention are (1) municipalities’ decisions to take charge of educational support themselves and, thus, not to refer children with special educational needs to private ECEC and (2) as Excerpt 2 demonstrates, the providers’ reliance on the municipal subsidy policy.

Excerpt 2

1 (...) *It [The municipal voucher system] is a terribly bad system [laughs]. It does not work, it doesn’t enable any kind of special support [for children with special educational needs] in reality and it... causes mostly awkward situations. It’s totally insufficient.*

In Excerpt 2, the provider presents deficient public subsidies as an external reason that precludes the provision of special support. Elsewhere in the data, the form of subsidies is also blamed. The fixed-sum PDAMS is represented as an inflexible system that does not enable resourcing in special education. The voucher system, in turn, is represented as a flexible system that enables special education if a municipality decides to set a reasonable value for it. In all cases, the public subsidies are represented as enabling or disabling special support in private ECEC. Hence, the public subsidies serve as excuses that diminish organizations’ responsibility for the negatively interpreted outcome.

The interviewees presented the child’s age as another reason for the exclusion of clientele. Age-based exclusion was justified by the provider’s limited resources and by presenting opinions about the importance of home care for children under two years of age. Highlighting the deficient resources can be interpreted as an excuse and the ideological view about the right age to start ECEC justifies exclusion in the name of the child’s best interest.

Families’ financial situation as a reason for selectivity

The interviews included discussion about the affordability of private ECEC services and the potential selectivity related to them. In 10 out of 12 interviews, the representatives of private ECEC mentioned that the provider has, at least slightly, higher customer fees than the public sector.⁶ The reported amounts of the extra costs varied from 10 euros per month per child to around 160 euros on top of the maximum price of the public sector.⁷ In this context, *defensive IM* tactics were mainly used. However, some *assertive*

overtones could be distinguished as well. Moreover, the accounts produced by the same interviewee could be internally contradictory. For example, one interviewee emphasized their organization's striving for affordable and accessible ECEC, but said elsewhere that the organization also runs centres, under a different 'brand', that provide specialized ECEC at a higher price.⁸

Defensive IM

In the accounts analysed, five different ways to justify or excuse the higher customer fees or selectivity related to them could be identified. The first explanation was to justify the higher prices of the organization by linking them with higher quality and, consequently, with children's best interest. Second, the interviewees could underline families' initiative by representing them as active in seeking for high quality ECEC and by representing the organization as just answering to this demand. Third, the municipality's subsidy system or law could be presented as an excuse for higher prices. Fourth, the interviewees could present the gravitation of families from a higher socioeconomic background to private services as natural. Finally, they could understate the price difference between their services and public sector by arguing that it is so low that it does not actually cause selectivity.

Excerpt 3

1 Well, when we started, we wanted it (ECEC) to be
high quality. So at the moment we, say we
2 are the best childcare and ECEC in the city...(...)
So it's also expensive. That is, it's €150 more
3 than municipal daycare at the moment, for over
three-years-olds. For under three-years-olds
4 it's twice as expensive. So, it's just that socio
economic factors limit our growth to other cities.
5 (...) Then one must not avoid that the task of a
limited company is to make a profit for
6 stockholders. Then pricing has to be based on that.
And then, quality costs. That too, I guess
7 everyone recognises that a chipboard table is
completely different from a handcrafted oak
8 table. That's the starting point. (...) Then of
course, at some point we'll see if the parents will
9 continue to pay that much. And now I see that the
tendency is all the time that as people are
10 aware that their own child must be given the best
possible opportunities because the children
11 of [the name of the home city] or [name of the
region] or the nation no longer compete only
12 with each other for the next (sets of learning)
and opportunities, but the whole world is in
13 play, so I believe that families' investments are
increasing in the future (...) And, sure it's a pity
14 that it (the value of the municipal subsidy) is
pretty low compared to neighbouring

15 municipalities, that in the [neighbouring muni-
cality] the subsidies are around €100 more per
16 child, so there in [neighbouring municipality]
can be said that the private ECEC is a real
17 alternative to municipal ECEC, whereas in
[home city] families have to make a values-based
18 choice or have the financial resources to make
the choice. This is an unfortunate trend indeed
19 if it's not evened out at some point. (...) Now, I
am operating in a municipality where a family
20 has to pay the most, in the whole country, so it's
a little absurd, because we're anyway in a
21 city which has the biggest costs of living, and life
is anyway stressful, (-) and then even
22 daycare is made into an issue of inequality. (...)
In the future, if [the municipal subsidy] doesn't
23 stay at a certain level, there might be a little
segregation and inequality, I mean, the
24 socioeconomic, a family's socioeconomic, situa-
tion starts to have an effect.

