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## Privatised ECEC in Sweden: Exploring the affective dimensions of 'market care' in local quasi-markets

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### Abstract

This article focuses on experiences of private preschool operators (with varying sizes and profiles) of the governance and organisation of ECEC delivery in Sweden. The aim is to analyse how these private providers relate to, interact with and perceive their relationships with municipal authorities. These private-public governing relationships are analysed by paying particular attention to their affective dimensions through the notion of 'market care'. The empirical data consists of interviews with 20 private preschool providers, which are analysed through a two-dimensional grid where predictability and conflict serve as analytical focal points. The findings highlight how experiences and perceptions are enabled, provoked and felt differently depending on their embeddedness in diverse local 'affective atmospheres'. Moreover, they show that interpersonal exchanges and relationships play important roles in the performance and experience of market care. The study contributes empirical insights into the role of local affective atmospheres and market care (or lack thereof) in local Swedish ECEC governance and delivery. It thereby illuminates central aspects of the governance of privatised ECEC that complements the predominantly national and state-focused literature on quasi-market organisation.

**Keywords:** market care, municipalities, private actors, preschool, affective atmospheres

## 1 Introduction

Privatisation in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) has been implemented with varying purposes in countries with different policy legacies and histories, resulting in large variations across countries and systems in for instance how, why and under what conditions private actors can provide ECEC (Trætteberg et al., 2023; Roberts-Holmes & Moss, 2021; Penn, 2014). In the following, we will provide insights from the Swedish ECEC setting to contribute to a wider discussion on the role, functions and, also, affective dimension of private ECEC governance and delivery. Although Sweden has been characterised as having a 'social democratic welfare state regime' (Esping-Andersen, 1996), political changes in recent decades have resulted in a general transformation of Swedish welfare services that have opened opportunities for private actors to engage in welfare provision

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in various ways. The changes have included, among others, major reforms in the health care and municipal social service sectors, as well as in education (Blix & Jordahl, 2021). In compulsory and upper secondary education, the introduction of school choice via publicly funded vouchers in combination with liberal regulations for approving private providers, who are allowed to operate for profit, has had major impacts on the school sector. This distinctive regime, with full public funding for private (for-profit) actors, and no parental fees, has aroused both scholarly interest and political debate (cf. Magnússon, 2020; Fjellman et al., 2019; Dahlstedt & Fejes, 2019; Tyrefors Hinnerich & Vlachos, 2017; Sebhatu & Wennberg, 2017; Böhlmark, et al., 2015; Lundahl et al., 2013). However, the Swedish ECEC sector, which has been similarly transformed but at a different pace and with partly different regulation, has attracted far less research interest (for some exceptions, see Carlbaum et al., 2024; Forsberg et al., 2024; Westberg & Larsson, 2022). As a result, several central issues, not the least relating to the perceptions and experiences of private ECEC providers, remain to be explored.

Private providers have played an important part in the provision of ECEC in Sweden over the last fifty years (Larsson & Westberg, 2024). In the 1970s and 80s, an expansion of the sector took place, and a bill from the mid-1980s (Government Bill 1984/85:209) granted all Swedish children the right to attend preschool starting at the age of 18 months (now 12 months) and ensuring that this universal right is fulfilled is the responsibility of the municipalities. Preschool enrolment rates have increased gradually and are high by international standards at ca. 95 percent for children aged 3-5 years. The provision of ECEC is delegated from the Swedish state to the 290 municipalities, which can deliver ECEC themselves and/or use private providers to ensure provision. Through legislative reforms, ECEC provision through public finances have opened up a market for private actors. One important reform was the so-called right to free establishment for private preschool providers from 2006. By this decision, municipalities became obliged to grant permission and funding to private preschool providers as long as they met basic requirements. Today, about 20 percent of enrolled children in ECEC attend a privately operated preschool.

Private actors have a right to establish a preschool if they meet demands in the Education Act, and (as in the compulsory and upper secondary school sectors) to obtain public funding from the municipality for each child they enrol, through vouchers corresponding to the average cost of the municipal ECEC service per child. There are about 2800 private preschools in Sweden, about half of which are owned by limited liability companies and allowed to operate for profit (National Agency for Education, 2022). The private operators vary greatly in size, profile and scope, ranging from small units run for example by parents and cooperatives or associations to very large companies, operated in chains and/or corporate groups. However, large companies (with Swedish and/or international ownership) tend to acquire smaller private actors, resulting in general ownership concentration (cf. Rönnerberg et al., 2024).

Swedish parents are free to choose a private or municipally operated preschool for their child and the fees are the same in both cases. Parental fees are subject to a cap related to household income, and they are generally very low in international terms (about 120 Euro per month per child). Thus, public funding is extensive, making Sweden an interesting amalgamation (Alexiadou & Rönnerberg, 2019) of major public investment and general welfare traditions together with liberal regulations for private actors in welfare delivery,

including large private profit-making corporations. With this composite policy architecture, the Swedish case contributes additional dimensions to the discussion of ECEC privatisation. Thus, in this article we address the governance and organisation of private actor ECEC delivery in the Swedish context from the perspective private ECEC providers with varying sizes and profiles, with the aim to analyse how these private providers relate to, interact with and perceive their relationships with municipal authorities.

