Small-scale Welfare on a Large Scale
Social cohesion and the politics of Swedish childcare

Contemporary European life seems to require new ways for people to combine family life and career. There is a fear among European governments and the European Union, however, that such changes will alter received patterns of child rearing and may, in the long run, threaten social cohesion, integration and solidarity between generations. In current discussions how to make childcare generally available, as a social service, without posing a threat to social cohesion, the Swedish post-war experience may serve as a point of reference. This study traces and analyses the development of Swedish childcare which, in order to cater to two-career families, has changed from rudimentary and scarce to sophisticated and comprehensive.
Small-scale Welfare on a Large Scale

Social cohesion and the politics of Swedish childcare

Peter Strandbrink  Victor Pestoff

Södertörns högskola 2006
Contents

List of tables ........................................................................................................... 7
Preface .................................................................................................................. 9

1 Introduction ....................................................................................................... 11

2 The politics and history of Swedish childcare ............................................. 17
   Swedish childcare policy from the 1930s to the present .............................. 17
   1930s – 1945 Early childcare structure .................................................. 24
   1945 – 1960s Foundations of universalism ........................................... 27
   1970s – 1980s Consolidation and growth ............................................. 28
   1990 – 2002 Crisis and reconstruction .................................................. 37
   Forces of change ...................................................................................... 58

3 The Swedish childcare system of the early 2000s ..................................... 69
   Methodology and local units of analysis ................................................. 74

4 The City of Stockholm ..................................................................................... 85
   Goals ........................................................................................................ 85
   Diversity ............................................................................................... 90
   Financing .............................................................................................. 91
   Access .................................................................................................. 93
   Service quality ..................................................................................... 97
   Integration ........................................................................................... 99
   Participation ......................................................................................... 100
   Some remarks on the City of Stockholm ................................................ 105

5 The Maria-Gamla Stan ward .......................................................................... 107
   Goals .................................................................................................... 107
   Diversity .............................................................................................. 108
   Financing .............................................................................................. 111
List of tables

In the text
Table 1. Demographic and childcare facility data for the local units of analysis (2002).................................................................................................................. 76
Table 2. Set-up and structure of the studied childcare facilities .............. 80
Table 3. Set of interviews conducted for the study ........................................ 83
Table 4. User satisfaction with Stockholm’s childcare conditions 1996 & 1999 (per cent; ranked according to degree of dissatisfaction) ........ 88
Table 5. User satisfaction with levels of information and ability to influence 1996 & 1999 (per cent; ranked according to degree of dissatisfaction) ........................................................................................................... 89
Table 6. Welfare budget 2003, Skärholmen ward, million SEK (million €) ................................................................................................................................. 130

In the appendix
Table 7. Number of children enrolled in preschool childcare 1974-1999 (x1000) ................................................................................................................................. 203
Table 8. Number of children enrolled in non-municipal preschool childcare 1986-1999 (x1000) .................................................................................................................. 204
Table 9. Proportion of age cohorts enrolled in childcare 1990 and 1999 (x1000) ................................................................................................................................. 204
Table 10. Proportion of preschool children enrolled in childcare by parents’ occupation 1999 (x1000) ........................................................................................................ 204
Table 11. Age of youngest child by mother’s participation on the labour market 1997 (per cent) .................................................................................................................. 205
Table 12. Proportion of father’s use of parental leave insurance system 1974-1996 ................................................................................................................................. 205
Table 13. Reasons for choosing type of day care, early 1990s (per cent, multiple replies possible) .............................................................................................................. 206
Table 14. Costs for parental insurance and child allowance 1996-2000 (million €) .............................................................................................................206
Table 15. Age cohort in the Swedish labour force by sex, age and children 2000 (per cent) .............................................................................................................207
Table 16. 0-9 year old children’s family relations and social conditions 2000 (per cent) .............................................................................................................207
Table 17. Separations yearly for married/cohabiting couples 1991-92 by woman’s age (per 1000) .............................................................................................................208
Table 18. Attitudes on divorce/separation 1995 (per cent) ......................208
Preface

This book is the result of a research effort that has been going on between 2001 and 2004. During this time we have made up the Swedish team in a European research project financed by the Fifth Framework Programme of the European Community. The project – known under its acronym TSFEPS – has been studiously led by Bernard Eme and coordinated by Laurent Fraisse at CRIDA research institute in Paris, and has also engaged research teams from France, Germany, Italy, Belgium, Spain, Great Britain and Bulgaria. We are, first, deeply indebted to our European colleagues for the invaluable intellectual support and insights they have provided and shared with us at numerous regular and irregular TSFEPS meetings.

Second, we are grateful to Joachim Andersson, Nina Seger and Johan Vamstad, who have all been instrumental in getting parts of the empirical work in our two case cities done. We also extend our gratitude third, to a number of colleagues at the departments of political science at Södertörn University College and Mid-Sweden University for providing us with inspiring academic contexts for the work, as well as to one anonymous manuscript reviewer from SOFI research institute at Stockholm University. Lastly, we extend our gratitude to Erland Jansson and Magnus Sandgren at Södertörn University College, for their patience and expertise in preparing the manuscript.

Our hope at this final stage of the research process is that the text will be of value for students of the Swedish welfare system in terms of its approach to l’acceuil de petite enfance – as the title of the European project words it.

Flemingsberg, February 2006
Peter Strandbrink

Östersund, February 2006
Victor Pestoff
1 Introduction

It is commonly argued that European social life is changing faster than ever. The accelerating pace of the expanding and globalising information society is even held to exceed the already exaggerated pace of the industrial era that we are now leaving. In this context of change, there are concerns in many European societies that earlier, more stable ideals and models for social organisation are being challenged and reshaped under the pressure of processes of modernisation, individuation and restructured professional life. Across European polities, many governments fear that these processes are eroding and putting established patterns of social cohesion and solidarity at risk. In the diverse arguments that are raised in connection to this concern, one shared feature is the idea that the abandonment of the family as the primary unit of social thought and production could lead to possibly fatal ruptures in the social fabric of contemporary Europe.

At the same time, falling nativity rates create increasingly unstable, top-heavy demographic structures in Europe, that seem to make it difficult to maintain the welfare logic of earlier days. To keep future welfare policies at received levels of ambition is thus a great challenge to European societies, as the relative proportion of European populations active in the workplace decreases. As standard accounts note, this development may either force mature welfare states to give up all broad attempts to provide decent social conditions for those unable to obtain childcare, education, health care, elder care and other welfare services by other means or to retain the same overall policy aim, but incorporate a host of new modes and methods of provision in their welfare matrices. In both cases, old patterns of social cohesion first seem to have to be broken down and ripped apart in order, hopefully, to be reassembled again later in new ways. An issue of some magnitude here is, to put it metaphorically: will the patient survive this operation?

This study is an attempt to grapple with these broad questions of change in the social organisation of welfare by way of analysing Swedish childcare
and family policy. If European social life is changing at the believed pace, the issue of how we ought to approach and envision the politics of childcare and family welfare under these conditions becomes central in analyses of social policy. Will it be impossible to think comprehensively about patterns of welfare in the future? Is a hard choice between having and lacking welfare structures inevitable for many European societies? Is there a choice at all? And how may the impact of changing social patterns in terms of the family’s role in the context of care and welfare be assessed? Is the fear that European societies are undergoing change in the sense mentioned above, jeopardising the density and texture of the social fabric, well founded?

More precisely, the conducted study has two purposes and operates at two levels. The first is an investigation and elaboration on the logic of the Swedish politics of childcare from the 1930s – when childcare in the contemporary sense was first introduced – to 2002. To achieve this goal, we describe and discuss the political principles and institutional solutions characteristic of this field of social policy, a field that in Sweden has developed in rather unusual directions compared with most other European countries. Since the current system is virtually comprehensive, it is something of an anomaly in the post-war liberal democratic context. The point of this first part of the study is to bring forth the historical and political logic of the system, and reflect on possibilities for policy development and political change, with one eye turned to the process of Europeanisation and the sometimes aired notion that the European process of integration will force traditional national social and family policies to adjust to a lowest common policy denominator in the European context.

Our investigation suggests that this process of adaptation, at work in the Swedish system at least since the 1990s, should mainly be read as systems internal, and not to a similar extent as a fundamental challenge to the notion of comprehensiveness itself – which, in fact, still forms the basis of the system. It seems, furthermore, reasonably clear that the lines of influence between Swedish and other European approaches to social and family policy are complex and connect to more subtle and fundamental patterns of modernisation, individualisation and the restructuring of social life in Europe today. To predict the future development by extrapolating current trends is therefore a steep task indeed, in the field of social policy as well as elsewhere. It is of course possible that the European Union, in time, will set a clearer agenda for its social policy preferences, but today social welfare is
organised by each member country nationally. Sweden’s unusual approach to the relations between family and workplace, between working men and women, and the all but communitarian belief in the possibility of solving common social problems in an all-encompassing way would probably not be viable unless national independence was considered more important than European policy input. One intriguing question in this regard is whether the received balance between legislative clout at the EU-level and national politics will remain in the future. We have no answer to this question, but assume that changes in the current national/European balance would rather strengthen the influence of Swedish childcare and family policy on other European countries than the other way around. It appears as though Sweden is considered a leading nation in this field of welfare.

The second purpose and contribution of the book is an historical study of the contemporary state and performance of the Swedish childcare system. Here, we analyse the function and performance of the prevalent forms of childcare in two Swedish cities: Stockholm and Östersund. In each city, we investigate all primary forms of provision – i.e. municipal care, private for-profit care (corporate or one-facility firms converted by the staff from an earlier municipal format) and co-operative care (all-parent, all-staff or a combination of the two). One intention of the study here is thus to critically elaborate on the conventional approach to the distinction between publicly and privately provided social welfare, like childcare. In the debate on the renewal on the Social Democratic welfare state, it is often argued that this dual view covers the possible logical and viable political options. As we will demonstrate, this is hardly the case. The heavy attention that has been paid by politics and social science alike to the decisive distinction between public and private per se, has obscured the fact that the latter category has enough nuances to warrant basic reconceptualisation. 1 It makes little sense

---

1 Blomqvist argues, for instance, that the Swedish privatisation of welfare in the 1990s is a feature in a broad process of transformation that endangers the belief in and support for the tradition of social egalitarianism. 2003, p 140. She thus overlooks the untapped potential of the third sector to contribute to the renewal of social welfare thinking. This is perhaps partly occasioned by the fundamental socio-economic orientation of the conventional debate on the Social Democratic state. If the problem is assessed primarily in terms of financial structures, less attention is perhaps naturally paid to a systems variety that relies on volunteer labour by members/users of the service. In this sense, the co-operative approach clearly falls outside the corporativist political tradition, making it hard to discern from the inside of this tradition.
to equate, for instance, corporate with co-operative welfare production. As our study shows, the performance in terms of democracy and participation of the co-operative sector is generally more advanced than municipally provided care. Even in terms of organisation and economy private (but non-for-profit) co-operative childcare appears to perform competitively, without lowering the high pedagogical and social standards it primarily shares with municipal provision.

Whereas the first part of the study mainly draws on theoretical debates and political research, this latter part is primarily based on interviews with municipal political and administrative officials responsible for the running of the local system, with managers and staff of individual childcare facilities, and with parents/users of those same facilities. On this level of the study the operation of the entire current variety of provision in the field of Swedish childcare is thus to a certain extent described and assessed.

There is an aspect of substance as well as comparison at work in the overall approach of the study. Sweden’s approach to childcare may serve as a point of reference, we propose, for understanding social policy options in contemporary Europe. As states, polities, policy organisations and entrepreneurs struggle to define and meet socially legitimate needs for social welfare in this and other fields, the notion of comprehensiveness is generally regarded as a model of the past. As will become apparent during the course of this study, however, non-comprehensive policy models do not seem to be the only ones able to cope with rapidly changing social patterns.

There are two different dimensions or aspects of childcare that have to be kept apart and analysed separately. One aspect concerns institutional or policy regimes (that, in their own right, may perform better or worse); another concerns policies that are actually chosen or in operation. These are different issues that call for different political and analytical considerations.

What the Swedish example may convey is consequently the conditions for choice on the second, operational welfare level. In the Swedish context, the issue of whether or not to aspire for or implement a comprehensive childcare model is no longer on the agenda. It would therefore make little

---

A similar omission is conventionally made of one-firm facilities that have been converted into limited companies, but were earlier run municipally. Again, it is very difficult to apply basically corporativist models of thought to this phenomenon.
sense for us to focus too strongly on this dimension, fundamental as it may nonetheless be. This question is hardly politically or socially salient today. Instead, we will concentrate on the logic and tensions within the system. The problem of how to organise social and family policy in contemporary European society thus has at least two dimensions. In a range of countries, the paramount question of whether or not to implement ambitious public welfare schemes still needs to be politically addressed and worked out. In other countries, the main current concern is, on the contrary, to decide what patterns of welfare differentiation to opt for. In the latter case, the Swedish example might remind us of one particular point: that politics, regardless of what policy patterns are eventually adopted, seems to matter a great deal. If there is a policy lesson to be gleaned from the analysis undertaken here, it is mainly that the fabric of society in part emerges as a consequence of hard political choices. As soon as policy structures are erected, they contribute heavily to the further unfolding logic and organisation of the social space itself. To organise welfare by other than public means – be it either on the level of financing or actual provision – is thus not to organise welfare in a non-political way. This is a false understanding. It is rather to set another political logic to work than the one that has been decisive for the Swedish tradition.

The analytical set-up and scope of this study include issues of social cohesion and democracy, ways of organising welfare services, integration, diversity, and the relationship between particular childcare services and specific local spaces and social experiences. Given the comprehensiveness of the system, one key question is if a welfare structure of this kind is able to adjust to the specific demands and conditions that prevail in local areas and under different circumstances. The childcare system is the same throughout the whole country, but the Swedish regions, communities, and families it provides with care vary in any number of ways. A general concern relevant to this analysis is therefore whether comprehensive welfare solutions of this kind are viable in fragmented, diverse and changing social contexts. The question becomes all the more pressing on the assumption that the current development towards social and cultural fragmentation is increasingly pronounced and rapid. In other words, can large-scale welfare continue to be conceptualised – let alone organised – in a comprehensive way, if the societies in which these large-scale policies are to be implemented are not characterised by a corresponding structure of homogeneity?
Are the circumstances of the early 21st century requiring us to relinquish the notion that the good of welfare is possible to define communally and distributive in a legitimate and reasonably efficient way by public means? Or is the tradition of grand welfare obsolete?
2 The politics and history of Swedish childcare

To analyse the politics of Swedish childcare through the post-war era is a daunting task, and a challenging one. As will become apparent below, the notion of a general welfare system has been strong from its very conception in the 1930s-40s. The Möller line (i.e. the inclusive and all-encompassing view on social policy named after the former Swedish Minister of Social Affairs, Gustav Möller) became a dominant mode for Social Democratic thinking at an early point in the party’s position at the head of government. A position that remained unbroken for more than four decades (1932-76). Given this extraordinary period of political tenure, the development and logic of the Swedish approach to social policy must be regarded mainly as a Social Democratic affair. Swedish social policy patterns are thus part of the Social Democratic ideological legacy. Both social policy generally, and childcare especially, have been central elements in the construction and consolidation of the edifice of the Swedish welfare state – a project that, in turn, has been decisive for the definition of the Social Democratic political agenda.

Swedish childcare policy from the 1930s to the present

Given this political dominance of the Social Democrats, the questions pursued here will inevitably deal with the specifics of social policy patterns that are essentially Social Democratic. In the Swedish post-war case it

3 Erler & Sass observe that “for decades family policy was a political issue of the first priority” in Sweden. 1997, p 33.
makes little sense to approach the field of childcare as an open political and institutional field – i.e. as a situation where fundamentally different policy alternatives have been introduced and replaced in connection with party and institutional changes at the highest levels of government. Until 1976, the dominance was massive, with the Social Democratic state more or less firmly controlling most aspects of social policy making. In a certain sense, this tied in well with the age-old centralism of the Swedish state, a political feature predating modern government. Even today, the edifice of classical Social Democratic social policy is, as many writers point out, very strong indeed, impeding radical constitutive change. Welfare debates have therefore been more concerned with interpreting and criticising what is essentially a Social Democratic approach than with elaborating on structural or ideological alternatives to existing policies and institutions. Other political forces have simply enjoyed far less opportunity to influence legislation on the level of the Social Democrats.

How, then, should the Social Democratic approach to social policy be interpreted? A heated discussion followed in Sweden on the publication of feminist historian Yvonne Hirdman’s 1989 study *Att lägga livet tillrätta* [Putting life right]. In her book (written within the framework of the 1980s’ official study of the economy and structure of power in Swedish society, *Maktutredningen* [the Power Audit], that delivered its final report SOU 1990:44 in 1990), Hirdman argued forcefully that the Social Democrats’ approach to social policy had been thoroughly paternalistic. The party, she claimed, had always been rather deaf to any suggestions that people were not perfectly happy to have their lives planned, evaluated and organised by the state. This became particularly clear in social policy matters, where the party’s line of thought, Hirdman argued, was safely anchored in a robustly scientistic and rationalistic political sociology. The underlying argument for the benevolent state was always that it provided unequalled opportunity for the improvement of people’s living conditions. Using the state’s leverage, social reform schemes could be far more ambitious and far more effectively reach further into people’s ordinary day-to-day life circumstances than any other means would allow.

---

4 Cf Hajighasemi 2004, p 217.
The Hirdman account provoked a range of more or less sophisticated responses, many of which pointed to the gap between Alva and Gunnar Myrdal’s utopian approach to social policy, on the one hand, and the more practical one associated with Möller, on the other. The latter’s views were adopted to a far greater extent by the party (and thus also by the state) than the functionalist and modernist schemes elaborated by the intellectually brilliant couple Alva and Gunnar Myrdal. The debate on how to interpret Social Democratic social policy dogma, in terms of its ethical complexities and empirical realism, continued through the 1990s. As indicated in the preamble of her book, Hirdman’s own feelings toward the study are ambivalent. She senses that it might be used as ammunition for ideological attacks on the Social Democratic approach to social policy, saying she has no desire to take part in such an onslaught. She also expresses a sense of betrayal of her personal social and political history.