In Excerpt 3, the interviewee accounts for the higher fees of the organization's services by employing the first three of the explanations listed above.

In the account, the interviewee notes that the customer fees of the organization are higher than in public services and that families' socioeconomic conditions in other municipalities hinder their growth (1–4). This indicates the interviewee's perception that the organization's services are financially inaccessible for some families. Firstly, the higher fees causing the selectivity are justified by the high quality of ECEC the organization provides. The interviewee offers an example of how different kinds of tables differ in price, drawing a parallel between ECEC provision and markets for other goods (1, 6–8). The suggestion is that ECEC is the same as any other good exchanged in the markets. By that logic, prices are elastic according to the quality of a good.

The interviewee also implies that today's parents are willing to invest in high-quality ECEC because they are nowadays more and more interested in developing their children's competitiveness (8–13). The parents are represented as active and demanding subjects and the provision of high-priced and high-quality private ECEC as an answer to that demand. Thus, the IM used justifies the higher fees with parents' preferences. The other interviewee, in turn, states that in larger cities 'there is a completely separate clientele wanting private services anyway' and that private ECEC providers compete for these 'marginal groups' (exemplified by referring to the employees of high-end technology companies). The interviewee represents private provision as an answer to the prevailing demand of those solvent families 'wanting' private services. Therefore, in this kind of IM, the selectivity of clientele (earlier in the interview,

the interviewee states that they are not ‘only’ an elite centre) is justified by diminishing the provider’s agency and highlighting ‘marginal groups’.

Moreover, in contrast to those accounts, elsewhere in the data, downplaying a provider’s possibilities to make a profit or justifying a company’s strong finances by stating that it enables them to be a reliable partner for the municipalities, the interviewee in Excerpt 3 states that a limited company’s statutory duty is actually to make profits for its shareholders (5–6). Using the modal phrases ‘one must not avoid’ and ‘pricing has to’ indicates the interviewee’s assumption that bringing up profit-seeking in the context of ECEC is somehow not an accepted way of talking and thus against cultural norms. Hence, the interviewee uses IM and excuses profit-seeking by referring to an external reason, namely the law. The other external subject presented the municipality’s subsidy policy as a reason for higher fees and selectivity (13–24). The interviewee implies that the value of the subsidy is so low that the ECEC provider has no other option but to charge high fees. The argument is strengthened by mentioning the more generous subsidies in other municipalities and highlighting the socioeconomic segregation caused by subsidies that are too low. In general, municipalities’ subsidy policies are repeatedly represented in the data as playing a key role in the interviewees’ accounts of the selectivity due to families’ financial situations. Income-tested subsidies are connected to affordability and fixed-sum PDAMS to selectivity of services.

Defensive IM is also used to justify socioeconomic selectivity by representing it as a natural situation. In such accounts, however, the prices of the services are not discussed directly but, as Excerpt 4 exemplifies, the naturalization is created by describing the clientele in a way that indicates high socioeconomic positions in society.

Excerpt 4

1 (...) because this [private ECEC] must not only be
for the for the privileged few. But, sure it’s
2 true of course that if I’m thinking of our custo-
mers, and their socioeconomic position, it’s true
3 that we have, like I said we have a lot of teachers’
children, and then we have a lot, that is
4 ours, the level of education, the parents’ level of
education is really (high). That’s just how it is.