By using the concept of a quasi-market (see below), we want to emphasise how market-making activities in the public sector significantly differ from the traditional notion of a free ‘market’. (cf. Carlbaum et al., 2024; Lindgren et al., 2024; cf. Glennerster, 1991; Le Grand, 1991; Hartman, 2011). As such and furthermore, even if quasi-markets are ostensibly designed and established with motives to enhance quality and efficiency, they are also political and ideological constructs that are subject to problems and failure (Carey & Malbon, 2020; Lowery, 1998). The socially embedded activities within them involve ‘a mix of conflictual and co-operative behaviour’ (Hughes et al., 2012, p. 8) and complex relationships between actors, particularly municipal officials and representatives of providers (for-profit and non-profit) with various roles, interests, needs, values, and goals competing for resources (Blix & Jordal, 2021; Kastberg, 2008; Brandsen, 2004). We analyse these private-public governing relationships through the notion of ‘market care’ to probe largely neglected aspects of the workings of privatised ECEC and municipal ‘market stewardship’, by highlighting the complexities in the interactions between public and private actors in ECEC governance, organisation and delivery.

## 2 Conceptual framework, data and analysis

### 2.1 Exploring preschool quasi markets through the notion of ‘market care’

In Sweden, the 290 municipalities are key arenas in the public and private provision of ECEC. The municipalities must ensure that a preschool place is available for every child within their jurisdictions. They also have responsibilities for both managing and inspecting the premises and practices of private ECEC operators in their ‘local preschool quasi-markets’ (LPQs, Carlbaum et al., 2024), including the crucial tasks of approving new private preschools, by awarding or refusing to award starting permits. This positions municipalities as ‘market stewards’ within the overall nationally binding legislative framework of the ECEC sector (Carey et al., 2018; Contrafatto, 2014; Malbon & Carey, 2021), by for example providing information, monitoring, steering and encouraging best practice. We have previously shown that Swedish municipalities’ associated practices and strategies vary substantially (Carlbaum et al., 2024). Here we further explore this variation in local preschool quasi-market making, by analysing expressed views of private ECEC providers.

In the literature, focus has been directed towards for instance market shaping, referring to ‘agential efforts to influence both the formation and transformation of markets’ (Nenonen & Storbacka, 2021, p. 338), as well as market stewardship in quasi-markets. As emphasised initially, the term ‘quasi’ is considered important, as it highlights the politically steered nature of market-making in welfare services and there are substantial

differences between quasi and more traditional markets, which significantly influence quasi-markets' character (LeGrand, 1991). These include, for instance, the lack of a price mechanism, exemplified by the use of tax-funded vouchers, which level the playing field for both private and public providers. The municipal rights to issue permits and impose sanctions after inspection of private actors are further important aspects of the LPQs, as they enable municipalities to control market entry and apply sanctions to force exit (cf. Rönnerberg et al., 2024; c.f. Le Grand, 1991, Glennerster, 1991). Several studies have addressed 'market stewardship', i.e., the activities and roles of governing actors in quasi-market organisation in efforts to meet policy objectives for welfare state services (Dickinson et al., 2022; Malbon & Carey, 2021). As suggested by Carey et al. (2018), a regulative role is not sufficient in relation to ensuring a well-functioning quasi-market. Softer approaches, via stewardship activities, can buffer inequity in welfare services. Thus, these studies have addressed the need to pay attention to actions and activities beyond regulation in relation to quasi-markets. However at the same time, these studies have tended to focus on governmental (national level) actions and activities, although both non-governmental and local actors (in our case municipal actors) play crucial roles in designing and maintaining quasi-markets (Dickinson et al., 2022; Green et al., 2024, p. 1140; Malbon & Carey, 2021, p. 18). It is particularly important to extend analysis of market stewardship beyond (and below) the national level in settings such as the decentralised Swedish system, where local municipalities have extensive discretion and a history of self-governance. In addition, providers' perceptions, experiences and expressions of market stewardship and shaping activities have received little attention in prior literature.