The attacks which were subsequently launched centred around the concept of “social engineering”, a term conjuring up an ideological and political movement purportedly working in the interest of social equality and progress, but in effect generating system-oriented modes of policy making, instead of life-oriented ones, as the early Habermas might have put it. In those system-oriented modes of thinking, the utopian plans for a well-ordered society gained precedence over the regard for citizens’ individual interests, autonomy and human worth. Of course, Hirdman’s suspicions were accurate. Her instrumentalist-paternalist interpretation of the Social Democratic agenda in the field of social policy soon became standard rhetorical equipment for all critics of the party, as well as of the comprehensive welfare state.

We assume that it has played an inspirational role for the later critique of, for instance, the officially sanctioned policy of sterilising hospitalised and/or underclass women in effect for the perceived greater good of society up until the 1960s, or against other dark parts of the welfare tradition. The logic of the critique is in a way quite compelling. To set the goal of social

---

5 Björnberg argues that Alva Myrdal “was primarily responsible for formulating the ideology behind public childcare in the 1930s”. 1997, p 122. Cf also Möller 1996, p 38; Hirdman 2001, p 154.
welfare for all means to propose and define the width and substance of the conceptual category “all” – which is a very wide concept indeed. It is likely that it will never match the characteristics of any given social population. It thus holds together internally only at the cost of designating odd groups and people as alien to the core, making it easier to regard these as in need of special consideration and non-routine attention.\footnote{Cf Åmark 2004, p 7.} Efficiency at the level of reform thus seems to require a certain insensitivity at the level of needs and identities.

Later studies indicate, however, that the Myrdalian approach had less influence on social policy design and legislation than Hirdman suggests in her book. Since its main function was to be avant-gardist and ideational, critics argue that the early Social Democratic formulations of a political and ethical basis that was in time transformed into the comprehensive welfare state, should rather be analysed in terms of the policies that were actually implemented. As Rothstein and others emphatically claim, actual policies lay, on the whole, closer to the Möller line.\footnote{Cf Rothstein 1985.} According to such arguments, the Social Democrats have never had very utopian schemes for social reconfiguration. Instead, they are considered to be essentially politically reformist. But the rivalry between interpretations has not come to an end.

One line of argument that needs to be noted in this context is, however, that the Swedish social policy model was originally not only a means to organise and deliver welfare universally. It was also – some argue: rather – part of the early and defining Social Democratic ambition of keeping the wheels of production rolling. Being a socialist intellectual movement and tradition, it neither shares the conservative way of prioritising the family, nor the liberal commitment to atomised individuality. Instead, this tradition of political thought regards people as citizen-workers. It should be borne in mind that the workers’ movement, during the last decades of the 19\textsuperscript{th} and first third of the 20\textsuperscript{th} centuries, was only one of a number of large popular movements in Sweden. Other influential movements were the IOGT/NTO [temperance movements] and Christian revivalist movements. The early liberal movement was perhaps stronger a century ago than it became later, even if the parliamentary party had a peak during the 1960s-80s. But none
of these movements showed much interest in, or had much influence over, the development of childcare. The transition from family-based patterns of care and provision for small children has thus been unidirectional, and this has become possible because the Swedish centralist political tradition was gradually taken over by the Social Democrats as they ascended to power and consolidated their position.

One salient point where the Swedish Social Democratic movement has been successful on a spectacular scale is in terms of its historical ability to transform its moment of radical political and social critique into stable state responsibility and governmentality – partly singling it out from comparable 20th century movements. This has created the sometimes noted paradox that today, even liberal and conservative business and industrial interests that are in principle ideologically at odds with the Social Democratic view on social justice and organisation tacitly refrain from criticising the party or government too strongly, for fear that incumbent governments, although more in ideological harmony with these interests, might cause political and economic instability. The irony is, of course, that other parties have never had any opportunity to prove that they’re able to govern at superior levels of competence. In the post-war political history, the Social Democrats have developed a major talent for transforming basic ideological push into solid institutional competence.

During the post-war era, one visible aspect of Swedish childcare politics has thus been its virtually linear pattern of development. It has evolved from fragmented initiatives and uncoordinated schemes – both publicly and privately provided – towards an increasingly firm and ambitious public responsibility. Since the second half of the 20th century, there has been no equivalent (following Esping-Andersen’s typology) to the continental or Anglo-Saxon models of large-scale provision of the good of childcare by non-public means – such as charity associations, corporations, religious institutions, or voluntary organisations. The perspective on childcare as a basically public matter has gained wide ideological and social currency. As will be shown here, even when new forms of provision were introduced in the 1990s, relying on other than public service providers, these new ventures remained within the same legislative and financial framework as the public sector.

A description of the childcare that was actually provided during the golden age of the welfare state, therefore, coincides with a description of
public political action and legislation in the field. The issues at the centre of
the Swedish social and political stage are thus different from childcare-
related issues in many other countries, in that the Swedish issues are pri-
marily how to design this service, and how to adapt it to socio-economical
and labour market needs. In the Swedish context, fundamental assumptions
underlying existing attitudes, in the first place towards the breadth and
depth of publicly provided services are hardly discussed at all, nor, for in-
stance, are the principle of equality in the work market, or the question
whether policies for financial support and taxing should regard families or
individuals as primary units. This general social transformation, has been
underway since the 1960s. During this period, as Björnberg notes, “the
Swedish family structure has changed from a predominance of the male
breadwinner family to a predominance of the dual breadwinner family”.9

This abandonment of the breadwinner model in Swedish social policy is
an individualist development. The notion that the Social Democratic main
orientation is uncompromisingly collectivist is thus more complex than
what is sometimes assumed. The position that is now associated with the
“traditionalist” side of social democracy embraces what Giddens and other
writers today refer to as Old Left solutions, including the idea of a publicly
controlled and all but comprehensive welfare state.10 Those who argue
against this new traditionalism and in favour of non-public solutions to
contemporary welfare needs by necessity advocate a more limited scope of
public control. This is not inevitably a more liberal approach to individual
autonomy in late capitalist, post-fordist society than the Social Democratic
approach.

As will be further described below, since the 1980s the debate about the
future of the welfare state has mainly revolved around a search for non-
public modes of service provision and distribution. But the conventional

9 Björnberg 1997, p 116. A 2001 official government study identifies as the most important
legislative changes in this context the passing during the 1970s of three sets of legislation:
the 1971 law that made individuals, not families, the primary units for income taxation, the
1974 law ensuring the right to parental leave of absence with newborn and young children,
with economical compensation via social insurance systems, and the 1974 initiative making
for general and expansive public provision of childcare. Ds 2001:57, p 144.
10 Giddens 2000, p 28. On the same note, Pierson wonders: “Can, or indeed should, social
democrats still strive to be ‘the party of the welfare state’?”. 2004, p 166.
view of welfare was still that it is a common and public good, the financial burden of which should be borne by the state, via taxation. Even if the welfare systems required some decades to mature after the war, the view on childcare as a basically public and not private – certainly not commercial – affair, was never seriously threatened. As one study formulates it:

Childcare that is characterized by high levels of legitimacy, quality and availability, and not least affordable fees, has more and more come to be regarded as an obvious ingredient of modern welfare society in Sweden.11

This notion of childcare as an integral part of society is testified to by potential parents’ answer to the question what is most important for them to consider having children. Most of them respond steady employment and secure incomes. Today, childcare issues hardly appear at all in these kinds of surveys.12 The most likely interpretation is that adequate childcare is taken for granted.

How should this social policy pattern, unusual in an international perspective, be understood? One recent study notes that international childcare scholarship has often, tacitly or explicitly, assumed that participation in the labour market by women/mothers may have negative implications for children. For fathers, on the contrary, unemployment has been construed as the major negative impact on children. Thus the negative consequences for children are sought in women’s work and men’s unemployment. It has been questioned lately if this gendered perspective is a fruitful basis of research. Instead, research patterns are suggested that leave such assumptions aside. “Work” then ceases to take on different intrinsic meanings for men and women.13 We concur with this view. There is no reason to reproduce the gendered views represented by the former standard account.

Against this backdrop, to advocate non-public solutions to childcare must be done without the impression that they are part of a conservative or reactionary agenda. Polls usually indicate weak support for the argument that families should be economically and legally able to make what is put

12 Ds 2001:57, p 223f.
13 Östberg 2001, p 133.
forth as “free” choices in the field of childcare for preschool children. On the political spectrum, these arguments generally originate from the more conservative side of the political right; that is, from Christian Democrat and conservative parties and social forces. Critics, in their turn, point to the fact that this freedom is strongly gendered and will probably result in the mother abandoning her career plans – given that the field were left open in terms of taxation and normative expectations. This means nothing less than to resurrect the breadwinner model – proponents for the universalist and public political tradition argue – a vision that has little coinage in today’s political debate. To argue that families should reassume a patriarchal internal organisation and that work in the public and private fields, respectively, ought to be re-divided along traditional gendered lines (either directly or indirectly) no longer seems to be a viable option. Even the main proponents of this alternative take great pains to steer clear of the argument’s normative and historical undertow. The discursive space does not seem to allow for such traditional family-oriented thinking.

1930s – 1945 Early childcare structure

For reasons of clarity, the remaining part of this chapter is divided into four historical parts. Of these, the first two periods, 1930s-1945 and 1945-1960s, are dealt with more perfunctorily. Given that the main object of the study is to analyse the contemporary Swedish childcare system, this theme will occupy most of the space below. This choice testifies to the fact that the Swedish childcare policy experience prior to the 1960s is relatively unexceptional. On the contrary, the underdeveloped policy patterns and approaches visible in Sweden at this time resemble those in many other West European countries. The Swedish case is more interesting from the 1960s onwards, especially when it comes to producing relevant knowledge for cross-European comparison. Special attention is thus paid to the two later periods: the 1970s-1980s and the 1990s-2002.

However, childcare has been one of the central concerns of Swedish family policy and its welfare state, with debate and policy formulations dating as far back as the late 1930s and early 1940s. As one recent study remarks, from the 1930s on the state assumed a markedly greater responsibility than before for citizens’ lives and well-being:
The growth of the people’s home [folkhemmet] presupposes a renegotiation of the roles and relationship between the citizens and the state. The [socially] “closed”, “isolated” nuclear family is required to open itself up to the ideas of modern society, insofar as the benevolent state is to be able to assist its citizens with the social welfare that is purported to become one of Sweden’s future characteristics.¹⁴

Prior to this phase, childcare (as well as other welfare provisions in the more ambitious post-war sense of the word) was available on a very limited scale. The childcare that did exist added only marginally to traditional patterns of care for children by their families and kin (effectively meaning non-employed mothers). When available, childcare was mainly provided by non-governmental organisations, foundations, and societies, financed by charities, private donations and the like.

When the responsibility for childcare was politicised and the state thus acknowledged its responsibility for organising matters pertaining to family structure, the idea was “that families who do not have enough resources of their own should have access to common resources at a community level”.¹⁵

In this early phase the connection between childcare and labour market needs was still to be made. The reason why the government began to view family structure as a political issue was rather that they were alarmed by the poverty level and other social problems in Sweden at the time. The social and theoretical radicalism in influential intellectual and political circles found an outlet in the humanitarian task of improving life conditions for the majority of the people, a task close to the early core ideological agenda of the Social Democratic movement.

But even as the main rationale was the improvement of living conditions for the poor, a welcome implication of the proposed reforms was that public childcare facilities would also enable women to work. In relation to our introductory discussion, it is useful, however, to stress the difference between the two logics at work here. The primary acknowledgement that the state (for what are ultimately political, socio-normative reasons) should become legitimately involved in family structure regulation, legislation and policy, is different from the secondary issue of the nature and substance of

¹⁴ Gleichmann 2004, p 59.
¹⁵ Björnberg 1997, p 122.
this involvement. The political form is different from its content. (There may be a point for readers unfamiliar with Swedish childcare politics to again stress that the primary logic has been fairly uncontroversial for a long time.) As pointed out above, arguments that the state should relinquish its role in Swedish family politics are seldom heard; instead, current debates rather concern different and innovative ways of organising childcare within a system that is ultimately considered a public responsibility. This may be read as a reflection of the role of the Swedish public tradition.

This early acknowledgement of state sovereignty and the belief in state activism in the field of family politics no doubt made the situation less complicated than it might otherwise have been when, after the war, labour market needs provided an argument for the rapid expansion of public childcare services. Since the role of the state was already defined in these terms, the project could be handled as an issue of the secondary order. Available political energy could thus be devoted to develop and consolidate the systems, and to design the services, rather than be spent on ideological battles about problems occasioned by state intervention in “private” affairs. This absence of fundamental ideational strife in the field of childcare is still obvious, as will be apparent below.

Prior to the 1930s, public support for families with small children thus did exist, but primarily in the form of tax subsidies.\(^\text{16}\) The economic gain of families with higher incomes was greater than that of families with small incomes. To refer to this as a welfare system in the post-war sense of the term makes little or no sense. In 1941 there were 347 childcare institutions, tending to approximately 13,700 children. More than half of these institutions were located in municipal (i.e. small-town) areas, but less than one tenth were run by municipal authorities. Instead, the operation of these early facilities was usually non-profit and idealistic. Subsidised childcare was introduced in 1944. By 1946 the number of children in different childcare facilities had risen to 18,250. Around this time, facilities were basically of two kinds: barnkrubbor [nursery homes] and barnträdgårder [kindergarten].\(^\text{17}\) The first of these varieties was meant to provide childcare for poor women (often single parents) who needed to work for a living. The

\(^{16}\) Ds 2001:57, p 201.

\(^{17}\) SOU 2001:52, p 242.
system was closely related in ideological as well as practical terms to the tradition of poverty relief institutions. The second variety was intended to provide part-time care for women who worked at home.

Tax deductions for costs incurred for childcare were abolished in 1948, as the universal reform granting barnbidrag [children’s allowance] to all families was introduced. Other forms of indirect tax subsidies remained, but with a marginal effect, until 1991.

1945 – 1960s Foundations of universalism

After the Second World War, several parliamentary commissions renewed and carried on the public interest in childcare, as part of larger family assistance programmes and a reconsideration of family policy. Given the unexpected and rapid economic recovery after the war, and the growing demand for labour in Sweden, women who were not wage earners were now beginning to be construed as a previously undiscovered resource for the labour market. However, it soon became obvious that if more mothers of small children were to participate in the labour force, public day care schemes needed to be substantially improved and altered to suit the new needs. By 1950, there were over 700 Swedish day care institutions for toddlers, with almost 30,000 children enrolled.18 Only about a third of these, however, were run by municipal authorities. Public subsidies to day care furthermore only covered about 10% of the total cost incurred.

Although more women entered the labour market due to the continued economic growth through the 1960s, an even greater number was prevented from working due to the shortage of childcare. Both the Confederation of Swedish Employers (SAF) and the Swedish Trade Union Confederation (LO), therefore, wanted to accelerate the expansion of day care facilities. In this allied struggle these organisations, traditionally political adversaries, joined forces to create the Women’s Commission of the Labour Market. This commission made an investigation of the need for day care, and presented its views to the government in 1961. During the 1950s, day care gradually developed into a municipal rather than a state concern, and few

18 Cf table 2.1 in Möller 1996, p 41.
private providers survived the 1960s. Towards the end of this decade a parliamentary investigation was commissioned once again to address and specify the need for a system of publicly run day care, which was subsequently confirmed. The commission called for a definition of the goals of childcare on theoretical-pedagogical grounds, and for an improved education of the employees in terms of academic training. Numerous other reforms in favour — and always aiming to ease the reconciliation between family and work obligations — of families with small children were passed during the 1950s and 1960s.

In an interesting twist of logic, the political momentum for the reform of the childcare system in order to meet the needs of families, where mothers were regarded as a labour reserve, did not peak until what may in retrospect be defined as the end of the fordist era. As is often pointed out, the post-war period of sustained high growth and economical development in the West peaked in the early 1970s, precisely when the Swedish welfare state began to see its large-scale, universalist attempts to resolve the manifest conflict between family and work obligations making an impact. 19 Strangely, this means that the impetus to rearrange social and family legislation to enable both men and women to work — mainly a fordist measure — came at a point when this mode of production and social organisation was already rapidly declining. During the post-fordist period that ensued, social and productive conditions changed and intersected with the matrix of childcare at points and in ways that could not have been foreseen at the time of inception. The population of Swedish families then able to take advantage of the system was in a sense different than the population it was originally targeted for.