The interviewee starts the account with the modal expression ‘must not’ and thus brings out the norm of universally accessible ECEC (1). Then, when noting that typically their clientele is highly educated, the interviewee uses the expressions *kyllähän* (but, sure it’s true) and *onhan* (it’s true that we have), which in Finnish in this context indicate admitting or confessing to an undesirable state of affairs (1–4). This contradiction between the norm and the actual

situation threatens the organization’s legitimacy, so the interviewee uses IM to naturalize the situation: using the expression ‘That’s just how it is’ represents the situation as a natural state of affairs beyond the organization’s authority and hence offers justification for the selectivity.

In sum, it can be said that clear add-ons in public fees and the selectivity of families related to those are expected to be not accepted and thus defensive IM tactics are used when discussing them. In addition, as noted above, assuring somehow that the services are accessible and/or affordable for every family is one way of managing the image of the organizations. However, depending on the context, this kind of talk can represent defensive or assertive IM. When the interviewees produce accounts that function to diminish the importance of their slightly higher customer fees than those in the public sector (e.g. 30 euros add-on per moth), the IM is interpreted as defensive. In such instances, IM functions to diminish the negative readings of the importance of an organization’s somewhat higher customer fees and is therefore interpreted as giving justifications.

Assertive IM

Assertive IM is not used in the context where interviewees discuss possible selectivity related to their higher customer fees. However, as mentioned above, the interviewees can also assure that their services are affordable and accessible for every family. When this is done in an assertive sense, the interviewees can highlight that they have ‘all kinds of families’ as customers or describe themselves as a local service for ordinary families living nearby. When these issues are mentioned with overtones of pride or without an explicit question they are understood as exemplification. Exemplification is an assertive IM tactic used to present oneself as a model of morally virtuous or principled conduct (Tedeschi & Melburg, 1984). Excerpt 5 demonstrates the use of assertive IM.

Excerpt 5

1 When we founded [the organisation] our idea was
that [the organisation] would be a centre
2 for everybody, regardless of family size, income
level, background that whether they are
3 native Finns or not, so they would have the
opportunity to come to (the organisation). And
4 the voucher system enables that. At the moment,
depending on the voucher value and local
5 level of costs, our extra customer fee is 0–37 euros.
We strive to keep it to zero or close to
6 zero, so that it would genuinely be available to all.
(...) (The voucher system) enables
7 actualisation of values pretty important to
Finnish people. Myself, I have a master’s in social
8 sciences and it’s important to me that everyone
has the opportunity, that we don’t start to

9 categorise children so that for high-income families, it is possible to go to a private ECEC centre, no, but everyone has to have the opportunity then.

Excerpt 5 is a part of the response to a question about the provision of special educational support. Later the interviewee says that the organization provides special education when public subsidies enable it. In the account, the interviewee assures that they do not intentionally select customers and there is no selectivity of customers (1–3, 8–10). This is interpreted as assertive IM (exemplification) since the organization represents itself as an active subject in aiming for affordable and accessible ECEC. The subject role is produced by presenting the organization's ideology and vision about 'a centre for everybody' (1–2). Moreover, the interviewee mentions their social sciences degree and personal view that families should have equal opportunities to choose private services (see Ruutiainen et al., 2020), which serves as a rhetorical move that strengthens the impression of the interviewee and the organization as morally righteous actors (7–10). When the interviewee proactively presents the organization (without being prompted) as an egalitarian actor, and on the other hand, avoids the impression that the organization or the interviewee is motivated by financial benefit of profit-seeking (cf. Excerpt 3), it can be interpreted as assertive IM, because it represents the organization as a morally legitimate actor.

In Excerpt 5 (as in Excerpt 3) the extra fees are explained as the result of municipalities' subsidy policy (3–7). At the same time, the organization becomes represented as an egalitarian actor whose good intentions are enabled or hindered by features of the subsidy systems. The income-tested voucher system is linked to affordability and in other part of the same interview fixed-sum PDAMS is linked to selectivity. As noted before, this kind of outsourcing of responsibility to an external author (subsidy system) is understood as an expression of excuses. At the same time, the commitment to a voucher system that 'enables actualization of values pretty important to Finnish people', is interpreted as assertive IM since it is mentioned with an overtone of pride. Therefore, Excerpt 5 also illustrates how defensive and assertive IM can be intertwined, even to the extent that they can be difficult to distinguish.