In this study we seek to supplement and nuance this picture and to refine our understanding of market stewardship both in the Swedish ECEC setting and more generally. We do this by, firstly, acknowledging that municipalities (or, more specifically their LPQs) are sites of (local) market-making and stewardship, where both public and private ECEC operators interact, exchange and build relationships in order to provide ECEC welfare services to parents and children. We also, secondly, develop and use 'market care' as a bridging concept to facilitate analysis of relational aspects of the activities and interactions between stewards of the quasi-markets and those operating within them. The term is deliberately chosen by us to highlight the interactivity and exchanges associated with the practices under study. It can thus expand the notion of market stewardship to include fundamental experiences and interactions by placing the focus outside of both '(care) givers' (municipalities as stewards) and receivers (private actors) via 'market care'. In addition, and semantically, 'care' is intimately connected to the ECEC sector. Indeed, care is always inherently relational, as it is exercised in relation to someone and/or something. Thus, market care, in our definition, refers to processes in the LPQs that occur in the complex, multi-actor relational spaces between municipalities and private preschool providers, which have important affective dimensions as it can be experienced, lived, felt and expressed. Thus, we find it productive to connect the notion of market care to literature on affect.

In the following, affect is understood as both encompassing and exceeding individualised emotions, which may be mediated and circulated socially and culturally (Anderson, 2009; Stewart, 2007). Affect is 'attached to things, people, ideas, sensations, relations, activities, ambitions, institutions, and any number of other things, including other affects'

(Sedgwick, 2003, p. 19). Thus, affect may be manifested in individuals' minds or bodies, but it encompasses diverse relational phenomena that arise from myriads of forms of interaction (Anderson, 2013). We find Anderson's notion of affective atmospheres (2009, 2016) particularly useful in this context, as it provides an understanding of affect as something that may be diffused metaphorically 'in the air' or 'relational space', and is relationally contingent, acting as a collective force that shapes encounters and experiences in certain ways. Affect is thus related to actions and perceptions of actions, past, present and future, as experiences of previous actions influence perceptions of present action and how they are felt by the actors involved. As Wetherell (2012, p. 116) notes, affect can be 'deeply felt', as well as 'more obviously performed', and discerned in moral and normative assessments embedded in descriptions, accounts and judgements of selves and others. Against this backdrop, we use 'market care' as a broad concept that encompasses practices, expressions, norms and values (such as trust, reciprocity, and shared understanding) that foster cooperation that are embedding market stewardship in a particular 'affective atmosphere'. So, with the perceived shortcomings from the market stewardship literature and 'market care' as our starting points, we have elaborated a theoretical framework encompassing two main dimensions through which the empirical data has been analysed. We will expand on these dimensions after presenting the study and the collected data.

## 2.2 The empirical study and data

In this article we draw on a sub-study of a wider research project on privatisation in Swedish ECEC, particularly interviews with representatives of 20 private preschool providers of substantially varying sizes and legal ownership forms (Table 1). The providers represent three main groups in terms of size: large for-profit companies (N=6), medium-sized preschool providers operating two or more preschools (N=8), and small providers with only one preschool (N=6). The first group is dominated by for-profit companies, while the other two also include operators with other forms of organisation, such as non-profit parent and staff-run preschools, foundations and associations. Of the 20 selected private actors, eight were for-profit and eight had an explicitly stated profile. Although it was not a criterion for the initial sampling, the final selection of private providers operated in various geographical parts of Sweden. Some operated in just one municipality, but the medium and large actors operated in several municipalities so they could share experiences of operating in several different LPQs<sup>1</sup>. There was also substantial variation in their pedagogical profiles (Table 1).

<sup>1</sup> In the larger research project "Preschool as a Market" (financed by the Swedish Research Council 2020-2025), a previous sub-study focused on municipalities and how they shape and contribute to competition and freedom of choice in their LPQs. This study included interviews with municipal managers (N =35) from 30 of Sweden's 290 municipalities (c.f. Carlbaum et al., 2024). The 20 private actors that this study draws on did not necessarily operate in these 30 municipalities that were included in the first sub-study.

**Table 1** Selection of private preschool providers (N=20)

Private provider	No. of preschools	Ownership/mode of operation	Pedagogic Profile
L1	Appr. 100	Limited company	
L2	Appr. 15	Limited company	
L3	Appr. 40	Limited company	
L4	Appr. 30	Limited company	
L5	Appr. 10	Limited company	Reggio Emilia
L6	Appr. 10	Limited company	Outdoor
M1	3	Limited company	
M2	4	Foundation	Montessori
M3	4	Limited company	International
M4	4	Foundation	
M5	8	Association	
M6	4	Limited company	Reggio Emilia
M7	4	Association	Christian
M8	4	Limited company	
S1	1	Limited company	
S2	1	Economic association	
S3	1	Parental cooperative	
S4	1	Economic association	Montessori
S5	1	Staff cooperative	
S6	1	Foundation	Waldorf

The interviews were conducted with a representative of the principal organiser (in Swedish *huvudmannen*), and, as a result, the interviews included diverse informants ranging from a CEO, or a head of a large company sub-division, to a preschool head teacher, who may be both owner and principal. The interview guide focused on several aspects including organisation, profile or pedagogical orientation, as well as motives and philosophies for running a preschool (or several preschools). It also included several questions intended to capture experiences of municipal collaboration, vouchers, inspection and so-called establishment control (through municipalities' power to accept or reject applications to start new preschools), as well as perceptions of associated interactions with municipality representatives, and possible changes or variations in them. Throughout the data collection process, ethical regulations from the Swedish Research Council (2017) have been carefully