1970s – 1980s Consolidation and growth

The Swedish welfare state is thus often described in terms of its ambition to let both parents combine family and work responsibilities. 20 Historically, the developments during the 1970s, when a number of reforms were implemented, mark the defining moment of these welfare state initiatives. One

---

recent study claims that the most reasonable explanation of the Nordic advantage in terms of childcare policy and equality in the labour market is the special mix of the welfare services provided:

through a combination of high levels of female employment, low levels of unemployment generally, well functioning childcare systems and generous terms for taking time off from work to care for young children.\(^{21}\)

Judging by the occupational frequency of women 25-34 years of age, the impact of the 1970s’ childcare reforms was visible already in 1980, when 81% of the cohort was active in the labour market. In 1997, however, the number had risen only by a fraction, to 82%, suggesting that the system’s early success in putting people to work had long since peaked, and that the function of childcare since 1980 had rather been to maintain an established system than to bring about further changes in established patterns of care and work.\(^{22}\)

The nativity peak in 1990 (simultaneously placing Sweden at the top of the European charts in terms of fertility and labour market participation) is conventionally explained by reference to a certain set of policies that favour families. The Swedish case is taken to illustrate a general trend in Europe in the 1990s, showing that high levels of women labour market participation correlate positively with high fertility rates.\(^{23}\) This is a reversal of the European situation in the 1970s, when high fertility rates instead correlated positively with low occupational frequency among women.\(^{24}\) What remains unclear, however, in this line of reasoning is why the 1990 peak occurred at that particular time, or why the rates soon afterwards fell dramatically, without equally drastic, simultaneous cuts in the relevant welfare systems (although some cuts were indeed made). It thus seems that the relationship between fertility/nativity and participation in the labour market is not such a simple matter to decipher. This doesn’t necessarily make the relationship

\(^{22}\) Ds 2001:57, p 150, table 5.2.
\(^{24}\) Cf Ds 2001:57, pp 154-55, diagram 5.3.
spurious. Instead, it could mean that it is predicated on underlying social, cultural and economic patterns.\textsuperscript{25}

One study does conclude that the major reason why nativity rates vary to this extent is the productivity cycle. In times of slow economic growth and lower levels of employment, quantitative analyses show that people are half as willing to have a first child as in good times, making this the single most comprehensive explanation.\textsuperscript{26} The same study points to a second aspect of this line of reasoning: the positive correlation between relatively high nativity rates and individual levels of income. The effect of a family’s having a first child on the income variable is very high.\textsuperscript{27} Another interesting aspect is that the inclination to have a second and third child varies in accordance with levels of education; the chances for more than one child are substantially higher for people with an academic education.\textsuperscript{28}

In 1973 the Riksdag [the Swedish parliament] passed the first preschool law, which set high goals for the expansion of day care services during the next five years.\textsuperscript{29} Although the idea of expansion was widely approved by national and municipal authorities, fiscal constraints prevented this from taking place at a pace that could keep up with increases in demand. In 1974 there were nearly 62,000 children enrolled in day care services nationwide, including approximately 30 co-operative facilities run by parents, providing service for nearly 300 children. Public efforts fell short by 40\% of the target goal of 100,000 new places in childcare by 1980. Under these circumstances new actors were encouraged to enter the stage. By 1985 266,000 children were enrolled in Swedish day care facilities, including 1300 in nearly 100 parent co-operative day care centres.

The early parliamentary childcare service audit, Barnstugeutredningen (SOU 1972:26; 1972:27), specified parental participation as a main goal of childcare and suggested several different forms for enhanced participation.

\\textsuperscript{25} Cf Ds 2001:57, p 103.
\textsuperscript{26} Hoem 2000, p 128.
\textsuperscript{27} \textit{Ibid.}, p 129. Cf SOU 2000:3, p 48.
\textsuperscript{28} Hoem 2000, p 137, table 5. The correlation holds for both sexes through the educational system, with the blunt exception of postgraduate men’s and women’s inclination to have a third child. Here, men score very high on the chances for a third child whereas women score exceptionally low, suggesting the presence of structural gender inequalities in the academic career system.
and transparency, including regular discussions between parents and staff, open house activities, and extended periods of socialisation. Evaluations show, however, that in the public system, parents tended only to be invited to various activities as “guests” of the staff, and that they did not gain much more influence this way. One explanation that has been suggested was that parents might like to participate but were unable to do so due to long working hours. Shorter working hours for parents with young children was thus proposed by a later parliamentary investigation on public support for families, *Familjestödsutredningen* (SOU 1981:25), suggesting that the working days of these parents should not exceed six hours. Parents with children between 4-12 years of age were also granted two days’ leave for visiting day care services or schools, covered by their public health insurance, a right that was withdrawn in the early 1990s and again reinstated at the end of the decade – in line with changes in government and accompanying ideological shifts. A concept of user or consumer influence was, furthermore, introduced by the official democracy audit (SOU 1985:28), which discussed increased possibilities for citizens to influence the welfare services they used. In the context of day care this was primarily interpreted in terms of higher levels of parental influence over services.

The pedagogical programme adopted by the *Socialstyrelsen* [the National Board for Health and Welfare] for day care in 1987 stated that collaboration between the staff and parents was a central and natural part of professional day care work, and that it was the responsibility of the staff to promote constructive patterns of interaction. While it was the responsibility of day care services – viz. its staff – to facilitate and encourage such collaboration and develop the necessary forms, it was not specified how this new orientation could be achieved. The 1987 programme states that cooperation between the staff and parents is a self-evident part of preschool activities:

> it is a precondition for continuity between the home and preschool and for activities that are based on the children’s experience and life conditions.\(^{30}\)

\(^{30}\)Cf Björnberg, 1997, p 123.
Parental collaboration can be defined as the meeting between parents and the staff, both of an everyday *ad hoc* type, and in the form of organised discussions. However, staff opposition to parental participation, whether paid or not, appears significant. Few parents seem willing to engage more actively in the activities of their child(ren)’s municipal day care facilities, especially if they have to overcome resistance from the staff.

The (re)appearance of co-operative day care caused a lively debate at the time. Many of the co-operative day care services operated by parents that were initiated in the late 1970s and early 1980s practised a special pedagogical philosophy – like Montessori, Reggio Emilia, Waldorf etc – unavailable at the standard municipal day care facilities. Or they arranged their activities around a certain theme, such as arts or outdoor life. These facilities often attracted parents who were not happy with the pedagogical philosophy (or what they perhaps considered a lack of philosophy) at available municipal services. This first wave of parent co-ops acquired the legal status of voluntary associations, and they were the only non-municipal day care providers qualifying for public financial support prior to 1985.

In the 1980s, parents had begun to consider day care a right, a service they were entitled to, rather than as a municipally controlled privilege. The responsibility to produce childcare was accorded to municipalities in supplemental childcare legislation of 1976,\(^{31}\) following the first law to formalise childcare in 1975.\(^{32}\) The legislation was revised in 1995, when the present law was passed. The demands on municipalities in the earlier law, formulated in rather vague terms, were more stringently worded in the new law. Under the 1995 legislation, municipalities are not only required to plan for childcare but are obliged to ensure that the real needs are met. Given that changes in local demand may alter fast, however, a waiting period for families of no more than 3-4 months is tolerated. The law covers all modes of care for children 1-12 years old and requires availability either on the grounds of parents’ or children’s needs. Introduction of this piece of legislation forced an expansion of childcare facilities on all levels.

---

\(^{31}\) Law SFS 1976:381.

Around 1985 a second wave of parent co-operatives started, when legal changes made it possible for parents to form economic associations and receive public financial support on terms similar to those enjoyed by municipal day care services. By 1987 the number of parent co-operatives had nearly doubled, and three years later they were 500. The speed of this dramatic growth was contested at the time. It was then, and still often is, claimed that only “privileged” parents with higher education and better-than-average abilities to articulate their needs were able to participate in, or initiate, such arrangements. By the trade union movement in general – and by the unions organising municipal employees in particular – this was considered a threat to the underlying ideal of solidarity between different social groups, creating a strong union reluctance to accept parent co-operatives as legitimate actors in the provision of social services.33 As one study shows, a similar reluctance on the unions’ part also comes to light in the professionalisation of child minders.34

During the 1980s, however, to establish and operate private co-operative day care facilities was the only effective solution for many working parents. With municipal facilities falling short of the demand for places, this was at least a way forward. Today, the situation has changed again, as matters of social and cultural value seem to come through more clearly. Some reports indicate that the quality of Swedish childcare is becoming more levelled, as co-operative (and some other) facilities have acquired an edge over publicly run care.35

With increasing demand, it was often claimed in the early 1980s that municipal facilities were unable to provide childcare service on the scale needed. The stage was then set for the introduction of private, for-profit services. Although this addition to the landscape of care may be described in terms of an imbalance between supply and demand, ideological explanations may also be applied. All through the post-war era, the primary Swedish ideological dimension has been socio-economically grounded. This

33 Sigvard Marjasin, the Chairman of the Swedish Municipal Workers Union, SKAF, travelled the country up and down debating parent cooperative day care with representatives of the consumer co-operative movement. He was strongly opposed, although he attended HSB day care himself in his early years.
35 Cf Pestoff 1998.
left/right struggle – the clash between successive Social Democratic governments and the non-socialist opposition – has defined Swedish political life to an extent that ought not to be underestimated. In terms of political economy, this has generated strong interest organisations on both sides of the main ideological divide.

In the field of childcare and family policy, however, the consequences of this ideological divide are, to some degree, subtle and indirect. Although a major and stable political division of this kind exists, it has not spawned a corresponding differentiation in national government. The adopted policy patterns are thus disproportionately modelled on Social Democratic thought despite the ideological rift otherwise characteristic of Swedish society. This does not mean that the existing policy landscapes are deficient in terms of ideological structure or motivation, but it does indicate that the opposition’s access to arenas of hard policy formation has been constrained. There has been and still is ideological opposition in this sense, but in Sweden the step from mere ideological critique to social reform and new legislation has been unusually long and hard to take.

Among the three non-socialist opposition parties represented in parliament for much of the post-war era – i.e. the Centre (former Agrarian), the Liberal (Folkpartiet) and the Moderate (former Right) parties – the relationship to the Social Democrats has, as will become apparent below, varied a great deal. Together, however, these parties have made up the main political alternative ever since the Social Democratic ascendance to power in the 1930s. After the 1991 general elections, the Christian Democratic party (founded in the early 1960s) has joined the non-socialist side. The fifth non-socialist parliamentary party, the Greens (Miljöpartiet, founded in 1982), first entered parliament in 1988.

In the successive 1976 and 1979 general elections the Social Democrats lost their traditional dominant position and were unable to form a government. This failure is often related to the influence of neo-liberal arguments. In this ideologically changed atmosphere, the traditional Swedish commitment to a publicly regulated welfare system became weaker – the main ambition of a succession of non-socialist governments between 1976-82 being in various ways to dismantle this tradition. This ambition, however, should perhaps not be taken too literally. Some writers argue that even the non-socialist governments during this period were by and large supportive, in theory as well as practice, of the notion of a generalist welfare model,
but always making the conventional point that it should be a bit slimmer, thinner and more efficient.36

This ideological context contributes to explain the fact that the first serious contemporary attempt at providing childcare commercially was initiated in 1984 by a large Swedish corporation: Electrolux, a company belonging to the industrialist Wallenberg family’s sphere of influence, with close links to employer interest groups. Under these circumstances, the motives for this venture into the field of childcare provision ought probably be interpreted in ideological rather than merely commercial terms. Considering (a) that childcare for profit was prohibited by a law (named after the new Electrolux subsidiary): *Lex Pysslingen* – passed by the 1982 reinstated Social Democratic government – and (b) that the initiative had no connection to the company’s regular fields of activity. A subsidiary Electrolux company known as Pysslingen AB [Ltd] was thus formed in order to provide day care services throughout the country. The initiative met with heavy political opposition, symbolically marking the end, as it were, of the tradition from the 1938 Saltsjöbaden agreement of tolerance between industrial/employer and Social Democratic interests – or between leaders at any rate.37

The non-socialist municipality of Nacka, an eastern Stockholm suburb, subsequently set up two Pysslingen day care centres in 1986 without a commercial profit motive. Nacka devised a contracting-out agreement, with the manager employed by Pysslingen, whereas the rest of the staff were municipally employed. In 1989 four new Pysslingen day care facilities opened in Stockholm, following the victory of the non-socialists in the municipal elections the previous year. Returning to power in 1991, the conservative Carl Bildt government inhibited the contested *Lex Pysslingen*

36 Cf Rothstein 2002, p 28. In his 1996 study of user influence in childcare and care for the elderly, Möller notes that the political consensus behind the creation of an extensive public responsibility for welfare in both these service fields has been extraordinary. Möller 1996, p 32. Sainsbury notes that “strong public involvement has characterized childcare in Sweden”. 1996, p 95.

37 The word “pyssling” is, incidentally, a noun referring to the little people/gnomes who live in the forest or in dark corners of barns, stables or other uncrowded buildings on farms, according to traditional Swedish lore. It is perhaps symbolical that family policies created for modern corporatist industrial society in this sense were toppled by a phantom from the backward rural woods.
legislation, paving the way for a wave of privately operated day care facilities. By November 1994 there were 27 Pysslingen facilities in the capital and surrounding municipalities. In other parts of Sweden, however, public provision remained the norm, illustrating that the distance between Stockholm and other regions is not just geographical. Traditionally, the Stockholm region influences lines of conflicts and practice throughout the country, far beyond its physical perimeter. The main family and childcare policies implemented during this period are:

- **Föräldraförsäkringen** [the parental leave insurance system] that replaced the earlier, less ambitious maternity leave insurance. Fathers were now included as beneficiaries, with the same status as mothers.\(^{38}\) The compensation was, as a rule, 90% of the ordinary income of the beneficiary. Under the new system, the compensation was also, in principle, given the same status as income from salaried work, i.e. taxable and included in the regular earnings as a basis for state pension. For the benefit of parents with low or no prior incomes, a smaller amount of the day total was set at a secondary level of compensation: **garantidagar**. The main compensation principle (a blueprint of the health insurance system) applied to the supplementary benefit that allowed parental leave to care for sick children, to accompany children to health controls, and to pay a visit to public childcare facilities with their children twice a year. Beneficiaries could also be those (mostly relatives) replacing sick parents to care for sick children. The benefits were rapidly expanded throughout the 1970s-80s, mainly by successive extensions of the leave period, but also by greater flexibility for the beneficiaries. The insurance is in force from two months before the child’s birth until the child’s ninth birthday.

- **Särskild föräldraperenning** [special parental compensation] was implemented in 1978 and added three extra months of leave until the child’s first school year at secondary compensation levels.

---

\(^{38}\) The main, but not only, source here is Ds 2001:57, chapter 7.
• Havandeskapspenning [pregnancy compensation] was implemented in 1980, granting pregnant women leave from work between the sixtieth and eleventh day before giving birth.

• Flerbarnstillägg [multiple children compensation] was implemented in 1982, raising the barnbidrag [children’s allowance, from 1948] compensation levels for parents with three or more children (on the argument that full-time work is hard to maintain with more than two children).

• Faderskapspenning [fatherhood compensation] is made available to expecting fathers for ten days in connection with a child’s birth, to enable fathers to take part in the birth, connect to the baby, care for other children and do housework.

• In the early 1990s, the right to use the föräldraförsäkring was divided equally between the mother and father. The parents can choose between them who is to receive the benefit, with the exception of one month each, which cannot be transferred.

1990 – 2002 Crisis and reconstruction
During this most recent period, Sweden exhibits exceptional rates of preschool children in publicly financed day care. This is sometimes seen as a cornerstone of the general “family friendly” policy that enables women to combine work and child bearing, generating the lowest comparable rate of poverty among families with small children. Some writers go so far as to claim that Sweden is a “child friendly”, or even “woman friendly”, society (but, by assuming that men by inclination are self-seeking paternalists, often fail to mention why these policies are not equally friendly to them).39

Many writers seem to share this view.40 Compared to most other welfare systems, Sweden is noted for its commitment to providing equal access to the labour market for both genders. In these aspirations, childcare, as is apparent from our account, has played a vital role from the 1960s on, as it has increased such accessibility dramatically. But even as the system has

been quantitatively successful in this respect, its qualitative outcome is somewhat less impressive. As observed by Klausen, “gender segregation has increased as more jobs were added” 1970-93.41 This critical perspective is today shared even by the state itself, to some extent. One study reflects that the road to gender equality in the labour market is perhaps not perfectly smooth:

Through the 1970s and 1980s women’s occupational frequency increased strongly, to almost match men’s in the 1990s. During this period, however, part-time work represented the larger share of the increase. Women largely shifted from wholly unpaid care-taking work to partly paid work of the same kind. The labour market was and is heavily sexually segregated. In 1999 half of all employed women work in the fields of children and elder care, health and education. Eleven per cent of all employed men work in these sectors. In 1979 the right to a six hours workday was introduced for parents of small children, a right that has been predominantly utilised by women.42

Traditionally, women and mothers have of course automatically been entrusted with the care for children. One aspect of the gendering of labour market and family relationships that has some bearing on Swedish childcare patterns is the transformation of gender roles. During the 1990s, an ambitious government study was initiated to investigate what it referred to as the myth of Swedish equality and the rational labour market (SOU 1998:6). One observation made by the study is that the internal family labour division regarding children’s care has changed. Women still spend more time tending children than men do, but

41 Klausen 1999, p 269. Of course, Klausen’s view could be criticised for its selectivity and narrowness. It is not inevitably true that a given society in which labour market accessibility per se is radically gendered implies less overall social segregation than a society where the labour market itself is (even strongly) gendered. Surely, these situations are fundamentally different in a sense ignored by Klausen in the quoted passage. For any labour market to be able to hypothetically provide for gender neutrality in and across workplaces, one necessary condition seems to us to be that men and women have roughly equal access to it. In this sense, it is inadequate to compare (as is often done) dimensions of genderedness between societies characterised by a single breadwinner and dual-earner family norm.
in the 1960s it was very unusual for fathers to spend time caring for small children. Merely one per cent of fathers occupied themselves with feeding, changing nappies, dressing and undressing their children. A larger percentage of fathers participated when they became a little older, but still the proportion was very low at a mere 14%. Today, 85% of fathers take part in the children’s care.\textsuperscript{43}

An evolutionary perspective on citizens’ social rights, through the welfare state and the structural development of the labour market, evidently doesn’t suffice. The logic of the welfare state, and the reforms that are attributed to its ideological orientation, do not agree with the norms of feminist critics – or with the structurally differentiated life conditions experienced by men and women. The challenge here is to decide whom the welfare state serves. In this regard, spill-over of general economic growth has not proved a sufficient argument for all feminist critics to embrace the conventional model of the welfare state with its individualist conception of citizenship. The contested issue is the nature of the relationship between the institutional welfare state project and progressive politics in the average post-war Western state.\textsuperscript{44}

Between 1970 and 2000, the expansion of Swedish childcare has been dramatic. At the beginning of the period 70,000 places were available. At the end there were 700,000.\textsuperscript{45} Through the period of expansion a paradox was recurring: the more childcare was recognised as a generally available public social good (meeting certain standards of quality), the more demand for the service grew. During this period, the market seemed insatiable. During the 1990s, the state increased the pressure on the municipalities to deliver childcare at a rate that met the legal requirements for provision. As a result, today, coverage is virtually complete in all parts of the country. Three out of four children between 1-5 have a place in childcare and two out of three between 6-9 have use of the \textit{fritidshem}, as do seven per cent of 10-12 year olds.