Cultural and ideological selectivity

One way the interviewees position their organization as a part of the Finnish ECEC system is to describe their services, features, specialities, emphases, visions and so on. These characteristics are represented as serving different families' different tastes or needs, as

a state of affairs or as self-fulfilment of a provider's personal vision. In this study, cultural and ideological selectivity refers to differentiation of the service users of different ECEC services on the basis of their varying preferences regarding ECEC.

Different descriptions of the provider's services draw a picture of ECEC markets where families choose not only between public and private settings, but also between numerous different features of services, such as the size of the centre or child group, location, the educational background of the staff, operating language, different pedagogical emphases, available diets, educational programmes, value bases, uniqueness or ideologies. Consequently, families are represented as subjects evaluating the different opportunities that are available. Families may explicitly or implicitly become pictured as customers whose satisfaction is important.

Parents' opportunities to choose services they prefer are not an issue that interviewees tend to account for. Rather, it is mentioned in either a factual way or with a positive overtone, indicating interviewees' assumptions about its general acceptability. Thus, only *assertive IM* tactics were used in this context. Excerpt 6 demonstrates how the private provider's specialization in certain kinds of services and families' choices between services are represented as a natural reason for cultural or ideological selectivity.

Excerpt 6

1 And when we talked about how the private day care's customers are selected, so, sure of course
2 there are all of these, let's say, if they have like
3 Montessori, Steiner, some language, that
4 affects the selection. Well, we have this sustainable
5 development perspective, so that has an
6 effect. (...) It is just that these families are, how to
7 say it, they don't think that society should
8 simply offer some door through which I put my
9 child, and then take out. They don't think about
10 it in that way, but they are extremely interested in
11 the content.

The interviewee brings out the different pedagogical programmes or emphases as impacting parents' ECEC choice (1–4). By using the utterance 'sure, of course there are all of these' this situation is represented as a matter of fact and thus the selectivity based on families and ECEC providers' different preferences becomes naturalized. This indicates the assumption of the general acceptability of this kind of selectivity and is thus interpreted as assertive IM.

In Excerpt 6, the interviewee explains that parents can select an appropriate ECEC from among the many different pedagogical emphases. Then the interviewee explicitly describes the organization's customer parents as active in ECEC selection and 'extremely interested in the content' of ECEC

provided (5–6). Also different generally valued and highly educated professions included in the clientele are named in the interviews as well. The fact that these highly educated and demanding parents have chosen a certain ECEC setting that interviewees represent is explained with an overtone of contentment or even pride. Accordingly, passing the test of demanding parents is employed to strengthen the organization's legitimacy and image. This indicates the use of assertive IM (self-promotion) (Bolino et al., 2008; Tedeschi & Melburg, 1984). Moreover, parents' ECEC choice becomes represented as a cultural or ideological act reflecting families' values, preferences or way of living.

As shown above, one way to justify the selectivity caused by families' financial situation is to represent parents as active subjects. The production of parents' subject position is used also in a more assertive way when discussing cultural and ideological selectivity, as Excerpt 7 exemplifies.

Excerpt 7

- 1 *Definitely we wouldn't have any customers in the private sector if parents' didn't have needs,*
- 2 *and the most important thing is that families get an opportunity to choose, for themselves and*
- 3 *for their child, the place they feel safe. Often when a family starts it is important that the*
- 4 *parents first have a feeling of safety, so that the child can adopt it. Nowadays, in the municipal*
- 5 *sector as well, parents' look through many centres before they decide on the one where they*
- 6 *will apply for a daycare place for their child.*

In Excerpt 7, the interviewee represents parents as subjects that make active, needs-based decisions regarding ECEC. This is done by stating that parents have 'needs' (1) and thus it is 'important' (2) that they have the 'opportunity to choose' (2). The interviewee also states that parents make these choices within the public service network 'as well' (4–6), thereby normalizing the selectivity in private provision. Private provision only extends the parents' possibilities to choose. Representing private service provision as a complement to the public ECEC provision therefore legitimizes the expansion of private provision. The excerpt also functions to legitimize cultural and ideological selectivity by representing it as a result of active choices that parents as subjects make on the basis of their needs. Thus, possible selectivity reflects a fulfilment of such needs. Moreover, the interviewee's statement that the private services get customers because parents have 'needs' (1) implies that such services are able to answer to those needs. Thus, the excerpt can be understood as self-promotion (private services are so good that parents end up choosing them).