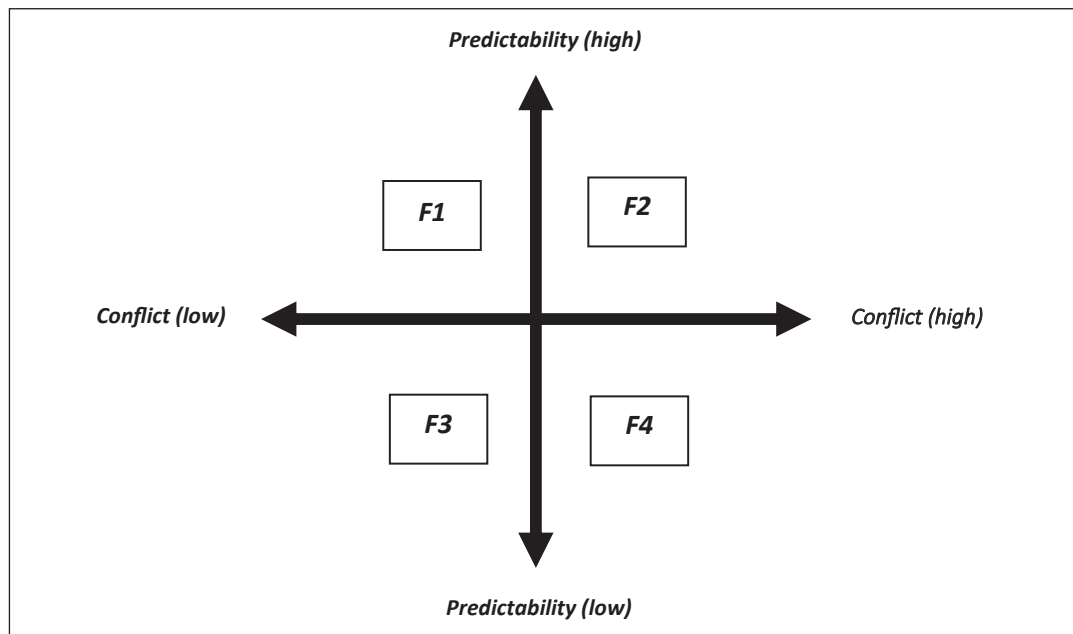


followed, including, among other things, informed consent, informing interviewees on the right to withdraw, ensuring safe storage of data and information, as well as information on how data will be used and cited, etc. Informants were told that neither their personal names or the name of their organisation would be disclosed in the reporting of the data and that company or preschool names would not be used. However, they were also informed that some central contextual information on their organisation (such as size) would be needed to contextualise the findings. Here they are referred to by the letters L, M or S (indicating large, medium-sized and small operator, respectively) and a number. The interviews lasted from 40 minutes to over an hour and were transcribed verbatim. The informants were forthcoming, accessible, and willing to share their thoughts and ideas. In this manner the interviews provided detailed information on the views of diverse private ECEC providers regarding issues that have received little prior research attention, both generally and specifically in Swedish settings. More broadly, the data was able to illuminate experiences of important non-state actors in quasi-markets, thereby complementing the market stewardship literature, which has tended to focus on actors at the national government level.

### 2.3 Towards the analysis: A two-dimensional matrix

The acquired data were analysed in several steps. The first step included a thorough reading of the transcripts in search of accounts of experiences, judgements and expressions of how the private actors described their relationships with the municipality (or municipalities, if they operated preschools in more than one). This yielded extracts including various accounts of experiences of relationships with the municipalities, what these were built on, the contexts and forms of interactions, how they met and collaborated, and associated phenomena. The transcript extracts thus included descriptions of instances, practices and expressions of how the private providers assessed or ‘felt’ these practices. In this stage of the analysis we also attended to what the informants described as lacking, missing, or fruitful in these relationships.

This initial step showed that judgments and statements of the experienced relationships with the municipality seemed to be connected to the perceived degree of predictability. Moreover, positive and negative experiences of both low and high degrees of predictability were expressed. Appreciated elements of high predictability included (among others) transparent processes and clarity, while mentioned negative elements included rigidity and overly legalistic practices. Another finding from the initial analysis was that the accounts portrayed substantial variation in the affective embeddedness of the relationships, which apparently ranged from dysfunctional to synergistic and fruitful. We identified these extremes as two ends of a conflict dimension, noting that ‘high conflict’ could include strongly articulated disagreement, silencing, withdrawal from interactions, non-responses, and similar latent expressions of discontent. Using the two dimensions identified in this first analytical step we created the four-quadrant matrix shown in Figure 1. It should, of course, be noted that myriads of processes, practices and variables (past and present) affect LPQs, market stewardship, associated affective atmospheres, and hence both of these dimensions. Thus, in any LPQ some aspects may be highly predictable or synergistic, but not others.