The principal form of non-municipal day care services during the 1990s, however, was parent co-operatives. Parents with children in co-operative

\textsuperscript{43} SOU 1998:6, p 49.
\textsuperscript{44} Cf Eme \textit{et al.} 2000, p 25.
care seem to prefer this form because it requires participation and influence on a scale unknown in and unsupported by municipal care.\textsuperscript{46} According to several parliamentary investigations, for instance, parents are expected to engage themselves in the internal activities of the operations.\textsuperscript{47} In this way, they are not only expected to get a clear insight into its operation but also to directly participate in, and thus be able to influence, its activities.

Yet another parliamentary committee on reforming childcare presented its conclusions in \textit{Förskola för alla barn 1991. Hur blir det?} [Preschool for all children by 1991. How will it turn out?] (SOU 1990:80). The recommendations of this analysis was that the social service law be amended to include the legal right for all children between 18 months and school age (6-7) to a place in a day care facility by the year of 1993. It is relevant to mention here that preschool activities are of three kinds. The most common one is a day care facility, and a less common a professional child minder (or day care mother). Still another form of preschool that is not as well documented is three-family day care, where families take turns receiving children in their own homes, for one week at a time.

The number of children six years old or younger attending regular day care services increased six-fold from nearly 62,000 in 1974 to nearly 362,000 in 1995, then declined to less than 320,000 by 1999. In terms of the proportion of Swedish 0-6 year olds, attendance increased from the 8 per cent in 1974 to approximately 60 per cent in 1999. The number of children nine years old and younger who attended the services provided by a professional child minder decreased from nearly 156,000 in 1990 to less than half that amount, or below 70,000 in 1999. This represents an additional 11 per cent of all preschool children that attend family home services provided by a child minder. However, the greatest increase during the 1990s can be noted for children enrolled in after-school or \textit{fritidshem} [leisure facilities]. Enrolment in this type of care increased three-fold from nearly 110,000 in 1990 to nearly 335,000 in 1999. Approximately 40 per cent of all children 7-9 years old now attend an after-school facility.

In Sweden preschool activities for children 0-6 years old, and care for children up to 12 years old, refer to publicly financed and institutionalised

\textsuperscript{46} Pestoff 1998.
\textsuperscript{47} Ståle 1995.
care. In theory it is available to all parents who work or study and have children below a given age. In the early 90’s a major institutional reform took place, when the age for starting school was reduced from seven to six. Many local school authorities responded to this change by introducing a “zero grade class” close to the school (often in the same building), like the school-related facility fritidshem mentioned above. Today, the zero classes and the fritidshem typically function in wrap-around fashion. In the pedagogical environment of the transitory zero class, the staff includes teachers from the lower grades as well as fritidshem staff: the categories of fritidspedagog and fritidsledare. Pedagogical activities generally combine these approaches, a combination reflected in their structure as well as their themes. After-school activities are available to children of working parents, both before and after school hours, until the age of 10 or 12.

It can be noted that in the established approach to preschool childcare the teaching of skills in literacy and numeracy is not emphasised. Instead of primarily being understood as a teaching environment, it is generally considered a place and time where children should be given space for social, physical and psychological exploration. The promotion of children’s self-knowledge, and their relational and emotional abilities, are given greater weight than tuition. Preschool pedagogical goals are in this way kept apart from those of the primary school system – a somewhat surprising aspect, in view of the transfer of responsibility for preschool childcare regulation and control from the Ministry of Social affairs to the Ministry of Education 1996. National childcare goals are stated as follows in one official guiding document:

---

48 These changes make comparisons between various forms of childcare and their development over time more difficult. In 1996 58 % of all children between 1-12 were enrolled in childcare activities of one type or another, and seven attended non-municipal services. Only one third of the children between 7-12 years old were enrolled in school-related after-school facilities, or fritidshem. Three fourths of the children between 0-6 attended some kind of preschool activity. Nearly all (97 %) six year olds attended some kind of preschool activity (ibid.). But, our focus is on day care centres and 43 per cent of children between 0-6 years old were enrolled in this form of preschool activity in 1996, while one out of eight attended non-municipal services.

49 There are claims that the closer links in most respects between schools and the fritidshem have clouded the limit, making it impossible to define where one activity/facility ends and the other begins. This could, in turn, threaten the pedagogical integrity, particularly of the latter. Bergqvist & Nyberg 2001, p 248.
The social and pedagogical role of childcare has required that activities meet high quality standards, well-educated staff, adequate size and composition of children’s groups and suitable, well-functioning premises. The importance of activities in contributing towards compensation for differences in the growing-up conditions for children from different parts of the population and in creating places of interaction for children from different ethnical, cultural and social backgrounds has been emphasized. In recent years, the value accorded to the pre-school for educational policy, as part of “life-long learning” [det livslånga lärandet] has become more important. This has led to reforms to increase availability and lower fees. In the long run, the declared goal is childcare wholly free of charge.50

The national preschool instructions from the Skolverket [the National Agency for Education] stress that play is of great importance for children’s learning and development abilities. Regarding the primary social and moral values that should be promoted by preschools, one recent information leaflet distributed to all facilities states that:

The basis for work in pre-school childcare is democracy. The children are expected to learn to respect people’s equal value. The staff will, in planning everyday activities, consider the children’s own opinions, interests and experiences. Pre-school childcare will, furthermore, work against traditional gender roles and lay great weight on environmental questions.

This overriding agenda is apparently well received by users of day care. A study of parents’ attitudes finds a remarkable resemblance between the fundamental goals for preschool childcare and parents’ expectations:

The results suggest that parents find it most important that in childcare institutions their children should be given an opportunity to develop their personalities. Also of high priority was that the children learn to respect others and to feel and express love and tenderness. […] Generally speaking, parents tend to emphasize the development of social skills and they attach less importance to creative skills such as constructing things and expressive activities. The differences in attitude are slight, but men tend to attach more importance to creative skills, and women to expressive skills.51

50 Ds 2001:57, p 226.
51 Björnberg 1997, p 124.
Municipal day care service is the dominant form for providing preschool activities, usually in premises housing one to four groups of 15 to 20 children. Most day care centres are open from early morning until late afternoon, five days a week. Professional child minders are approved by the municipal authorities to provide day care services in their own homes for between two and five preschool children. They often have young children of their own, and may receive compensation for caring for these too. Many parents enrol their children in the services provided by a child minder while waiting for a place in a local day care centre. Some parents, however, prefer keeping their children with a child minder until they start school because of the small size and family-like atmosphere provided. This solution is more common in rural and provincial areas than in more densely populated parts of the country.

The non-socialist government that carried the general election in 1991 introduced new features to the day care system. As mentioned above, they first removed most of the previous restrictions on the free establishment of day care services of Lex Pysslingen, and from 1992 onward private commercial firms could also receive public funding for running day care services. Municipal authorities were given even greater freedom to arrange all types of social services in 1993. Rather than having funds earmarked for day care, schooling, youth activities, care of the elderly, and so forth, from the central government as earlier, they were given a lump sum for the whole array of social services for which they were responsible. The primary argument for the reform was that the old system was not adaptable to local needs, nor did it allow for creative solutions in terms of municipal social service production.

At present, municipalities are free to decide how best to spend the funds from the central government, without having to adapt to national regulations about allocation for specific activities or needs. This boost of local political autonomy has lessened the possibilities for the national government to influence and guide childcare services, in terms of availability, quality or development, through public funds. However, childcare is still funded by public means.

---

The city of Stockholm introduced vouchers or “service checks” for day care, schools, and some other social services in 1993. This gave parents the right to choose the facility in which to place their children. This means that today all types of providers – municipal, co-operative and private – receive virtually the same compensation per enrolled child. The city of Gothenburg (the second largest Swedish city), on the other hand, decentralised its decision-making to a number of neighbourhood sub-units or wards, making each responsible for the provision of social services. This means that private day care facilities receive different financial compensation for the same activities in different parts of Gothenburg.

The city of Stockholm initiated a similar geographical decentralisation in 1996. It was first divided into 24 neighbourhoods or wards and in 1998 re-divided into 18 wards, each with its own stadsdelsnämnd [local ward administration], and its own budget. Under this system, each local district and neighbourhood administration is now responsible for providing its residents with a range of social services, such as day care and care for the elderly. Each of these wards sets its own priorities, at least in principle, and sets its own fees or tariffs for the services it provides. However, following the introduction of this administrative reform (it should be noted that it was primarily administrative, without local representative bodies – the City Council is still responsible for appointing sub-city political and administrative leaders), the situation for non-municipal day care services became so precarious in Stockholm, that a special city-wide office was established in 1999 to maintain contact with different types of non-municipal day care services.54

This wave of decentralisation signifies a second step away from national government control of childcare on the local community level. Some critics claim that this has had serious consequences for the quality of day care services during the 90s. Under the increased pressure of fiscal restraints, staff/child ratios have fallen compared to those of the preceding period, as have other economically contingent dimensions of care, such as the size of children’s groups, the size of the premises, and extra resources for children

54 Since then, however, this office has been discontinued.
with special needs.\footnote{It is worth noting that some writers view the 1995 tightening of the legal demands on municipalities to actually provide childcare for parents in work or education as a re-centralising move, partly countering the decentralising trend. Bergmark 2001, p 52.} (This downscaling did not just affect the childcare system but other social services as well.)

Somewhat paradoxically, some local administrators find it increasingly difficult to effectively decide how to organise local social services. Instead, funds are allocated by the central government to Swedish municipalities, funds that are pooled with parts of the municipal tax revenue. These funds are transferred to the local community, where the political and administrative options are few, by and large between cuts in different activities. Local administrators complain publicly that fiscal figures take precedence over social and pedagogical matters. The conventional Social Democratic attitude in this context is that financing must be boosted (whether by means of taxation or not), whereas the non-socialist view, adopted for instance by the incumbent City Council leadership in Stockholm, is that the connection between quality and funding is complex.

A democratic problem in this regard is that the local administration in the large cities runs day care (and other social services), but cannot be held politically responsible, other than indirectly, via the municipal elections. Municipal councils, on the other hand, don’t have to bear the brunt of citizens’ frustration at lower standards of performance. This two-tiered system of decentralisation – if we disregard its democratic lustre – struggles with its own built-in paradoxes in terms of legitimacy and accountability. It seems reasonably clear that the political winner in this development is the municipal level, that has felt the grip from above slacken, since the ones carrying the heavier load today are local sub-municipal/ward administrators. Thus the role of the municipal political level in the field of social service production and distribution vis-à-vis the stadsdelsnämnd [sub-municipal ward] resembles the role that the state used to play vis-à-vis the municipalities. Apparently, in this regard the locus of power in the municipal welfare sector has shifted.

The economic crisis and austerity of the 1990s forced many municipal authorities to introduce administrative reforms that affected the provision and quality of day care, and generally reduced expenditures on such activi-
ties. When the city of Stockholm initiated an earlier school start in 1993, the children starting school at six instead of seven, all six year-old children in Stockholm were transferred from day care facilities to school. This transfer made for considerable savings in the municipal budgets. Rather than four to six children per day care employee, there were now 25 to 30 children per two or three zero grade staff. In Gothenburg, by comparison, parents could decide, with the advice of the teachers, whether to put their child/children in a zero grade at the age of six or to leave them in day care until primary schooling proper begins at seven. It is possible that these differences in economic and administrative rules create regional differences in terms of the development of private and co-operative day care solutions.

During the 1990s many municipalities also restricted the availability of day care services, in order to reduce costs. Previously, children of parents who stayed at home after the birth of a second or third child, could retain their place at the local day care facility and thereby maintain social contacts with their peers. During the 1990s this right was revoked in many municipalities. Parents who were either unemployed or students lost the option to have their children enrolled in municipal day care facilities as well. These austerity measures on the municipal level were directly related to the widening gap between state spending on childcare and the rising demand implied by larger cohorts of children. As noted above, the pressure for more places in childcare was rising sharply during the 1990s. Government spending during the period, however, was almost constant. In 1990 the total public cost for childcare for 1-12 year olds was € 3.78 billion. In 1994 it was 3.61; in 1995 3.67; in 1996 3.78; and in 1997 3.81.

The only possible municipal response to these conditions was to decrease the staff/child ratio. In 1990 the average day care centre ratio was 4.2; in 1993 5.2; in 1997 5.7; and in 2000 5.4. In addition, many municipalities curtailed services in other ways. Fees paid by parents were increased in several ways. With the introduction of the maxtaxis [i.e. national system of maximum tariffs], conditions however changed again.

---

56 As exchange rates between sek and € vary, conversions throughout this text have been made using a flat rate of 9:1.
57 Ds 2001:57, p 232, table 7.4. Figures for preschool childcare only were not available from this source.
The Social Democrats introduced the idea of a maximum tariff for childcare in the last stage of the campaign for the 1998 general election. Prime minister Göran Persson then made a promise to impose an upper limit on day care fees amounting to €63 for the first child and €45 for the second child. He also stated that the municipal governments would be fully compensated for any loss due to the reform. The government hoped that by lowering the parent fees it could encourage more women to work full-time, as they would no longer be constrained by attendance-related fees.\(^{59}\)

In the period following the 1998 election the non-socialist parties opposed this proposal. The opposition has been strongest in municipalities governed by non-socialist parties, whose politics are characterised by low income taxes and high service fees. Many of them gave in reluctantly and introduced the new funding principle at the beginning of 2002. Two of the most recalcitrant municipalities are Österåker and Täby, both located in the relatively well-off, northern Stockholm area. For a long time Österåker was the only municipality to decide not to introduce a ceiling on tariffs. Täby was also visibly reluctant to follow suit, even though a local referendum indicated that voters were generally in favour of the reform.\(^{60}\) The municipal leadership only eventually caved in to the pressure. Incidentally, Täby was also the first Swedish municipality to convert all of its municipal day care facilities to commercial establishments in 2001. One reason for Täby’s reluctance to accept the maxtaxa could possibly have been solidarity with the new entrepreneurs, whose economical options and margins for institutional survival would decrease with the reform.

Some opponents of the measure claim that the maxtaxa will force municipalities both to increase income taxes and extend queues to day care services. Others say that the quality of the service will decline, as there will be more children spending more time, but with the same number of staff. Yet others claim that government funds will not cover all the increased costs and that municipalities will have to establish new priorities. This

---

\(^{59}\) All in all, the conclusion, particularly since the introduction of the maxtaxa, is that childcare is heavily subsidised, making it realistically available to virtually all families, regardless of economic circumstances. Cf Jonsson 2000b, p 105.

\(^{60}\) Dagens Nyheter, October 19, 2001. 49 % voted in favour, 39 % against, while 12 % were undecided or didn’t vote. 62 % of families with children were in favour, and 75 % of those with children below 6 years supported the idea of a maxtaxa.
could be detrimental to other sectors in need of financing – such as elder-care, and the cultural and educational sectors. Another problem is whether alternative or non-municipal day care services will receive full compensation for their loss of income, as the funds are allocated through the municipalities.

The Social Democratic move resulted in a bill that took effect at the beginning of 2002. The maximum tariff for the first child was eventually set at € 103/month or three per cent of the parents’ combined taxable income; € 68/month for the second child or two per cent of the combined income; and € 34/month for the third child or one per cent of the combined income. The fourth child was free of charge. This added up to a total of € 205/month for families with many children in childcare. The government intended to compensate municipalities for the loss of income, and € 306 million was reserved for this purpose in the 2002 state budget. An additional 45 million was earmarked for extra costs incurred by the municipalities for the expected increase in demand for services by unemployed parents or those at home with a second or third new-born child.

Another introduction in the field of childcare by the 1991 non-socialist government, relevant to the demand for public, institutionalised day care services, was the Vårdnadsbidrag [support for care-givers]. It provided approximately € 450 per month and child for parents who chose to stay home and care for their own children, rather than enrolling them in municipal or other day care facilities. Given the relatively low compensation, it was mostly (intended to be) used by women, whose salaries are usually lower than men’s. The reform was a consequence of a demand made by the Christian Democratic party, and was first implemented in July 1994. As the Social Democrats were returned to power in the general election some months later, however, the legislation was annulled and the subsidy for parents to stay at home with their children abolished.

By mid-2002, however, the consensus between the non-socialists about Vårdnadsbidrag came to an end, as the Centre and Liberal parties reconsidered their support. (Both of these parties are seen as markedly less rightist than the Moderate/conservative and Christian Democratic non-socialists; since the last historical coalition between the Social Democrats and the Centre party in the 1950s, parliamentary deals have regularly been struck between one of those parties and Social Democratic minority governments.) The leader of the Centre party, Maud Olofsson, observed at the
June 2002 party convention that support among the citizens for this type of care is weak and decreasing, which makes a reorientation necessary for the party.

Non-municipal day care services (known as alternativ drift [alternative provision] or enskild [private or separate] services in Swedish) expanded dramatically, as we have seen, after 1985. In 1988 there were slightly more than 500 non-municipal day care centres that met public requirements for state support, but by the end of 1995 the number increased to nearly 1900; an increase ratio of nearly four. The number of children enrolled in these non-municipal day care services increased from merely 8500 in 1988 to 47,000 in 1999, a nearly six-fold increase. In 1999, an average of nearly 15 per cent of all preschool children enrolled in day care facilities attended non-municipal services.\(^61\) Large variations can be noted, however, between different parts of the country: in Uppsala county, just north of the capital, nearly one fourth of all children attended non-municipal facilities, while in the sparsely populated Västerbotten region, in the far north, the corresponding number was approximately one out of twenty.\(^62\)

Nearly two-thirds of the non-municipal day care facilities in operation in 1995 were either provided by parent and worker co-operatives, or by different voluntary organisations. More than half of the non-municipal day care services were organised as parent co-ops in 1995, or 1016 in real figures. Worker co-operative day care was a new form, introduced at the end of 1991. From that year until 1995 the number of worker co-ops increased from 13 to 157. In 1995 there were 250 non-municipal day care centres and after-school facilities with a special pedagogics, e.g. Montessori, Reggio Emilia or Waldorf. They often call themselves parent co-ops but are usually legally organised as voluntary organisations or foundations. The parishes of the Swedish Church ran 47 day care centres in 1992, and there were, furthermore, several parent co-ops affiliated with the Swedish Church, although those are formally regarded as voluntary organisations.