Another way to legitimize cultural and ideological selectivity is to represent a provider itself as a subject. In such cases, the interviewees may describe their

personal vision or ambition. These descriptions entail, for example, sustainable development, a certain pedagogical programme or the interviewee's need for a sense of autonomy. ECEC services were also described as a package, a product or a programme that families can take or leave. Consequently, parents become represented as active decision-making subjects and children as objects of, for example, a societal project.

Overall, the potential for cultural and ideological selectivity is produced when interviewees position parents as subjects whose choices between different service providers reflect their ECEC preferences. At the same time, parents become represented as consumers with purchase power, which, in turn, outsources private providers' responsibility for the selectivity of families to the families themselves. With that kind of framing, attracting customers can be understood as an indication of relative success compared to other service providers, which, in turn, is used as self-promotion (assertive IM).

Impression management used in legitimation

In line with IM theory (e.g. Goffman, 1959; Schlenker, 1980), the investigation of IM in the present study makes visible the interviewees' expectations and assumptions about the cultural accessibility of different forms of selectivity regarding private ECEC. Table 2 relates the three types of selectivity and selection described in the previous sections to IM by dividing the different techniques employed in legitimating the selection and the selectivity in the defensive and assertive types of IM (see Boeije, 2004; Bolino et al., 2008; Ellis et al., 2002; Mohamed et al., 1999; Tedeschi & Melburg, 1984).

Briefly, *the screening of clientele* included only defensive accounts. *The families' financial situation as a reason for selectivity* was mainly a subject of defensive IM, but was employed in assertive IM as well. *The cultural and ideological selectivity* was used as assertive IM to gain or maintain legitimacy (see Suchman, 1995), but can be understood also as a proactive justification.

Discussion

Finnish ECEC policies are based on the idea of universalism (see Kildal & Kuhnle, 2005; Mahon et al., 2012; Vlasov, 2018) and despite the recent development of marketization, the ideal of universal non-selective ECEC remains strong (Ruutiainen et al., 2020). In addition, Finnish ECEC policies have promoted the uniformity of ECEC through similar statutory and curricula requirements for public and private ECEC. However, this study suggests that market-based ECEC provision may entail at least three

Table 2. Impression management (IM) employed in legitimizing the selectivity of private ECEC's clientele.

IM	Type of selectivity/ selection	IM tactics used	Cultural assumptions and expectations related to selection and/or selectivity of private ECEC
Defensive	<i>Screening of clientele</i>	Justification (child's best interest), Avoiding talk about finances Excuses (mutual understanding with municipalities, subsidy system and regulation)	Selection and/or selectivity culturally disapproved of, controversial or debated. Child's best interest as an acceptable reason for selectivity. Selection and/or selectivity culturally disapproved of, controversial or debated. Tension between universal non- selective ECEC and screening of clientele
	<i>Families' financial situation as a reason for selectivity</i>	Justifications (quality-based pricing, child's best interest, naturalization, parents as subjects, understating of price difference) Excuses (subsidy system or law as an external reason)	Selection and/or selectivity culturally disapproved of controversial or debated. Selection and/or selectivity culturally disapproved controversial or debated. The contradiction between selectivity, universalism and choice discourse is neutralized by appealing to external reasons
	<i>Cultural and ideological selectivity</i>	-	-
Assertive/ proactive	<i>Screening of clientele</i>	-	-
	<i>Families' financial situation as a reason for selectivity*</i>	Exemplification Self-promotion	Selection and/or selectivity based on affordability and accessibility as culturally approved
	<i>Cultural and ideological selectivity</i>	Naturalization, very matter-of-fact way of talking Parents as subjects, used in an assertive sense Self-promotion Private agents as subjects (own vision or ideology)	Selection and/or selectivity based on differentiation of ECEC services as a culturally approved or natural issue Selection and/or selectivity reflecting opportunity to choose as culturally acceptable Selection and/or selectivity reflects a provider's success in responding to parents' preferences Selection and/or selectivity reflecting self-fulfilment through ECEC provision culturally accepted