**Figure 1** Analytical dimensions: A four-quadrant matrix to visualise perceived degrees of predictability and conflict

A finding from the first step was that experiences of the private providers varied in relation to various governance activities of the municipalities. To account for this, we applied conceptualisations of three types of such activities, namely regulative, inquisitive and meditative (Jacobsson (2010). Even if the concepts originally were developed in the context of Europeanisation, they offer a script to highlight various governing activities that are performed and experienced in a municipal governing context as well, when local actors enact various forms of quasi-market organisation in their LPQs (for a previous application in the context of national school inspection, c.f. Lindgren, 2015). Examples of regulative activities include setting and/or enforcing rules, standards and any practices that require some degree of compliance. Inquisitive activities encompass auditing, inspections, evaluations, rankings and assessments, while meditative activities include discussions, probing of ideas and sharing experiences (Jacobsson, 2010). In this analytical step we largely followed the principles of directed content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005), revisiting the extracts identified in the first step and relating views and experiences expressed in them to the two affective dimensions and the governing activities mentioned in the transcripts.



### 3 Findings

#### 3.1 An initial glance at the vertical and horizontal dimensions

The degree of predictability, the vertical dimension in our two-dimensional matrix, is perceived as important for the private providers, as high predictability provides a secure framework for joint expectations regarding the interactions. The interviewees clearly regarded high predictability as important for promoting some beneficial values, e.g., 'equivalence, transparency, and operating under the same conditions [as the municipal preschools]' (L1). However, low predictability could also be advantageous in some cases according to the providers, for instance by enabling 'flexibility', 'open mindedness', and willingness to negotiate to 'agree and find common middle ground' (L2). Moreover, high predictability was also associated with overly bureaucratic, formalistic and frustrating municipal exercises, and low predictability with arbitrary, unclear or even unfair treatment.

Turning to the conflict dimension, on the horizontal axis, most participants indicated that they had harmonious relationships with the municipalities, located towards the low conflict end of the matrix. However, high degrees of conflict were clearly present in some reported experiences. Examples included taking a municipality to court, 'We appealed [against a municipal decision to dismiss an application for a permit] and the court said we were right' (M8). In addition, more latent disagreements and resigned states were also reported, in cases where trust was broken and a private actor chose to disengage from the municipality as much as possible. It should be noted that the providers' affective experiences were also strongly affected by variations among the LPQs and in focal concerns of the interactions with the municipalities. Different governance activities thus seem to provoke different responses and relationships, the relationships are not static in terms of either dimension, and the associations between the responses and governance activities are complex (as discussed in the following section).

#### 3.2 Regulative activities

Regulative activities include to enforce rules but also to ensure standards are met, as well as activities based on more voluntary participation (Jacobsson, 2010). In the context of this study, such activities include, for instance, municipalities granting starting-up permits for new private preschools, and financial activities such as the calculation and distribution of funding vouchers and so called 'additional amounts' for children in need of special support. An important initial observation is that the municipalities tend to exercise discretion in interpreting and designing these governing activities, resulting in substantial variation, so the private providers need to navigate and respond appropriately (or effectively) to the local municipal practices.

A key necessity for any private provider is to receive municipal permission to start a preschool. There are different procedures and regulations that the municipalities have elaborated in this regard, even if the basic requirements that certain demands in the Education Act need to be assessed (by the municipality) as satisfactory. On the more positive side of the private actor experiences (left-hand quadrants of the matrix, F1 and F3), there are expressions of appreciation both when the municipalities have taken a more detailed and elaborated route, as well as routes more open to (at least some) degrees of flexibility. There are repeated notions in the data pointing to transparency (high predictability, low conflict in F1) and flexibility (low predictability, low conflict in F3). However, the accounts also include examples of low predictability resulting in feelings of discontent (F4), as explained by Medium sized actor 8:

[Municipality X] has a lot of made-up local rules making it difficult for us. (...) I get a stomach ache when the municipality calls because I never really know what it's about. I know we're not doing anything wrong. But I don't know what they think is wrong ... and the gut feeling is that you can't really trust the municipality. (M8)

Another example of negative experience associated with low predictability was expressed by small operator S1, who felt that at the time of their preschool's start-up the municipality did not have the proper procedures in place and thus lacked predictability: 'I felt that the municipal officials...[were]...very slow, they didn't have routines. I thought, it would be professional. Today it is, but then it wasn't. They kind of didn't know how...' (S1). At the same time, regulatory contexts characterised by 'high predictability' can also provoke negative experiences (F2), as voiced by a large private actor:

[Municipality X] has become more fixed in their mindset, and more like strict legalistic management, they interpret very literally and give exact numbers of children you are allowed to enrol so on. (...) But we'd like to have some flexibility that in some municipalities does not exist. (L4)