At the beginning of 1995 approximately 20 per cent of all day care was provided by private facilities in Stockholm, most of which were co-

\(^61\) Cf table 8 in the appendix.
In 1986 there were only 18 parent co-ops in Stockholm, but by 1990 the number had grown to 140, and by 1995 there were about 200 parent co-ops. During 1989 and 1990 parent co-ops represented most of the growth of day care in Stockholm. The reason for the expansion of this particular form is that it was often the only chance for parents to obtain a day care place. Municipal rules about sibling preference, and the over-heated labour market, meant that it was often hard to get a day care place for a first child in Stockholm. A total study of co-op day care in Stockholm in 1990 and 1991 showed that parent co-ops were often small organisations (one or two units), that they arranged their own recruitment of children, and that they had shorter opening hours than municipal day care. Compared to the families using municipal day care, the families of parent co-ops had higher socio-economic status, consisted more often two parents, and had less often a foreign background. Parents chose parent co-ops because there were no municipal day care services close to their homes.

The average size of municipal childcare facilities is twice the size of parent co-operative day care services, with an average of 42 and 20 children, respectively. Worker co-ops are about 50 per cent larger than parent co-ops, while the size of private commercial firms providing day care services approaches that of municipal services. Municipal day care services require more personnel than non-municipal ones, but parental participation partially makes up for the lower staff intensity in parent co-ops.

By the end of 1995 the difference between the costs of municipal day care facilities and non-municipal services was 10 to 15 per cent. The average municipal funding of non-municipal day care services came to € 4628 per child and year in 1995, while the total cost for running similar municipal day care services were € 6328 per child and year. One reason for this discrepancy is parent fees, which are included in the latter figure, but not the former. They constitute 12-15 per cent of the total cost of all kinds of day care services. Another reason for the discrepancy is the work obligation in some types of non-municipal services. Yet another reason for the discrepancy is that non-public day care facilities are exempted from contribut-
ing to the expenses of the municipality or local community for maintaining this general social service. A part of the extra funds allocated to each public childcare institution is consequently deducted from the municipal source, which makes it seem as though the gap between the funds for public and non-public day care is fairly substantial. In principle, the same amount of money is allocated each individual child in any given municipality, regardless of which childcare facility the child attends.

Nearly all (98%) parent co-ops stipulate some kind of work obligation or other parental participation, e.g. administration (94%), temporary relief for the staff’s leaves of absence (91%), cleaning (74%), preparing food (31%). However, less than one-fifth (17%) of the other categories of “private” day care services require any parental involvement. Where they exist, parental responsibilities each month are on average 4.5 hours per child in parent co-ops, 0.8 hour per child in worker co-ops, and 0.3 hour per child in other private day care services. For each day care facility this means an annual average of 61 hours in parent co-ops, 13 hours for worker co-ops, and seven hours for other types of non-municipal day care services. Other differences in the provision of non-municipal day care services, for instance more engagement by the staff, can in part explain differences between the costs of municipal and non-municipal day care services.

One observation that can be made in relation to the system of Swedish day care is that the main ideological divide seems to be that between the publicly run system of day care and the commercial system of care – even though it would be exaggerated to say that the difference is of great importance today. Few now argue that funding and quality concerns should be removed from state hands, given that practical provision of day care remains open for different providers. In a sense, this is a reflection of the Swedish notion that the state is not always a major political problem. The Swedish political tradition is in this regard markedly less liberal than, for instance, the Anglo-Saxon. A phenomenon that is best linked to the Social Democratic appropriation of the state, and the central role of universalistic social policy reforms, since several decades on the party’s agenda. Commercial day care is for this reason often interpreted as an aspect of the old

ideological aspiration by the right side of the right to undermine the Social Democrats.

The parent co-operative day care system, however, does not accord with this pattern. Here, other forces seem to be at work. If we were to try to label these, we would point in the direction of social philosophy, rather than of social politics. At the beginning of the parent co-op wave during the late 1980s, the Swedish day care system was characterised by severe shortage at the production end. Parents had few options, one of which was to get this kind of initiative. Parental co-ops could be described in terms of a politically motivated move(ment), but the ideological overtones at the time were perfunctory. Nor were these initiatives ideologically orchestrated. The rationale behind these particular developments, therefore, seems to have been motivated by the third sector at the outset. This orientation is still in place today. There are few rivals of this assessment of the continuing strong wave of co-ops. Earlier, co-ops could also compete with lower tariffs, since they didn’t have to carry the same burden of administration and legal responsibility as the municipalities; they were able to use parents/members as labour, and they could use local knowledge and contacts to negotiate rents. Following the maxtaxa reform, the gap between co-ops and the other two organisational forms has lost significance.

The main remaining reason for families to choose this type of day care would therefore seem to be that it has a pedagogical and social edge, compared to competing forms. The co-operative solution as a whole is thus possibly perceived by parents/users as a more secure and pedagogically rewarding environment for their children. And this is maybe easier to assess for parents from wealthier socio-economic backgrounds, as they are prepared through their education to take advantage of the strength of the pedagogical and educational system. An interesting aspect here is that scarcity of childcare seems to produce differentiation among users. When publicly produced childcare was unable to meet demands in the 1970s and 80s, families with higher levels of income and education were over-consuming it, proportionally speaking. Academics, well-paid civil and private employees, white-collar workers, and the like, were over-represented during this phase.
But the expansion of the day care system between 1987 and 1995 was almost exclusively taken advantage of by children of parents with blue-collar jobs, lower civil servants, or private employees.\footnote{Ds 2001:57, p 229.} A possible interpretation is that privileged families are more prone to identify, and gain from, different welfare systems. One broader comment of relevance here is that this can be seen as a general phenomenon in the consumption of welfare. If this is the case (and it could very well be), then policy makers should bear in mind that the more complex any given system of social welfare is, the more it works in the interest of privileged citizens/families. To provide for an egalitarian social policy would thus be easier in direct proportion to the system’s degree of parsimony. If a great effort in terms of time, analysis, interpretation and the like is required to achieve an optimum performance of a system for given individual users, then those more able to up this investment will profit more than other users.

If this is the case, the co-operative alternative could now be subject to the same mechanism of selection, which might in turn imply that it does indeed possess an edge, compared to other forms, under the condition that the group that has designated it as a higher quality service is in fact right. One study remarks that whereas earlier inequalities in terms of access to preschool childcare disappeared during the 1990s, new systems of differentiation have appeared since then. Children of parents living together, of academics, of those of Swedish descent, etc, are over-represented in privately run, commercial and (particularly) parent co-operative day care centres, while children to single parents, parents with lower levels of education, and non-Swedish background are over-represented in publicly run facilities.\footnote{sou 2001:52, p 275f. Cf sou 2001:79, p 97.}

The system of public day care for preschool children is thus an important part of Swedish social life.\footnote{Cf Björnberg’s remark that the “expansion after the war of social citizenship rights in terms of material goods and services has created a basis for social identity in Sweden.” 1997, p 135.} The system is well established and the country now well covered, enabling both parents in families with small children to be active on the labour market to a large extent (with better coverage in urban areas which have a high frequency of people of both
genders in professions). The acceptance and support for this Swedish social policy is strong among citizens. This is not surprising, if we bear in mind that the political support for the welfare state as a whole remained high even through the economically turbulent 1990s, when cuts in funding adversely affected the quality of a range of welfare services and sectors, including day care.70 Some economic recovery has, as one study concludes, now taken place, but: “the resources are still not at the level of the early 1990s. Much indicates, however, that day care services still enjoy the confidence of parents”.71 The system thus appears to be both legitimate and stable.

At the moment, the debate seems to evolve in connection to political struggles to define the appropriate ambition for state spending in the day care (and general welfare) sector. The maxtaxa-system took effect in January 2002, and in November 2001 the Social Democratic party congress moved for a long term ambition to make day care for preschool children available free of charge.72 This will involve substantial economic input from the state, and the congress mentioned no date for the implementation of the suggestion. The former minister of education, Thomas Östros, has stated that in the light of the maxtaxa-reform, this step is logical. The maxtaxa is the first major social welfare reform following years of budget restrictions and cutbacks in service provision. It not only attempts to reinstate replacement rates that have been down-scaled, as in sick or unemployment insurance systems; it reverses the trend of higher parent fees for childcare that was very unevenly distributed across municipalities. This is an attempt to reinstate universalism, appreciated by middle-class parents. But the reform is possibly damaging for alternative providers of day care.73 The concept itself, however, can be interpreted as a legislative reversal of the fragmentation of social services, supported by the non-socialist Bildt government in 1991-94.

Another intense discussion concerns how the welfare state may renew itself after the harsh 1990s. Sweden shares the predicament created by the

70 Svallfors 1996.
72 Between 1990 and 1999 the proportion of parent’s fees in financing day care rose from 10 to 18 %. SOU 2001:79, p 97.
73 Similar reforms are now planned for elder care.
period of austerity with a host of other European nations. If the Swedish Social Democrats will be able or willing to follow the examples set, for instance, by New Labour in the UK is unclear. Various propositions concerning privatising the production of social services seems to be one major issue that has to be dealt with.\(^{74}\) Again, the Social Democratic legacy makes the state hesitant in this respect. There has been radical political change on this score over the last decade, but the welfare system as a whole remains politically and funding-wise in the hands of the state, even though organisational innovation abounds in the field of welfare production. For-profit, as well as non-profit and third sector driven solutions, have made substantial inroads into what was formerly a strongly publicly dominated social and political economy of care. The domination has lessened.

Only to reiterate this point: in today’s Swedish childcare system the role of non-public funding is minimal. (And the same of course goes for most major social services, such as health care, primary, secondary and most of tertiary education.) Swedish childcare is maintained, regardless of provider or region, by the same funding principle: the municipal (and state provided) voucher to which every resident child is entitled. There may be a theoretical possibility that there be childcare facilities or schemes that function otherwise, but these are not visible in the literature and of no consequence here. The 2002 reform of the maxtaxa effectively barred the only conceivable alternative funding channel: exorbitant tariffs. Small children not attending any of the forms of childcare under scrutiny here are thus generally to be found in their own homes, not in childcare settings other than those described above. Erler & Sass’ 1997 conclusion that there “are very few forms of private childcare in Sweden – apart from care by one parent” thus continues to be correct.\(^{75}\)

\(^{74}\) Giddens 2000.

\(^{75}\) Erler & Sass 1997, p 45. Figures provided by Trydegård show the very low proportion of all childcare employees in Sweden 1993-2000 holding other than public employment. Of nearly 140,000 staff in 1993, more than 130,000 worked in public facilities. In 2000 the total number of employees was over 115,000, with about 10,000 employed in non-public facilities (i.e. in both for-profit and non-profit facilities). 2001, p 91, table 1. In relative terms the proportion of non-public employees has increased between 1993-2000, from 4.1 % to 10.2 %. Of these, those employed in third sector facilities, mainly co-ops, were in 1999 as many as all other non-publicly employed together. Ibid., p 92, table 2.
This group of, as it were, childcare absentees has not been studied rigorously. Given, however, that the norm today is the two-earner family, it may be inferred that to remain at home is a less viable option for couples with incomes in the lower strata. For a family with one or more children to live on one income only (i.e. after the regular parental leave allowances and time frames have run their course) seems possible only if that income is very high indeed. Only a fraction of Swedish parents reasonably belong to this group. There are of course other parents, without these kinds of resources, who opt for keeping their preschool children at home, living in a minimalist fashion. But again, there are no figures to tell, and the group is probably small, though we would guess that this could be an easier route to take for comparatively young parents, who still have low expenses. Following this train of thought, a distinction that could be relevant – should systematic studies be undertaken to understand this category’s lifestyle – would be between those who take the minimalist option for reasons of choice, and those who do it for lack of a current alternative. Surely, to keep small children at home – until they have to attend school at the age of seven – for ideological or religious reasons and therefore scrape by on meagre economic resources, is quite a different thing than to scrape by for the time being, with hopes that conditions may improve in the future. We would imagine that the latter evaluation is shared by parents of small children in areas where demand for childcare currently exceeds supply.

Yet another inadequately mapped and analysed care context for the childcare absentees is the informal sector. We sense, however, that informal solutions are of less importance than the children who stay at home with one parent. The classical versions of informal day care would be to rely on grandparents or black labour. Some groups who are reputed to work with black childcare are Baltic, Polish or other European/American women, either permanent residents or temporary visitors. We feel that it is safe to assume, however, that this is a fairly marginal phenomenon, at least in terms of any sustained substitution for childcare. To have a resident black au pair in your home who brings the children to and from an ordinary day

---

76 Cf for instance Svedberg’s remark that knowledge on the informal sector’s role in the Swedish welfare system is scarce and fragmented. 2001, p 141, footnote 2. The usual interpretation is that this reflects the marginality of the sector itself.
care facility is perhaps a more common model, but even so the overall numbers of this practice can hardly be great.

How to assess the feminist critique of the welfare state’s individualistic perspective on family and social policy is not only an empirical question. As we have seen, the day care system itself does not really differentiate between women and men as wage earners or receivers of care for their children. One discernible problem, primarily with parent co-op solutions, however, is that the very amount of everyday responsibility and participation required by members to some extent tends to shut single parents out, as they usually lack the extra logistical margins in everyday family life that are necessary for parents engaged in co-ops. Even if this form seems better equipped to promote social cohesion and community building (as well as offer care with less economic restrictions), parents’ life situations would clearly have a bearing on the practical availability of this kind of day care.

At this point the categories of social class and sex/gender meet, indicating a presence of class as well as gender structures in the organisational and political economy of Swedish day care. One 2001 government study of concludes that it is “six times as usual that children whose parents have a tertiary education of three years attend non-public day care than children whose parents have only primary education”.77 Another study echoes the same theme in its conclusion: “if the difference earlier were between those who had access to day care and those who did not, today it is rather between those who have high quality and low quality care”.78 Swedish childcare in today’s mature phase thus seems to be on its way to becoming yet another class differentiated social commodity. And as the classical emphasis on socio-economic equality of the Social Democrats might have to diminish in the wake of internal and external changes (at the same time as the party can no longer count on being automatically re-elected to power), so does childcare risk becoming subject to the same differentiating dynamics as do other (social) services and consumer goods.

77 Ds 2001:57, p 235.
Forces of change

What are, then, the primary forces of change in today’s Swedish childcare system? A whole array of phenomena, developments and restraints are often pointed to in reply to this question. In the following we will briefly present what we consider to be the most central of these.

The first is demographic change. The childcare system (as well as society at large) has to cope with unstable birth rates. At the end of the 1980s and beginning of the 90s, as we have seen, nativity soared in Sweden. In 1990, the woman/child ratio reached a level of 2.13 that is extraordinary for a European context. By 1999, however, it had fallen to a mere 1.5, a level actually not seen since 1809. The demand for places in childcare has therefore risen dramatically over the last decade. In 1980 a total of 408,000 children were enrolled in care. Of these, 359,000 were preschool children. In 1985 the numbers were 498,000/424,000, respectively; in 1990 571,000/462,000; in 1995 725,000/515,000; in 1999 720,000/388,000. This is the nativity peak from the years around 1990 moving through the system. Current estimates, however, indicate that the number of Swedish 1-5 year olds will go down in the medium term. In 1993-95 there were over 600,000 children in this age group. Prognoses for the next few years estimate the figure to 450,000, a decrease of 25 %.

This demographic change will require adjustments in the childcare system. An observation here is that the increase in nativity rates during the 1980s leading up to the peak in the early 90s was almost as dramatic as today’s expected decrease will be. The increase, as we have seen, caused massive growth in the childcare system, and deepened Sweden’s already strong reputation as an icon of universalist welfarism. This could hardly have been achieved if the patterns in nativity rates at the time had resembled those likely to arrive in the coming years. An intriguing question is thus what this decrease will imply for the Swedish image. The changes are

---

79 This is also the first welfare policy challenge defined in the final report presented by the major Swedish welfare audit account committee led by sociologist Joakim Palme: SOU 2001:79. Other main challenges that are highlighted in the broad social and welfare policy perspective of the committee are related to financing, internationalisation, inequality and legitimacy.
80 Ds 2001:57, p 228, table 7.1.
very likely to generate new perspectives on the Swedish tradition of welfare.