*employed in an assertive sense in assuring that the service is affordable and accessible for every family

mechanisms of selectivity of service users. Selectivity may originate from private providers' admission policy or decisions (possibly in mutual understanding with municipalities) to limit their service selection. The prices of private ECEC can also form a barrier limiting the affordability of the services for some of families. The third mechanism of selectivity concerns families' ECEC choices reflecting their preferences. On the basis of this study, however, it is not possible to estimate the extent of these three forms of selectivity, and it is even a separate empirical question. Yet, as Table 2 summarizes, the first two forms of selectivity are, as IM theory suggests, expected or assumed to be culturally disapproved of and thus defensive IM is used to justify or excuse those. Moreover, highlighting the affordability and accessibility of (private) ECEC and the assertive talk about cultural and ideological selectivity indicate the general acceptability of selectivity that occurs as a by-product of parent's choices as long as they are not restricted by financial issues. Thus, the IM used indicates that the universally accessible non-selective ECEC system is still a norm to which interviewees have to adapt their accounts and descriptions.

The theoretical decision to apply IM theory as an analytical tool seems successful in making visible the culturally accepted ways of thinking related to the tension between the universalistic and market logic of ECEC provision. The IM practised by the

interviewees can be related to the two different types of logic that are used by municipal decision makers to rationalize the marketization of Finnish ECEC (Ruutiainen et al., 2020).⁹ The first type positions private ECEC as a part of the public ECEC system, so the accessibility and affordability of services is emphasized. The second type sees private ECEC as a complementary service allowing more space for a market mechanism. The use of the types of logic becomes visible in how organizations' possibilities to allocate and price their service, select their customers and produce returns are emphasized in some accounts and descriptions, while others underline the affordability and non-selectivity of ECEC and parents' equal possibilities to choose the services they want. Interestingly, although the application of business logic to ECEC appears to be culturally unacceptable or is at least considered controversial, children's best interest appears to be a culturally legitimate reason for higher priced ECEC and thus better possibilities to produce profits. It is however noteworthy that, in their accounts, the same interviewees could move between both types of logic.

The interviewees tended to justify or deny the selectivity and strengthen the positive image of their organization/provision by pleading children's best interest, equal accessibility of ECEC or parents' opportunities to choose. The frequency with which and how it was possible to plead these issues indicates

that they are culturally acceptable discourses. It appears that by adapting arguments to these discourses it is possible to protect or gain organizational legitimacy (see Tienari et al., 2003). Moreover, when it was not possible to adapt accounts to acceptable discourses, the interviewees offered excuses to assure that the selectivity was caused by external reason. These reasons presented concerned municipalities' policies related to private ECEC provision, public subsidies, regulation and legislation. This study complements previous research (e.g. Abrassart & Bonoli, 2015; Mäntyjärvi & Puroila, 2019; Pavolini & Van Lancker, 2018; Van Lancker, 2017) according to which local and national ECEC policies play a crucial role in the accessibility of ECEC by suggesting that on the micro level these policies also serve as external authors which the private providers can use to legitimate their actions.

The existing research conducted in the Finnish ECEC context suggests (Ruutiainen et al., 2020; Paananen et al., 2019) that the equality of the ECEC system is increasingly understood as families' equal opportunities to choose the service corresponding to their preferences. This study shows how this notion is used to justify the differentiation and specialization of private ECEC services and thus the selectivity of service users. However, according to results, the choice appears to be two-sided: the choice discourse also includes providers' choices about their clientele and selectivity related to pricing and targeting of their services. Thus, the Finnish ECEC policy emphasizing families' equal opportunities to choose appears to be followed by consequences that might be at least partly unintended (see Paananen, 2017; Settlege & Meadows, 2002). As Vandebroek et al. (2008) suggest, ECEC providers' admission policies might be related to the selectivity of ECEC service users. However, whether or not or to which extent such selection is happening in the Nordic context is ultimately an empirical question that remains unanswered.