Other key tasks for the municipalities as market stewards include the calculation and distribution of resources, this is a contested space for both public and private actors, and nationally the preschool vouchers vary considerably, mirroring the average cost per child in municipal preschools, which ranged from ca. 12 000 to 20 000 EUR per child in 2018 (Rönnberg et al., 2024). The level of the vouchers is a recurrent topic in accounts of experiences situated in the 'high conflict' side of the matrix. Moreover, the variation in their value is a strategic factor considered when private actors (particularly large ones) choose locations to establish preschools, and an important determinant of even the possibility to establish one profitably, or at all. On the other hand, the voucher may be accompanied by various 'additional benefits' that the municipality is willing to share, and a relatively low value voucher could be compensated, in the eyes of some private actors by (for example) invitations to attend municipal in-service training programmes:

In [Municipality x] we have concerns because the voucher is relatively low compared to the amount per child in other municipalities. But in this municipality, as I said, we have opportunities to participate in different activities [relating to professional development]. When the municipality offers, for instance, in-service training for preschool staff, our employees are also invited to participate. (M5)

This extract illustrates that the value of vouchers is not the only important factor for private actors. It also contributes to a broader theme highlighting the importance of 'mar-

ket care', in terms of perceptions that stewards are open, receptive, and inclusive (by, for instance, inviting private preschool teachers to participate in municipal activities). We return to this issue later, but first we address findings regarding inquisitive governance activities.

### 3.3 Inquisitive activities

Inquisitive activities include (among others) inspections, evaluations, rankings and judgments (Jacobsson, 2010). Similarly to the regulative activities, both municipalities and private providers must (of course) meet all relevant national legislative requirements. However, the regulations also leave discretionary scope for municipalities to develop, design and implement local inquisitive practices, such as inspection procedures targeting private preschools (key inquisitive activities that strongly influences the structure and affective aspects of public-private relationships in the LPQs). Some experiences of these activities were assigned to the low conflict side of the matrix, including some associated with high predictability (in the F1 quadrant), as it fostered feelings of reassurance and trust, as expressed for instance by Medium-sized actor M8:

Yes, inspection is a regular occurrence (...) inspections are predictable, well they also do un-announced inspections, but they're still predictable, in the sense that I know what's going to happen (...) I always feel secure that their inspection decisions are correct. (M8)

In addition, some experiences of such activities with low apparent predictability were also situated in the low conflict side of the matrix, as exemplified by Small actor S2, who described the inspection activities as a bit of a give-and-take, but nevertheless built on trust:

And it's very constructive, a give and take. (...) you get a little check that you're on the right track (...) the municipal inspections are there to improve the preschool activities and that there's mutually shared interest. (S2)

A sense of security is crucial for positive experiences of the inquisitive activities, but there is also substantial variation in the reported experiences of them. On the 'high conflict' side these include feelings of being 'exposed', or even subject to harassment related to inspection activities (and thus in the high predictability, high conflict quadrant, F2), as expressed by Large private provider L1: 'It's more of a witch hunt. And that's the experience that we can have in some municipalities... 'You want to find errors because you don't want our business here' (L1).

In LPQs where inquisitive activities were experienced as having had low predictability and were associated with low conflict according to the interviewees (quadrant F3) inspection tends to be ad-hoc and inconsistent, with substantial variation due to individual municipal inspectors having high degrees of discretion and autonomy:

It highly depends on the inspector (...) there are different inspectors and we've noticed that the main questions they ask varies. So it seems to [be up to their] personal interest. Something that [this particular inspector] is stuck on, something that person always brings up. (L2)

Thus, inspections are not automatically considered objective or rule-following, but rather something being determined by the inspector. And interestingly, we can once again discern that low level of predictability is considered problematic in some cases (F3) but not in others (F4). Continuing at the intersection of predictability and the need for both stewards and private actors to be rule following, a situation in which both parties could potentially understand the other, when a shared interest for a focus on the children meet the legislated need to perform ‘on paper’, it can become a source of disagreement and even frustration:

She [the inspector] said “I see that the children are doing well here and you have a fantastic business, but you’re not so good on paper”. Yes, and that’s exactly what I feel too (...) We focus on the children and in our opinion, it’s the right thing to do. And that’s where the big gap becomes, that they demand that... “We must have this on paper”. And they want to be able to see how our business works by reading a paper. And I maintain that it’s impossible. (S5)

### 3.4 Meditative activities

Examples of meditative activities include discussions, probing of ideas and sharing of experiences (Jacobsson, 2010), which in our case involve, for instance, how and in what ways the private ECEC providers are included in various activities in the municipal preschool setting, involving also how and in what ways sharing of experiences are organised (or not). Such activities could include, among others, the private ECEC providers’ inclusion in various in-service and professional development initiatives arranged by the municipalities. Previous findings (Carlbaum et al., 2024) has shown how municipal actors frame their vocabulary in terms of for instance trust, stability and the importance of good relations with the private providers, this is by and large a reciprocal commitment and something they are also striving for. Some more than others. From the providers’ side, they are also keen on developing and sustaining good relationships, as exemplified by Large actor 5:

I’d say that we put a lot of time and commitment into building good relations with the municipality, primarily with the civil servants but also with local politicians. We want them to know who we are, we want them to be curious about what we do in our preschools. And then, of course, we’re keen to not only have a relationship with the municipality when things get complicated, or when they do their inspections, but to have an open communication and dialogue in other matters as well. (L5)

Maintaining an open dialogue is essential for relationships to develop and for both parties to protect and further their respective interests. However, accounts of our participants indicate that strong mutual interest in safeguarding and promoting the development of ‘our children’ pushes experiences of dialogues generally to the low conflict side of the matrix (quadrants F1 and F3) and fosters an affective atmosphere of shared meaning:

So I can call them [the municipality] and say, “How should we do this?”, “How do you do it?” And then we do it the same way, we can have an open communication both ways. There’s a view that our children are also the municipality’s children. We must, like, collaborate (...) We feel that we’re important for [municipality x] (...) I think they see us as professional and that we have, ...Silly, but that our heart is in the right place to run a preschool. It feels good. (M8)

In addition to municipalities and private providers generally sharing reciprocal desires to establish trustful, stable relationships in their LPQs, our participants recognized that deficiencies in such relationship-building clearly has negative affective consequences. Particularly, withdrawal of a service, invitation or activity that market stewards used to offer and/or provide for private actors causes annoyance and discontent, pushing experiences to the high end of the conflict dimension (quadrants F2 and F4). Several of our informants shared experiences related to this theme. The reasons for excluding private actors from meditative activities, such as in-service training, joint lectures and networking, that used to be offered to all providers (public and private) were important issues. Revoking these may be related to legal concerns, as exemplified by small provider S4:

They hold exclusive principal meetings in the municipality. It'd be fantastic to join them now and then, to network and share experiences, and learn from other principals [in municipal preschools] But the municipality legal body said no. We also asked about attending their training days and sending our staff, but no, we were not allowed [by the municipality lawyer]. (S4)

There is substantial variation in the degree that municipalities invite private providers to join in such activities, as noted by some representatives of companies that operate preschools in several municipalities, such as M5:

[Municipality X] is so incredibly large, so we don't really have any direct contact with the municipal officials except for inspections and voucher payment. More regulations are issued there all the time about various things, (...) but it wasn't much through dialogue, it's more through information (...). In the [small] municipality Y, they have continuous professional development for their preschool staff, and they usually invite the private preschools too, so we have much closer collaboration. As I said, it actually varies strongly between municipalities. (M5)

Bearing these experiences in mind, we move on to discuss the issue of market care (and the perceived lack thereof) and its affective dimensions more specifically.

## 4 Discussion

This study has explored how different activities in municipal market stewardship are perceived, expressed and felt by the private ECEC providers through a two-dimensional matrix in relation to regulative, inquisitive and meditative activities. The results showed how both high and low levels of predictability can be positively or negatively conceived, and this pattern could be discerned in all three governing activities. However, the private actors seem to prefer high degrees of predictability in financial steering through the voucher system and inquisitive activities. In addition, reduction or withdrawal of meditative activities in the LPQs seem to push the experiences towards the high conflict side of the matrix. These findings regarding the two dimensions and associated affective responses are illustrated in Figure 2.