At first glance, this decrease ought perhaps make for a consolidating phase in childcare, with organisational structures being adjusted down to meet decreasing demand, and staff and location needs therefore being met relatively easily. But the picture is more complicated than that. Part of the reason is the imminent retirement of large cohorts of workers in the sector (and across Swedish society). Another aspect is the nation-wide shortage of highly trained staff. Today, the leading childcare staff category – the förskolelärare – is often found on lists of very promising careers in the decades ahead. One problem, however, is that wages are often criticised for being inadequate. But improvements are to some extent made today, generated not least by growing professionalisation in the sector. Recent figures put the estimated proportion of staff with tertiary training in preschool childcare at 54 % (and in after-school facilities at 68 %).81 The same source concludes that the 1990s’ increasing professionalisation in the childcare sector is noticeable in the following ways: by the fact that the number of children in day care (where education levels are higher) has increased, compared to the number of children cared for by child minders (where education levels are lower) and that the education of the staff of the childcare sector as a whole has been improved.82

Reports today also indicate that at least in major urban areas the distribution of staff with lower and higher qualifications is uneven. In Stockholm the concentration of staff with tertiary education in this professional sector closely follows the division of the city itself in terms of socio-economic prosperity. In those suburban parts of the city where the population is less

81 Bergqvist & Nyberg 2001, p 258.
82 At www.scb.se Statistics Sweden (SCB) hosts an official database covering most aspects of most sectors of the national accounts. It is very vast, user-friendly and publicly largely available free of charge. In the field of barnomsorg [childcare], for instance, an array of statistics concerning location and form of facilities, type of provider, level of staff education, children’s group size etc on the municipal, regional or national levels per year etc can easily be obtained for those with a basic knowledge of any Scandinavian language. The figures are precise. In 1998 31,252 people thus belonged to the academically trained main staff category of förskolelärare. 25,343 people were in the category barnskötare, with secondary school level education. 569 people were in the category “other”, and 1140 staff untrained, nationally.
prosperous the recruitment of highly trained staff is a bigger challenge than in the centre and well-to-do suburbs. The same situation seems to apply to the whole system of schooling and care.

Second, there is the issue whether the ideological and institutional universalism of the childcare system may have to be reshaped or even reconsidered, following the general development in EU-countries towards ethnic and cultural diversification. This is a general trend today, and political and policy structures are under constant pressure to adapt to the changes that are expected to follow, for instance, the pattern of the consumption of social services. It is hard, however, to be very precise in the assessment of this trend. We feel that the phenomenon of socio-political multiculturalism is not addressed in an adequately sophisticated way today, at least not in terms of social policy, and at least not in Sweden.

Third, there is change in family structure. As indicated above, the transformation of those social values that have traditionally supported and normatively embedded familialism has been going on for quite some time. The problem, however, of whether familialism should be restored or not is absent in today’s Swedish political debate. Interpretations of this development often stress that the requirements of the 1950s-60s for more labour made the old mode of thinking obsolete, and that processes of individualisation and social modernisation have gone unusually far in Sweden. This has created a situation where family patterns have become more open to negotiation, between partners that are fairly equal in economical and other terms, a negotiation that was hardly possible under familialism. Dismantling conventional patterns in this regard is only done to a degree, however. Equal parenthood, adoption and family rights are not officially awarded to those living in gay and lesbian relationships. The direction of change in family structures is therefore peculiar in Sweden, compared to many comparable European countries. In this kind of setting, future family policy reform will by necessity be a matter of change starting from the dual career family pattern, not going towards it.

The growth of dual career families has thus been steady since the 1960s-70s. Today, as mentioned above, the norm is that both parents work. This does not mean, however, that the system does not generate patterns of sexual discrimination. Women work part-time far more than men and are also tacitly and individually discriminated in terms of wage levels. Employment levels have been very high in Sweden throughout the post-war era, and the
dramatic fall in levels during the early 90s constituted a major social and political shock. Today, unemployment levels have decreased, but are still far higher than before the shocking fall. One official analysis concludes, however, that in principle, this is a time when young Nordic women work, and family, child and social policies aim to support dual careers as powerfully as possible.83 There is legislation in place today that theoretically prohibits employers from investigating potential or present employees’ family or pregnancy plans. Pregnancy is not a valid ground for discharge from the workplace, nor is parental benefits or leaves of absence. Admittedly, employers at times go to some lengths to find ways of cheating on the system in this regard. This is typically regarded by a majority of Swedes, though, as a rather offensive posture.

The living conditions of Swedish children are, naturally, shaped by these socio-cultural patterns. One study conducted in 2000, presents a contrast between the vast majority of Swedish children who live with both parents, in relation to the family patterns of Swedish children with separated parents (i.e. 17-18 % of all the children).84

- For children under 10 every second child sees the absent parent at least once a week.
- Less than one out of ten have no contact at all. For these children the absent parent lives nearby in 30 % of the cases.
- Children 0-9 years old live alternatively with both parents about half of the time in every second case.
- In the same group, almost all children are with their mother at least one day/month, and 90 % with their father.
- Almost one child out of five in the same age group does things together with both separated parents at least once a week and the parents of one out of two discuss matters that relate to the child each week. For adolescents, both figures decrease.

Given these patterns, however, the study notes, many of these children live in a context supported by the social capital generated by both parents. In

83 Ds 2001:57, p 153.
84 Jonsson 2001a, p 87f.
terms of inter-generation confidence and trust, 85-90 % of all Swedish children perceive that their parents have enough time for them.\textsuperscript{85} It may be worth noticing that cohabitation is very common in Sweden. A 1995 statistical report on rates of children experiencing divorce/separation during childhood or adolescence notes that a fairly consistent 76-87 % have grown up living with both their biological and adoptive parents.\textsuperscript{86}

A fourth aspect is the visible inroads made by fathers into the parental leave system. At the outset, this service was almost exclusively directed at and used by women/mothers. Women are still far ahead of men as users of this social service, but alterations are slowly taking place. In 1980, fathers’ use of the total number of days available for parental leave was 5 %, increasing in 1990 to 7 %, and in 2000 to just over 12 %. Men’s use of the parental leave system correlates positively with higher levels of income for both parents.\textsuperscript{87} Second, child fertility rates for men who have taken parental leave with the first child are substantially higher than for men who have not, but there is also a tendency to use more days with the first child than with later children.\textsuperscript{88} When it comes to staying home to care for sick children (using \textit{tillfällig föräldrapenning} insurance benefits), the share of days used by fathers has been 30-40 % throughout the 1980s and 90s.\textsuperscript{89}

Most of these tendencies are open-ended and inconclusive. The question what forces of change are \textit{really} at work today with regard to Swedish childcare is very hard to answer, partly because it is not merely empirical, but hinges on different theoretical conceptions of politics and the state in the first place. In our discussion we have given a number of independent interpretations that have seemed appropriate to us. Another, indirect way of

\textsuperscript{85} Jonsson 2001a, p 90. Cf the remark that even though the availability of absent parents is relatively high, the social resources enjoyed by children with step-mothers or -fathers is somewhat lower. \textit{Ibid.}, p 100.


\textsuperscript{87} Ds 2001:57, p 215.

\textsuperscript{88} Cf \textit{SOU} 1998:6, p 52. Different explanations of why men’s and women’s respective use of the insurance system varies considerably are discussed at length in this study, carefully considering stereotypes, career implications and micro-negotiation strategies/patterns in different family contexts. We refrain, however, from going deeper into this theme, as our main focus lies elsewhere.

\textsuperscript{89} Ds 2001:57, p 202.
assessing current tendencies is to study the approaches of the main political actors involved: the parliamentary parties. To be able to evaluate the posture and potential impact of these, one has to assume (a) that the views put forth by the parties are sincere and well grounded, (b) that the proposed reforms and changes are intended to be carried through the legislative system, and (c) that the tables will not suddenly turn and the field change in unexpected ways. All of these assumptions are somewhat shaky. But a review of the positions could at least provide the basis for some qualified guesswork. A modest speculation is that the future of Swedish childcare policy in the medium term perspective lies somewhere in between these partisan views and will be influenced by the direction of them over the next few years.\textsuperscript{90} Major pre-election proposals during the most recent national election campaign (i.e. 2002) by each Swedish party regarding family policy change were as follows:

- The conservative Moderate party proposed to shorten the period of paid parental leave to care for new-born and small children from 480 to 360 days/child, maintaining present economical levels (at 80 \% of regular income, with a break-off point at € 2132/month, which gives a highest possible benefit rate of € 1706/month, before income taxation).\textsuperscript{91} The cut includes the 90 days secondary insurance period, during which flat rate compensation is given at the very modest level of € 162/month, and one regular support month. This is the specifically designated “father’s month”, only available to the father of the child. The party furthermore proposed a general contribution of € 270/month to parents with 1-3 year olds, free of tax. This new contribution will decrease proportionally if the child attends public day care. Another plan was to introduce a modest tax deduction generating approx. € 36/month and child, as well as make parents’ costs for

\textsuperscript{90} As the system is constantly being revised changes are equally constant regarding, among other things, levels of contribution and compensation. Terminology also changes. Since this primarily is an historical overview, this suggests a certain descriptive vagueness in the text. Words and facts change, as does the relationship between them. We’ve chosen, however, not to dwell on this or trace the changes in detail.

\textsuperscript{91} A compilation that’s been helpful here was printed in \textit{Dagens Nyheter} on August 4, 2002.
day care up to € 2160/year tax deductible, making the moderate party the only one today to relate tax reductions to childcare.

- The liberal party, Folkpartiet, proposed to maintain the barnbidrag (i.e. the flat rate allowance, originally set at € 86/child and month with increased levels for parents with more than two children) received by all parents. The party proposed to raise the break-off point of the föräldraförsäkring (making the highest possible net support level € 2274/month), but also to reduce the total length of it by one month. The party also wants to raise the lower levels of the contribution. Like the Moderates (and the Christian Democrats), Folkpartiet suggested a flat contribution per child to all parents, at levels just above those proposed by the Moderate party. A special proposition from the liberals was that remuneration levels in the föräldraförsäkring should increase from 80 to 90 % of the earlier income, on the condition that the right to paid leave is used by both parents (up until the more austere early and mid-1990s, this had been the regular remuneration level).

- The non-socialist Centre party proposed to double the universal child allowance during the first five years of the child’s life; keep the föräldraförsäkring more or less intact, but raise both the break-off point (generating € 2501/month) and the contribution floors. This was the sole party in the non-socialist camp that did not advocate a general new child contribution. It also wanted to keep the economic incitement for fathers to make more use of the föräldraförsäkring, and extend the right to shorter working hours for those with small children from six to four hours a day.

- The Christian Democratic party wanted a modest raise in the universal child allowance, specifically for 13-16 year olds. The party proposed to shorten the föräldraförsäkring to 360 days, raise the break-off point to an ambitious € 2814/month net and also raise the floor of the contribution. As in the Moderate proposition, the secondary period with a symbolic economic compensation is abandoned. The Christian Democratic approach was also ambitious regarding the levels in the renewed proposition that parents should receive a universal allowance for each child. The party’s suggestion was € 7200/year for 1-3 year olds, free of tax; an amount that would surely go some way towards making ends meet.
for an ordinary family, if there is a breadwinner with a decent income present as well (in keeping with the party’s idea of vårdnadsbidrag from 1994). It further proposed a right to three years leave of absence from work when children are small.

- The Social Democratic party generally wished to keep the föräldraförsäkring, but extend it in the long run, primarily by introducing more fathers’ months. The party has also stated that it wishes to curb employers’ discrimination of pregnant mothers (and parents on parental leave) by legal means, and to initiate parliamentary talks on individualised parental leave, i.e. to formally split the right to parental leave between both parents.\(^\text{92}\) It also proposed a slight raise of the break-off point, making a € 2274/month net benefit level, as well as a raise of floor levels. A final proposition was to boost the child allowance and raise the relative benefit levels for families with more than one child (and not only for those with more than two).

- The socialist left (earlier communist) party Vänsterpartiet, that enjoyed an unprecedented success in the general elections of 1998, and that, together with Miljöpartiet, have since then supported the Social Democratic government in parliament during the period before and after the 2002 election, wanted to extend the föräldraförsäkring, but did not declare exactly by how much. They also proposed a raise of the break-off point (second only to the level proposed by the Christian Democrats) to € 2559/month, as well as a floor raise. Just like the Social Democrats, Vänsterpartiet wishes to extend the föräldraförsäkring in the long term by introducing more “father’s months”.

- The green party, Miljöpartiet exhibited the most expansive view among the seven parties represented in parliament since 1998 when it comes to the föräldraförsäkring. They proposed to lengthen the insurance period to as much as 540 days, with 80 %-level benefits for 450 and 90 %-levels for 90 days, keeping the present break-off point and raise the compensation floors. It also wanted to reinstate a specific, extra contribution for parents who

\(^{92}\text{Aftonbladet, August 25, 2002.}\)
use the government student loan system – i.e. for parents primarily in tertiary education.

One thing that comes across clearly in this brief review is the desire of three of the non-socialist parties to introduce an ambitious new policy of a monthly benefit exempt from taxation, particularly for parents of 1-3 year olds. The effect of the reform would give an economic standard comparable to salaried work – at least compared to low paid or part-time work. Net contribution levels ranging between €270-600 per month and per 1-3 year old child are, at least near the top end, close to low net wage levels. An aggressive scheme of this kind would potentially rival other means of contributing to a family’s economic maintenance, given that there is a primary income in the family. With more than one child the situation becomes even more promising in terms of provision for the family. Given that the suggestions are only aimed at families with 1-3 year olds, the time span is so brief that not many parents today are able to combine those benefits. Furthermore, compensation levels are hardly high enough to enable single parents to support themselves.

Other aspects that become apparent are the parliamentary consensus to keep the maxtaxa and the lack of non-socialist consensus in family and childcare policy matters. There are three policy clusters. The first cluster – that wants to maintain and/or expand on the current system – consists of the Social Democrats and its two parliamentary support parties. The second is the left side of the right, occupied by the liberal and Centre parties (often referred to as the two mid-parties), who wish to keep the present childcare system intact but, in addition, boost the economy of families with children considerably. The third and final cluster is the far right, the Moderates and Christian Democrats, whose suggestions imply a different direction in relation to the current systems, at least for 1-3 year olds. Instead, the care of these young children should be chosen by each family, which is part of the greater economic freedom implied by the parties in their propositions.

Not only did the pre-2002 election debate in Sweden thus indicate that no party is strongly opposed to the established childcare policy system; on the contrary, bids were made from right to left to impose restrictions on children’s group sizes in day care, and this in opposition to new municipal legislation that through fiscal measures tends to make it difficult to provide
small groups. In these regards, there seems indeed to be a consensus that the politics of Swedish childcare has been too austere for some time.⁹³

To bring this section to a close, we would at last like to make some general remarks on the politics of childcare in Sweden. The first observation is that the system of publicly supported childcare has expanded dramatically since the 1970s, and has now reached comprehensive levels of national coverage. A second reflection is that serious opposition to the system is marginal, both politically and ideologically.⁹⁴ The support for social services of this kind in the field of childcare is generally high, as is the support for the dual-career labour market. There are no indications that Swedes in general want to challenge or replace this basic model. The domestic debate seems to concentrate on how the system should be honed further, rather than overhauled. A ready interpretation here could be that the extraordinary Social Democratic political influence during the 20th century has created a hegemonic situation in Swedish social policy matters. The material and literature on preschool childcare used in this text indicate that the system plays an important role in furthering social cohesion. There is hardly any indication of the opposite.

A last observation that can be made is that the firmness of the state’s former grip over modes of childcare provision has lessened. Funding, as well as the safeguarding of quality standards, is still in firm public control, but a range of different organisational forms for care are now allowed, and viable. In terms of social cohesion, therefore, we perceive no distinct threat to the stability or inclusiveness connected to Swedish childcare policies per se. On the contrary, these policies seem to be interpreted by most Swedish families, as well as by the major political parties, as a fair contribution towards the practical, economical and institutional support of what has become the contemporary Swedish way of life for families with small children. From a broader socio-political perspective the tensions inherent in the policy system are not acute, and there are no current indications of any

---

⁹³ Sweden is of course not the only case in point here. Cf Lindbom 2002, p 312.
⁹⁴ Cf the observations provided by Erler & Sass that “public or state childcare is judged very positively by the parents”. 1997, p 45. They use an even stronger formulation at the last page of their article, where parents in Sweden “are extremely positive about the quality of day nursery care”. Ibid., p 46. Björnberg also uses the words “extremely positive”. 1997, p 125. Cf Ds 2001:57, p 243.
constitutive changes, unless a fiscal (or other) crisis like the one during the early/mid-1990s should appear.\textsuperscript{95}

Consequently, the main challenges today rather concern the system’s ability to deal with non-conformist, non-presumed life styles and family patterns. A universalist model by aspiration, Swedish childcare policy will conceivably continue to exert a visible institutional and political pressure on Swedish families.

\textsuperscript{95} Cf Pierson’s view that the 1990s must primarily be understood in terms of structural adjustment. 2004, p 59.
3 The Swedish childcare system of the early 2000s

In the preceding chapter the historical and political complexities of the Swedish childcare system were highlighted and discussed at length. The following five chapters are devoted to case studies of the operation of the system in the early 2000s. The analysis is thus presented chronologically. This chapter, serving as an introduction to the empirical investigation, addresses issues of practical methodology and offers some theoretical considerations. At the centre of attention is the question of how to approach and interpret a policy structure of this magnitude and scope without reducing the account unnecessarily.

Let us begin this part by noting that the topic of Swedish family policy and childcare gained much acclaim at the “Progressive Politicians” meeting in London in July 2003. A few weeks later the Swedish Prime Minister, Göran Persson, pleaded for a yes vote in the September 2003 referendum on Swedish membership in the EMU. In an article in a leading Swedish daily newspaper, he made reference to the need to broadly address issues of family policy in Europe. He also presented a Social Democratic eight-point programme for the future of Europe. The Prime Minister’s main argument was that Sweden must participate forcefully in the modernisation of the European Union in a number of areas: full employment, the development of the welfare state model, and the extension of childcare. Under the heading “increased equality” he wrote:

Sweden will forcefully promote the development of childcare [in the European Union]: at least 90 % of children three years and older should be enrolled in preschool facilities by 2010 and one-third of the children under three years age should have access to childcare. More women must get the possibility to participate in work life. The desire of both men and women to be able to combine an active family life with an active professional career
will promote a modern family policy. Greater participation in work life will be decisive for Europe’s possibility to deal with the challenges created by an aging population.96

In the following, the provision of childcare in two cities will be investigated: Stockholm and Östersund. In addition to presenting the result of independent empirical work, the study takes advantage of the large amount of academic and public evaluation and analysis available in Sweden.