Previous research (e.g. Moss, 2009; Lee, 2018; Yuen & Grieshaber, 2009; Ruutiainen et al., 2020) has argued that the emergence of market rationale in the context of ECEC conceptualizes parents as active and rational market agents selecting services corresponding to their preferences. This study indicates that this conceptualization of parents is employed in defensive and assertive IM by representing parents as demanding subjects. Accordingly, private service providers appeared as though they were just reacting to the prevailing demand offering different opportunities to choose (see also Karlsson et al., 2013). This notion of parents appears to be somewhat simplified because, as Meyers and Jordan (2006) note, parents' childcare choices appear to demonstrate their

accommodations to prevailing economic and social realities rather than differences in a priori preferences. Moreover, ECEC choice is more or less related to parents' background, which manifests as cultural awareness or socioeconomic situation (e.g. Eika, 2006; Grogan, 2012; Kampichler et al., 2018; Vincent & Ball, 2006).

Overall, this study shows how the consumerist ideas that challenge the understanding of school education as a public good and drive school segregation and differentiation in Nordic countries (Dovemaovemark et al., 2018) have gained a foothold in the area of ECEC as well (see also Karlsson et al., 2013). The Nordic model of universal and egalitarian education policy has aimed at reducing inequalities related to children's background (Esping-Andersen, 1996), but the current development of ECEC policy has set these objectives at risk. It appears that the marketization and privatization of ECEC, even carried out in a way that preserves the idea of universalism (see Ruutiainen et al., 2020), has the potential to increase the selectivity of such services. Thus, the inconsistency between ECEC policy objectives and actualization seems evident. Even though ECEC legislation and other regulations function to produce uniformity between public and private ECEC and to avoid stratification of their clientele, this study suggests that the marketization of Finnish ECEC may be leading – at least somewhat – to a differentiated clientele between the two provisions. However, since the empirical research (e.g. Degotardi et al., 2018; Grogan, 2012; Kensinger Rose & Elicker, 2008; Vandebroek et al., 2008) on selectivity and accessibility is highly context specific, further multi-methodological investigation is needed to fill the gaps in knowledge about the consequences of ongoing marketization development in the Nordic context and more broadly.

Notes

1. Universalism is defined differently in different contexts (Anttonen & Sipilä, 2014). However, this paper combines definitions by Moberg (2017) and Szebehely and Meagher (2018) in the context of Nordic eldercare. Accordingly, universalism is characterized by clearly defined right to services, equal needs-based inclusion, public funding, affordability and service provision, and comprehensive usage of services achieved by good quality.
2. In 2019, 14,318 families received a private day care allowance, 30,532 received vouchers and 4,898 children were in purchased service.
3. Customer fees in public ECEC are income tested, varying between €0 and €288 per child per month.
4. The concept used varies according to place and historical moment.
5. We regenerate illustration introduced by Lillqvist and Louhela-Salminen's (2013) to demonstrate the

complexity of corporate impression management in social media.

6. Two interviews did not include talk about the amount of customer fees, but on their websites both organizations list higher fees than those in the public sector.
7. If the municipal subsidy for the use of private ECEC is completely income tested, families will pay the same fee for the services as they would in public ECEC plus a possible extra fee set by the provider. However, if the subsidy is partly income tested and partly not – as is the case quite often (Lahtinen & Svartsjö, 2018) – the fee the families pay for private ECEC may exceed the fee they would pay for public ECEC. Since low-income families do not need to pay any fee for public ECEC services, for them the difference between the costs of public and private ECEC may be considerable if the subsidy is not fully income tested.
8. In addition to selectivity between public and private ECEC there appears to be potential for selectivity within settings as well. It is told that at an additional cost parents can purchase different hobby opportunities available during the ECEC days. Offering these paid extra services is justified by representing them as better serving customer families and giving their children the opportunity to have a hobby already during an ECEC day and thus save families' evening time.
9. The first type of logic is closely related to the income-tested voucher system and the other to fixed-sum PDAMS.

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