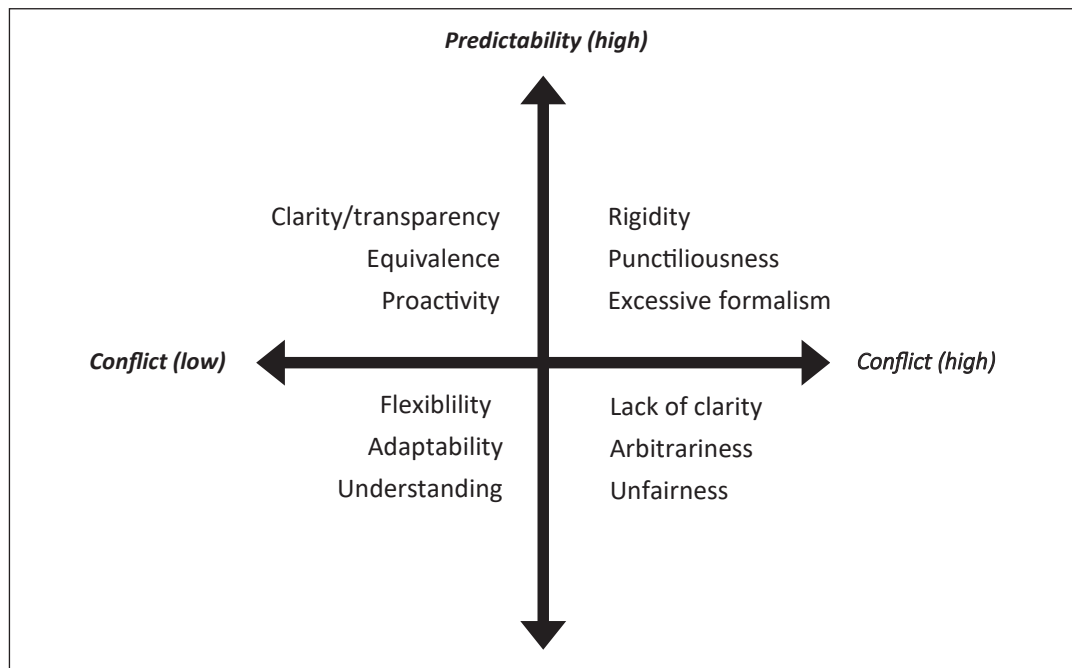


Figure 2 The two dimensions and associated responses

In the upper left quadrant, F1 (low conflict, high predictability), we find expressions indicating appreciation of transparency, equivalence and proactiveness. In contrast, expressions in the upper right quadrant, F2, at the high conflict side of the matrix, stewardship activities regarded as overly, excessively bureaucratic or formalistic may have strongly negative affective effects. Similarly, low predictability can be both positively received and experienced, by allowing mutuality, reciprocity, and flexibility (F3), but also, in the lower right corner, be perceived as unclear, unfair, and arbitrary (F4).

While all stakeholders expressed awareness of the importance of good interpersonal relationships, they seem to be conditionally based on the municipalities' activities as 'market stewards'. Indeed, the vertical dimension is in many ways in the hands of the market stewards, including to what extent and how municipal staff choose to work with and develop strategies and procedures to enhance predictability. Still and even so, a central finding from this study is that there are both positive and more negative experiences from either end of the predictability dimension. A potential interpretation of the variation in the vertical dimension would be to acknowledge how local affective atmospheres (c.f. Anderson, 2016) contribute to shape perceptions of, for instance, when, how and under what conditions high or low predictability is perceived either more positive or negative.

It is primarily when gravitating towards the low conflict side of the horizontal dimension in the matrix that we find activities relating to the notion of market care. Due to the reciprocal and contingent nature of relationships, and the affective atmospheres in which they are embedded, both stewards and private actors jointly contribute to 'moving'



the experiences towards the low or high end of the conflict spectrum, and thus play important roles in relationship-building and associated market care. In these processes, market care is central leverage, or 'currency', in this relationship-building. Focusing on the private actors, we can discern both reactive as well as proactive actions and strategies that are employed to 'push' experiences along the horizontal dimension. In either case, interpersonal exchanges and relationships influence how 'market care' is performed and experienced, and the private providers expressed perceptions that sometimes their relationship-building efforts are not reciprocated or warmly received. Hence, some described turning to other private providers or other organisations for strategies and support in addressing municipal demands or perceived injustices.

Given the reciprocal nature of market care, the ways in which the private actors approach the municipalities and the strategies they use can thus either intensify or reduce levels of perceived conflict, thereby contributing to the affective atmosphere in which market care is either enabled or constrained. In some cases, and more specifically in the case of large providers, situations at the high conflict end are turned into legal matters, as private providers claim their rights through court (c.f. Carlbaum et al., 2025). Far from being an isolated event, such an action will inevitably affect the affective climate for all actors in the LPQ, 'polluting the atmosphere' for all. All the private providers deploy various strategies to deal with (un)predictability and its emotional responses, but large actors in corporate preschool chains apply the widest range of strategies, and have the broadest professional and administrative competences for protecting their rights and interests if necessary. As these companies have expanded considerably, it seems highly likely that such (often legalistic) approaches will continue to affect municipal market care activities. As large providers are becoming increasingly central and important in governing actors, their extensive strategy repertoires contribute to making the market more conflictual.

Finally, our findings suggest that there is a need to continue to study local variations and local relationships, including their affective aspects, in LPQs more deeply. Although national regulations play crucial roles, they are inevitably enacted and interpreted locally by people that meet, interact and form relationships. In the literature on market stewardship, important insights on the need and function of (primarily national and regulatory) stewardship have been productively highlighted (Carey et al, 2018; Green et al, 2024; Malbon & Carey, 2021). However, local market stewards are also important, and we need to elucidate how relationships and trust evolve (positively or negatively) in these interactions. To do so we must acknowledge the key roles of various market care activities and wider affective atmosphere in the functions, organisation and governance of ECEC in times of privatisation. Thus, continued focus on the affective aspects of market care can provide insights into the governance of privatised ECEC, and potentially public-private relationships in other quasi-market settings.

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