To choose to study childcare policy in two Swedish cities, Stockholm and Östersund, means that we have to account for a number of geographical, demographic and social dimensions, which will affect the analytical structure. However, given the universal and highly developed character of the Swedish childcare system, structural variations between the cases will not be as large as that found in most other countries participating in the TSFEPS project. The Swedish childcare system distinguishes itself by its high levels of national coherence and uniformity. The legislative framework governs childcare services (as well as most other fields of social welfare) provided at the local level. Such services tend therefore to be more homogenous than when they are open to local or regional initiatives. But even so, the system should not be regarded as completely uniform. As will become apparent below, the local landscapes of childcare in Östersund and the three sub-municipal wards investigated in Stockholm each have a number of specific traits, unlike those exhibited by the other cases. It is useful, we therefore suggest, to approach the “big” Swedish childcare system through two perspectives: one focusing on structural uniformity and large-scale coherence, and one taking local small-scale style varieties into account.

In Sweden municipalities are ultimately responsible for the provision of childcare and thus have some leeway for particular solutions in accordance with local needs, but always within the boundaries of the broader, state-controlled and state-financed system. Most basic ideological, legal, financial or institutional issues concerning how childcare should be organised are not local matters. Childcare services in Stockholm will thus to a large

extent structurally resemble those found in Östersund, as will the nature of provision across and between Stockholm’s sub-municipal wards.

On the one hand, this implies that the difference between the policies of Stockholm and Östersund (some 600 km north) is bound to be modest. On the other hand, we consider it a challenge to systematically reflect on variations that occur despite this institutional and socio-political background. In Sweden, the debates on what type of childcare system should be adopted have been all but closed. Discussions today deal with fine-tuning rather than major changes in the field. In a sense Swedish society seems to have passed through the phases of formulating and adopting comprehensive universal childcare policies and made the corresponding sacrifices in terms of alternative social values. The overall political consensus about the direction and future of publicly financed childcare is possibly a unique Swedish pattern. Our contribution in this analysis will thus have to be in the direction of reflecting on childcare from within a universal system. However, it may be worth noting that day care services were often included in the broader public debate about the privatisation of social services during the 1990s. Some proponents of private solutions went so far as to argue that there were no relevant differences between running a day care centre and managing a fast food franchise.

Each Swedish municipality (there are 290 at present) organises childcare in accordance with the national structural norms. In this respect, the centralised tradition in Swedish political life comes across quite clearly. It should be kept in mind that Sweden is a unitary, not a federal state. Regional or county governments play no role in providing childcare services in Sweden. Therefore, a concept such as governance works differently in Sweden, than, for instance, in contemporary Germany or France. From a conventional

97 Note, however, the Christian Democratic Party promotion of the idea of a vårdnadbidrag [parental allowance] for those parents (read: women) who prefer to stay home and care for their own children, rather than send them to municipal or private day care facilities or a nearby child minder service.

98 It is worth reminding the reader here that there are other publicly supported forms of childcare apart from institutional day care. The main alternative is the familjedaghem [the institution of child minding], which amounts to the solution that a parent (almost invariably a mother) minds other children together with her own in her private home. The prevalence of this solution is marginal, however, and a 2003 article in a major daily paper offers the view that it ought to be phased-out within five years. Dagens Nyheter, August 11, 2003.
point of view, the concept of governance implies that the powers of political decision-making are not centrally controlled by the public sector. In countries with more fragmented and complex conditions it follows that new ways and means for controlling policy structures may develop. The process of Europeanisation is often considered illustrative of this fact. On a general note, higher levels of Europeanisation in the field of welfare may be better approached in terms of the subjectivity-weaker concept of governance. But as will become apparent below, in the field of Swedish childcare policy, this concept is perhaps less relevant in relation to this policy field than to other fields, or to other political contexts. The Swedish childcare system is apparently still, to a substantial degree, subjected to government in a rather subjectivity-strong and uniform sense. Our investigation indicates that Swedish social policy allows for some institutional variety, but not, for instance, in terms of financing or other decisive, “hard” policy issues. Here, the maxtaxa reforms that limit parent fees for day care services illustrate this point. The policy structure is clearly comprehensive and the system only modestly influenced by different non-public stakeholders or by any political or administrative levels other than central and municipal government.

Until the 1990s, local governments, however, did not wield much influence over the nature and development of childcare solutions in Sweden. Their role was to implement national goals rather than to reform or challenge established policy structures. As seen elsewhere, there is a spectrum of local providers of childcare, but the services offered by non-municipal providers of various kinds do not radically differ in their basic structures from those provided by most Swedish municipalities in terms of patterns of financing, professional and educational standards, staff recruitment, security and insurance legislation, and educational and social goals. The main childcare staff categories are thus the same all across Sweden, regardless of local social variations, prevalent pedagogical programmes, and so forth. The leading staff category has the same academic teacher education (to which complementary training is often added).

Variations in the Swedish landscape of childcare service thus concern the adaptation of the system to local demographic and social patterns, and local ideological differences in terms of public/private provision of personal social services. Today, legislation is indeed comprehensive, but of a “softer” kind than in the 1970s-80s. There are no legal obstacles to child-
care initiatives from outside the public sector. The possibilities for this are instead fairly good. In this sense, the unified and strict character of traditional Swedish childcare politics, even at the level of practice, has changed. There is a connection here, we suggest, to the larger Swedish trend during the 1980s-90s to move from detailed policy-regulation to more overriding framework legislation, particularly in the social welfare sector. The state is now far less involved than before, for instance in how elder care, schools, preschools and other welfare institutions and solutions are organised. Instead, municipalities are charged with the full responsibility to provide these services under certain structural formats.

Another element that needs to be mentioned is the fact that in Sweden, preschool childcare is designed to provide full day care for children between 1-5 years old. Generally speaking, the Swedish childcare norm is thus all-day attendance. This means that most children remain at their facilities from the morning (7-9 am) to the afternoon (3-6 pm), including meals, rest after lunch and a snack in the afternoon. Breakfast is also provided, if required by families with early schedules. Parents have the right to part-time care if they so desire, but in actual practice, the great majority of children in day care arrive in the morning and leave in the afternoon. There is thus no equivalent in Sweden to the part-time childcare structures without meals, as may be found elsewhere in the European childcare sector.

One important point that needs to be emphasised in this context is that children normally remain in the same facility throughout their preschool years, i.e. 1-5 years of age. Larger childcare facilities tend to be organised in two or three different age groups, whereas smaller facilities normally use the “sibling principle”, i.e. run an integrated group for all children. To our knowledge, there are no childcare centres that only admit preschool children of a certain age span, such as 1-2, 2-3 or 4-5 year olds. Continuity in terms of children’s social and personal relationships is in this sense a defining mark of Swedish childcare, as is the lack of institutional seams.

In addition, childcare in Sweden comes under the auspices of Skolverket [the National Board of Education], rather than being divided into age categories and supervised by two or more different public authorities, such as health authorities for the 0-3 year olds, and education authorities for the 3-6 year olds. Neither do county or regional authorities have any substantial say in Swedish childcare policy nor service provision, as is often the case in other European countries.
Methodology and local units of analysis

The comparison between Stockholm and Östersund touches on a range of differences in the Swedish political and social landscape. Stockholm is the country’s major urban area with the largest population, whereas Östersund is a medium-size municipality in the sparsely populated central part of the country. Whereas Östersund is close to the geographical centre, Stockholm epitomises the national centre in terms of politics, culture, administration and economy. For Stockholm, being the centre of social and economical power is a real condition of public life – as well as part of its identity. In the minds of its inhabitants, Stockholm’s problems and issues are thus often confused with those of Sweden. The municipality, including the local economy, is by far the largest in the country. The distance to the state and central government is relatively short. In Östersund, the distance to the state is in most respects much greater, and local issues are rarely treated in terms of national importance or general interest. Being part of the political periphery, a local notion of defiance is sometimes taken to be cultivated there.

The Stockholm polity also has to cope with the difference between meeting high-status inner city needs and more diverse suburban needs. The social and cultural fabric is more complex. Gentrification is increasing in the city as well as in parts of the more affluent suburban departments and municipalities, whereas problems concerning integration, unemployment, welfare and social needs seem to vary within the greater Stockholm area. In Östersund, there are relatively few equivalents to these structural patterns and challenges, qualitatively or quantitatively. Neither issues of housing, nor integration, nor education, for instance, pose similar problems here. For cities in the central and northern parts of the country, the most pressing political cause is traditionally to stem the currents of depopulation and deal with national centralisation – in economical, industrial, social, political, cultural and demographic regards.

The labour markets of the two cities also differ, but the main point of relevance for this study is that the sheer size of Stockholm gives many social and political issues quite a different momentum. Stockholm is a more cosmopolitan and politically complex part of Swedish society, compared to Östersund’s slower pace and smaller scale. In terms of size, as can be surmised from table 1 below, Östersund compares to one of Stockholm’s 18 sub-municipal wards.
Stockholm is thus the capital of the country and the main population centre of Sweden. Approximately 1.7 million of the country’s approximately 9 million residents live in the greater Stockholm area, and about 750,000 in the actual primary city. The city is administratively divided into 18 wards, responsible for administering local welfare needs, including preschool childcare. However, given the size of the city and the wards’ lack of political independence, at the time of this study there was also a central municipal educational administration dealing both with non-municipal and, to a lesser extent, municipal childcare and schooling. Needs concerning municipal facilities tend to be evenly distributed and can thus be attended to at the sub-municipal ward level. But non-municipal childcare is more sparsely and unevenly distributed across the city, which makes it harder to achieve equal consideration of the needs of non-municipal facilities for childcare and schooling, making it reasonable to create a central function of this kind.99

The political structure of the city of Stockholm thus influences the logic of this part of the case study. In Stockholm, we have modelled the three-tier analysis on the city’s structure, compared to the two-tier structure of cities of Östersund’s size. In Stockholm, we have opted to interview public officials responsible for childcare provision and supervision both at the city-wide educational administration and at three stadsdelsnämnder [sub-municipal wards]: Maria-Gamla Stan, Skärholmen and Bromma.

For the part of the study that concerns Stockholm, we have chosen to study three facilities in two of the wards: Maria-Gamla Stan and Skärholmen. In each of the wards we describe and analyse one municipal facility, one non-municipal parent co-operative facility, and one non-municipal facility run on a commercial basis. For each, interviews have been conducted with one user family. In the ward of Skärholmen, interviews have also been conducted with the managers of the three facilities. One difficulty in terms of comparison in this respect is the fact that single-facility managers are becoming exceptions in the municipal world of childcare. Instead, intermediate unit or area managers have increasingly assumed the managing responsibility for a greater number of facilities. Following this devel-

99 This administration has, however, as we mentioned in the foregoing since this study was concluded been abolished.
opment, the management function in municipal childcare is today dealt with on the central ward level. The ability for municipal facilities to make autonomous and individual decisions, based on the activities, has decreased. As shown in the study this is partly acknowledged at the service level, a fact that has given some providers an argument to leave the municipal fold.

From the level of the sub-municipal administrative ward down, the structure of the Stockholm study thus mirrors the Östersund study, with the important exception that the ward level in Stockholm is merely an administrative function, indeed a branch, of the city level, whereas in Östersund, the corresponding level is identical to the political level of the municipality. In Stockholm, the ward level does not have much independence in terms of political action. In this context, the ward ought mainly be regarded as a tool for administrative implementation. A primary purpose of the reform on the city level was to decentralise power and decision-making. In the field of childcare, this aim seems not to have been fulfilled, which might be a reflection of the character of the Swedish childcare system. Legal parameters are rather strict.\textsuperscript{100}

Table 1. *Demographic and childcare facility data for the local units of analysis (2002)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ward/municipality</th>
<th>Total population</th>
<th>1-5 year-olds\textsuperscript{101}</th>
<th>Childcare facilities</th>
<th>Non-municipal</th>
<th>Co-ops</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total number</td>
<td>per cent of population</td>
<td>total number</td>
<td>per cent of all</td>
<td>per cent of all</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bromma</td>
<td>59,059</td>
<td>3433 5.8</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skärholmen</td>
<td>31,410</td>
<td>1914 6.1</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maria-Gamla Stan</td>
<td>64,048</td>
<td>2512 3.9</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Östersund</td>
<td>58,000</td>
<td>2626 4.5</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The three Stockholm wards differ in several regards. An introduction to the socio-economic, demographic and welfare character of each unit is pro-

\textsuperscript{100} Cf Almqvist 2001, pp 42-43.
\textsuperscript{101} For Stockholm city and Greater Stockholm, the age span in this column is 0-5.
vided in the following. In table 1, some basic case data are supplied. For easy comparison, the non-Stockholm unit of Östersund is also included in the table.

Table 1 shows the population, the number of children, and the number of childcare facilities in the three administrative wards chosen for study in Stockholm and in Östersund. It also includes the percentage of the population that is between 0-5 years old, as well as the percentage of all childcare facilities that are either non-municipal or co-operative. Here we can note that the Stockholm ward of Maria-Gamla Stan has the smallest proportion of 0-5 year olds, only 3.9 %, and Skärholmen has the highest, 6.1 %, while Bromma and Östersund fall between these two. On the whole, the proportion of 0-5 year olds is greater in both Stockholm City and Greater Stockholm, where it reaches 6.4 % and 7.0 % respectively. In terms of the proportion of non-municipal childcare facilities Maria-Gamla Stan leads with 68 % while both Skärholmen and Östersund are at the low end, with below 20 % each. In terms of the proportion of parent co-ops, Maria-Gamla Stan leads again with 26 %, while Skärholmen has barely 2 %, but all of Östersund’s non-municipal facilities are run as parent co-operatives.

Of the investigated Stockholm cases, the Bromma ward is situated on the western brink of the inner city. It is the most central and most socially and economically well-to-do of the five wards situated west of the central city. This ward rates relatively low in terms of social and cultural heterogeneity. Skärholmen is a southern suburb, at some distance from the central city, nesting up against the municipal boundaries. This part of Stockholm was incorporated into the municipality relatively recently and contains numerous vast public housing projects from the expansive 1960s-70s, still known today under their original name: “the million programme”. (The connotations of this concept, however, have become markedly more dismal today than they were at the time.) The area scores relatively high in terms of social and cultural heterogeneity, but below average levels in terms of affluence. Maria-Gamla Stan, lastly, is one of the inner city’s five wards, mostly made up of half of the large island of Södermalm, but also of the smaller, and in this context less significant, historical old town [Gamla Stan] district. Södermalm island was only populated on a massive scale

---

102 Most official municipal data is available at www.stockholm.se.
during the beginning of the 20th century, making this one of the historically more recent of the inner city additions. As it became urbanised, the island predominantly received poorer sections of the labour population and industrial overflow from the more central northern parts of the city, as these had begun to fill up.

The topography of Stockholm does not provide conditions for the city to sprawl. The main city is built on 14 islands at a place where the great lake to the west, Mälaren, has a narrow outlet into the Baltic Sea and the extensive archipelago eastwards.\footnote{This is often considered the reason for the city’s original location in the 13th century.} For this reason, urbanisation on any scale has to be suburban and extend towards the north or the south. In neither case is a seamless continuity with inner city structural, urban or social landscapes possible to maintain. Urban expansion, therefore – particularly during the 20th century – took place in what could be described as planned leaps, rather than organically and incrementally. Today, the working-class and industrial heritage of the island of Södermalm, however, is mythologised, and (as in the rest of the inner city) gentrification is moving fast. Its two wards are reasonably affluent, with fair levels of socio-cultural heterogeneity, for the inner city percent figures indicate that the rate of childcare enrolment in the entire city of Stockholm today is 93% of all 1-5 year olds.

Östersund, on the other hand, is the regional centre of the county of Jämtland and has about 58,000 inhabitants. The municipality is geographically quite large and covers the city and a number of small surrounding villages. Most people work in the city, and the main working areas are care, trade and communication, manufacturing and mining, as well as electricity generation. About 25,000 people are employed by different municipal branches, out of the total number of 35,000 gainfully employed in Östersund.

There are about 45 different childcare centres run by the municipality of Östersund and about 10 parent co-operative facilities in the city. These are the only two kinds for parents to choose between in this area, there being no private, commercial facilities. The childcare centres are evenly distributed throughout the municipality, but with a larger concentration in the city area. The reason for this could be that many parents work in the central city and the facilities are placed nearby for their convenience. The total number
of children between 1-5 years with access to childcare centres is 2626, and out of these, about 2200 (i.e. 84 %) children are enrolled in a childcare centre.\textsuperscript{104}

There are about 150 children enrolled city-wide in official child minding homes, usually run by a mother with children of her own, caring for a few children (no more than five) in her home. These facilities usually operate longer hours and often have a higher level of flexibility, giving parents with longer or more irregular working hours a possibility to use the city’s childcare. As one of the underlying aims of childcare is to ease the combination of work and family responsibilities, the introduction of the \textit{maxtaxis} enables more parents to work full-time. This means that more children are present in the childcare system, which in turn requires more staff. Another consequence is that pedagogical groups are getting larger. The usual staff-to-child ratio is about 18 children in a group with three preschool teachers. 89 \% of all Östersund children 1-5 years old attend childcare in one form or another.

While the mother, or the father, stays at home with a sibling, the older child is entitled to 15 hours/week at a childcare centre. This is a way to let the children retain their place at the centre and a possibility for them to stay in the group of children that they are familiar with. In addition to this, the local Swedish church in Östersund has for the last 30 years provided a service called \textit{Kyrkis} or \textit{Kyrkans barntimmar} [the Church’s children hours]. This is a way for 3-5 year-olds to spend some time at church for a few hours every week with other children (the amount of time differs between churches but is four hours/week on average). There is also an employee from the church present. Parents are not required to remain with the children during the sessions, and there is no fee. In Östersund, about 50 children are enrolled in this activity each term.

\textsuperscript{104} Most official statistics is available at www.ostersund.se.
Table 2. Set-up and structure of the studied childcare facilities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Facility</th>
<th>Number of children</th>
<th>Number of children’s groups</th>
<th>Full-time pedagogic staff</th>
<th>Children / pedagogic staff</th>
<th>Full-time kitchen staff</th>
<th>Parent resource</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Municipal, Östersund</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1.25</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Co-op (1), Östersund</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3.15</td>
<td>5.7</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Co-op (2), Östersund</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6.25</td>
<td>5.6</td>
<td>1.75</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Municipal, Maria-Gamla Stan</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Co-op, Maria-Gamla Stan</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2 describes in greater detail the set-up and structure of some of the investigated childcare facilities. Normally, a facility with more than a certain number of children will be divided into a number of sections, with about 15-18 children in each. Of the facilities in the table we see that the municipal one in Östersund is the largest, with 90 children divided into five sections, while the parent co-op in Stockholm is the smallest, with only 15 children, followed closely by the parent co-op in Östersund, with 18 children. It is common for parent co-operatives to be small, normally only comprised of one section or 15 to 18 children, while municipal day care centres are often made up of four or five sections, or up to 100 children. There are separate rooms for each section in the municipal day care centres, but they may share playgrounds and cooking facilities. The child/staff ratio is slightly greater in the municipal facilities compared with the co-ops.

As we have discussed elsewhere, the logic of the Swedish childcare system is today not generally challenged. There is a universal childcare system in place that enjoys very high levels of support and legitimacy amongst the Swedish population. The state of research in the field is also fairly extensive. Particularly for the city of Stockholm, that runs its own Office for Research and Statistics [Utrednings- och Statistikkontoret; USK], which is

---

105 Information on the setup has neither been available to us for the remaining for-profit facility in Maria-Gamla Stan nor for the three studied facilities in Skärholmen.
continually producing and analysing data on the municipality’s areas of responsibility. This work is conducted both by in-office analysts and commissioned to academic institutes and social scientists in disciplines such as public economy, political science, cultural geography, statistics, demography and sociology.

In the field of childcare implementation, two major city-wide survey studies have been conducted by this office during the late 1990s, which tie in well with the empirical agenda of this effort (Ivarsson 1996, “What parents think of childcare in Stockholm” [USK-report 1996:3] and Ivarsson 1999, “Preschool care in Stockholm 1999 – what parents think, a comparison with 1996” [USK-report 1999:2]). The aim of the 1999 report is to analyse changes in user views of the field, particularly in light of the 1990s ward reform. The Stockholm part of our investigation draws on the most recent of these surveys. The main reason for this is that these investigations (and other analyses conducted nationally) provide more elaborate, and quantitatively more extensive, results than we are able to accomplish within the present analytical framework.

The logic of Stockholm’s childcare system makes it reasonable to divide the analysis between the levels of the municipality and the wards. This means that the following four chapters are dedicated to the city level and the three investigated wards, respectively. The study’s penultimate chapter on Östersund then wraps up the empirical case study. Interviews have thus been conducted both with the municipal officer responsible for the central coordination of childcare city-wide and with the responsible administrative officers at the wards studied: this means four in-depth interviews with Stockholm administrators, one at the central city-level and three at the different wards. At the intermediate local managerial level (a phenomenon that seems to be in the process of being abandoned as individual childcare facilities in Stockholm today do not necessarily employ local managers responsible only for that one particular facility), three interviews have also been performed in the Skärholmen ward. A set of personal interviews have, additionally, been conducted both in the Maria-Gamla Stan and the Skärholmen wards with parents of children enrolled in municipal, cooperative and commercial childcare, respectively. All interviews are compiled in table 3.

We would like to remind the reader, however, that in Stockholm as well as in most other larger cities that have commercial childcare, there are two
main varieties of this kind of childcare. One is *corporate* (which is also the term we have chosen for it here). This means that childcare is provided by a large corporation that is often active in this as well as other social welfare fields, such as primary and secondary education and care for the elderly. To this sub-category belongs the pioneer private company Pysslingen, but also other corporate players, like Ask & Embla and Vittra.\(^{106}\)

The second for-profit service type bears little resemblance to these corporations except in terms of its legal form. Individual facilities of this kind were earlier usually operated municipally, but later taken over by the staff and converted to small private firms, often on the initiative of local politicians. The resemblance is marginal between care of this kind and corporate childcare. These small one-facility firms instead often work very much along the same lines and with the same goals and aspirations as regular municipal facilities do. The one non-municipal, for-profit facility included in the Skärholmen section of the study belongs to this latter category.

The final empirical chapter thus contains the Östersund case study. Here, interviews have been conducted with the Social Democratic chairman of the Committee for Children and Education [*Barn- och utbildningsnämnden*] on the local political level. On the service level, we have interviewed one manager of a municipal childcare centre just outside the centre of the city, one manager of a parent co-operative centre situated in a small village outside Östersund, and one manager of a *Reggio Emilia*-inspired parent co-op in the central city. Additionally, one parent of a child at each of these three facilities is interviewed.\(^{107}\) Seven interviews have thus been conducted in Östersund and thirteen in Stockholm.

---

\(^{106}\) The parent of a child in for-profit care interviewed in the Maria-Gamla Stan section has been a user of the childcare services of the latter one of these companies.

\(^{107}\) All Östersund interviews were recorded and transcribed. In Stockholm, notes were taken.
Table 3. Set of interviews conducted for the study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>City level</th>
<th>Ward level</th>
<th>Managers</th>
<th>Parents</th>
<th>Σ</th>
<th>Chapter</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Stockholm</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Maria-Gamla Stan</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Skärholmen</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Bromma</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Östersund</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Total number**

| 2 | 3 | 6 | 9 | 20 |

All parents interviewed in both cities were promised anonymity. In the empirical section below, the Stockholm parents in Maria-Gamla Stan will be referred to as parents A, B and C, the ones in Skärholmen as G, H, I, and the Östersund parents as D, E and F. In this way, the integrity of these childcare users is not compromised.\(^ {108}\) We believe that this makes the conditions more favourable to get frankly and openly stated views of the services used.

All five empirical cases are organised and analysed under the following thematic headings: goals, diversity, financing, access, service quality, integration and participation. For the city of Stockholm and its three wards, the political and institutional logic of the field implies that even though all of these headings are present at the outset of the analysis, their presence as we move further down the road becomes more irregular. This is connected to the fact that in a universal childcare system like Sweden’s, the conditions in terms of, for instance, goals, financing, or professional set-up are all but identical across the field. It would therefore be meaningless to repeat the identical observations under each heading time and time again, unless there be obvious local variations impossible to neglect.

\(^{108}\) A listing of all interviews is appended after the text.
4 The City of Stockholm

This initial empirical chapter is devoted to the analysis of the municipal city-level in Stockholm. Given the decentralised character of the Stockholm social service system, the analysis deals with the structural organisation rather than with practical childcare experience or performance. We describe the local institutional picture, using the same subheadings as in the following four chapters.

Goals

As concluded by the major public evaluation of the state of the Swedish welfare state during the last decade, for a long time the main national goals in Swedish childcare have been to stimulate children’s development through pedagogical work: to counter and balance social differences in family and upbringing conditions between children from different parts and segments of the population; and to ease the conciliation of work/educational and family responsibilities.109

Beside these overriding childcare goals, a new activity plan for Stockholm’s childcare was adopted in the fall of 2003, specifying local goals and other parameters. As expressed in this plan, the main legal bases for childcare in Stockholm (and throughout the country) are the School law, the United Nations’ children’s convention and the regulations laid down by the National Agency for Education [LPFÖ 98; Läroplan för förskolan] adopted in 1998, following the shift of responsibility for the childcare sector from

---

the Ministry of Social Affairs to that of Education. The city’s main specified policy goals are:110

- to decrease the size of pedagogical groups by an average of two children
- to give all children the opportunity for language development
- to ensure the stability of the staff and opportunity for skill development
- to make it possible for parents to influence activities

According to the city audit, the currently most pressing current problems for Stockholm’s childcare provision are (a) maintaining quality standards in times of less affluence (b) coping with shortage of trained staff, in particular academically graduated teachers/educators [i.e. förskolepedagog]. Our interviewee in the central city estimates that childcare funding has fallen by 25 % on average in real prices over the last decade, raising, among other things, the ratio of staff per child proportionally.111 There is a consensus in the city, however, that the size of children’s pedagogical groups should not be allowed to grow. Instead, efforts should be made to return to the average ratio levels of the early 1990s.

In Ivarsson’s USK-reports of both 1996 and 1999, participating parents’/users’ satisfaction with the size of their children’s pedagogical groups rates far lower than all other aspects of childcare, except two: fee levels – considered too high – and staff density – considered insufficient. The introduction of the maxtaxa reform in 2002 has possibly removed some discontent with the previous fees. As the second problem basically amounts to another semantic version of the same theme – i.e. staff per child ratio – it is conceivable, or even plausible, that this issue is the main source of user discontent today, regardless of whether it is formulated in terms of the size of pedagogical groups or the number of academically educated staff.

In 1996, the relative dissatisfaction with staff density in Stockholm’s childcare system was 33 %, in 1999 36 %. However, user satisfaction was

110 Budget och verksamhetsplan för Skärholmens SDN 2003 [Budget and activity plan 2003, Skärholmen ward], p 16.
111 Cf Ivarsson 1999, p 7.
reported to be substantially greater. In 1996 51% were happy with staff density, in 1999 47%. As indicated in table 4, ratings were similar for both measured years regarding the size of pedagogical groups: 36-37% dissatisfied, and 53% satisfied or very satisfied.

Considering the high levels of satisfaction with the service, it is possible that parents may have been unable or unwilling to admit, even to themselves (let alone to social researchers trying to evaluate the childcare they use) that their children attend badly functioning, or poorly organised care. This relates to the image of good parenting in contemporary society. What kind of a parent am I, if I willingly allow my child to spend so much of her or his early, formative time in a place where standards are not the highest conceivable? In this perspective, the corresponding low levels would be all but impossible to gauge. We have no time to pursue this question here, but if this is a reasonable assumption about a psychological background to parents’ and other welfare users’ assessments, it may be used as an interpretative framework to analyse the very high and stable levels of support for the general state of welfare in Sweden. As we have observed elsewhere, Swedes appear to take pride in this structure. This pride seems to be a prerequisite for being a good Swede, just as excellent Swedish parenting implies taking pride in a supposedly high quality childcare. Of course this doesn’t preclude the possibility that the welfare services or national structures in question are of an extraordinary, premium quality, but neither does it make that conclusion inevitable.

There are thus built-in theoretical problems in the conventional method of approaching social service quality through levels of stated user satisfaction. The prospects of getting an accurate image of service quality at a local facility in this way are not necessarily promising. If, for instance, parents are indifferent to the issue per se, or have modest, even negative, expectations, scores may still be high, but very difficult to interpret; they might even be meaningless. There are strong reasons to question the superficial view of the rationally evaluating parent in this sense. It is partly worrying that this approach has gained such a dominant position in welfare evaluation. Regarding families who just settled here, with no previous experience of the Swedish comprehensive welfare solutions, another problem would be an uncertainty about the truthfulness of their replies. “Real” service quality levels should thus (if they can be evaluated at all) maybe be assessed by other methods, with a greater degree of participation. But in this context it
is difficult to be specific regarding this. We will briefly discuss the topic further below.

Table 4. *User satisfaction with Stockholm’s childcare conditions 1996 & 1999 (per cent; ranked according to degree of dissatisfaction)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Very satisfied</th>
<th>Satisfied</th>
<th>Dissatisfied</th>
<th>No opinion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1996 / 1999</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional competence of staff</td>
<td>49 / 52</td>
<td>34 / 33</td>
<td>4 / 3</td>
<td>13 / 12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nutrition and meals</td>
<td>44 / 47</td>
<td>38 / 38</td>
<td>5 / 5</td>
<td>13 / 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opening hours</td>
<td>61 / 65</td>
<td>27 / 26</td>
<td>6 / 4</td>
<td>6 / 15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attention given own child</td>
<td>42 / 45</td>
<td>38 / 37</td>
<td>6 / 4</td>
<td>14 / 14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pedagogical materials and play things</td>
<td>34 / 36</td>
<td>44 / 43</td>
<td>8 / 8</td>
<td>14 / 13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children’s safety</td>
<td>22 / 28</td>
<td>41 / 45</td>
<td>9 / 7</td>
<td>31 / 20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group constellations</td>
<td>27 / 27</td>
<td>43 / 45</td>
<td>11 / 12</td>
<td>19 / 16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internal space</td>
<td>24 / 28</td>
<td>44 / 46</td>
<td>15 / 14</td>
<td>17 / 12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>External surroundings</td>
<td>31 / 36</td>
<td>40 / 38</td>
<td>15 / 15</td>
<td>14 / 11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level of staff turnover</td>
<td>33 / 40</td>
<td>29 / 30</td>
<td>17 / 12</td>
<td>21 / 18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fee levels</td>
<td>14 / 13</td>
<td>24 / 24</td>
<td>34 / 38</td>
<td>28 / 25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff density (ratio staff/child)</td>
<td>18 / 20</td>
<td>29 / 31</td>
<td>35 / 33</td>
<td>18 / 16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Size of children’s groups</td>
<td>21 / 19</td>
<td>32 / 34</td>
<td>36 / 37</td>
<td>11 / 10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table adapted from Ivarsson 1999, tables 16-17*

Another side of childcare analysed in the 1996 and 1999 investigations is the ability of service providers to meet demands for parental participation. In table 5, this part of Stockholm’s childcare is described.
Table 5.  *User satisfaction with levels of information and ability to influence 1996 & 1999 (per cent; ranked according to degree of dissatisfaction)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Info about excursions and plans ahead</td>
<td>51 / 54</td>
<td>36 / 35</td>
<td>5 / 4</td>
<td>8 / 7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meetings between parents and staff</td>
<td>41 / 43</td>
<td>37 / 36</td>
<td>7 / 7</td>
<td>15 / 14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff’s ability to meet personal demands</td>
<td>39 / 40</td>
<td>37 / 37</td>
<td>7 / 8</td>
<td>17 / 15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents’ abilities to influence care</td>
<td>29 / 28</td>
<td>34 / 33</td>
<td>10 / 11</td>
<td>27 / 28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daily info concerning your child</td>
<td>35 / 36</td>
<td>40 / 40</td>
<td>13 / 13</td>
<td>12 / 11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table adapted from Ivarsson 1999, table 18*

It is clear from table 4-5 that user attitudes towards childcare in Stockholm are fairly stable between the two points of measure. As mentioned above, the major point of dissatisfaction or worry amongst users concerns decreasing funding, which induces larger pedagogical groups and fewer staff. No other preconditions or aspects of childcare seem to generate comparable levels of dissatisfaction. The issue of service quality, however, is notoriously hard to approach directly. Parents’ views of the service are often used as an indirect tool to assess the quality of the service. Two interesting perspectives in relation to the extreme levels of user satisfaction above, however, are that the deterioration of childcare standards has (a) not been as radical as is generally assumed, or (b) have a spurious causal relation to the issue of funding. A third critical interpretation is that parents have other reasons than those commonly assumed for answering the way they do.

As indicated in the tables, user dissatisfaction with Stockholm childcare appears somewhat marginal; satisfaction levels score very high both years. Read at face value, this is somewhat surprising, considering the common argument that Swedish childcare suffered heavily during the early and mid-1990s. One explanation could be that these blows hit around 1996, so that
user critique may not have gathered momentum at that point in time. In 1999, however, 15% of all parents taking part in that year’s survey reported that preschool childcare had improved during the last year, 28% indicated deterioration and 57% either held no view or considered conditions unchanged. Parents’ views in 1999 thus reflect the conviction, evident both in the municipality and the wider public debate, that the main childcare issue from then on has been funding. In the current public debate the staff-child ratio and concerns with funding overshadow all other considerations. Very few positive or negative comments are voiced publicly concerning the way childcare actually works in a pedagogic, day-to-day sense. Citizens and government alike seem to think of this as a non-issue.

To understand these sentiments, it helps to note that in Sweden, as already mentioned, the national childcare system is the object of some civic and political pride. In a recent survey published by the Stockholm School of Economics, the preschool system ratings are far ahead of all 25 other specified businesses and services in terms of user satisfaction. In the survey, the preschool system was firmly fixed at the top of the list with a satisfaction index of 75.3 on a 1-100 scale, followed first by a gap and then by the satisfaction levels with the national system of pharmacies. (Trailing at the bottom end was satisfaction with the police authority, some distance below privately operated equity and life insurance services.)

Diversity

The city-wide administrative childcare co-ordinator, our interviewee Berg, notes that there are no serious obstacles to alternative (i.e. non-municipal) ways of providing childcare in Stockholm. As implied by table 1 above, public childcare predominates, but other modes of provision are also readily available, under the same legislation and public sources of funding. The legislation that prohibited commercial childcare solutions was removed in

---

112 Ivarsson 1999, p 28. In the 1999 survey on which tables 4-5 are based, a relative proportion of 11,500 out of Stockholm’s approximately 29,000 families with children in childcare were included. In five Stockholm wards all the relevant families were included; in the rest selections were made. The overall reply frequency was an excellent 81%.
113 Dagens Nyheter, February 3, 2004. 30,000 Swedish residents participated in the survey.
1991. Now, the norm seems to be that any mode of provision is acceptable, as long as it remains within legal parameters. The point, Berg points out, is that parents should have a wide range of options in terms of childcare solutions. In densely populated central parts of Stockholm, this freedom of choice seems to be fairly real. In most sub-municipal wards in central Stockholm parents are able to choose between different forms of provision, different local settings and different pedagogical styles. But the variety is not as large in less central areas.

Financing

As in the rest of the country, childcare in Stockholm is financed by a system of municipal childcare vouchers [barnomsorgspeng]. Each Swedish municipality receives funds for childcare from the state at a cost level that covers expenses for provision in the local area. The state funding is marginally adapted to account for local cost variations, but is virtually the same everywhere. In Stockholm, the municipality then either, in the case of municipal facilities, transfers the corresponding funds to the sub-municipal wards, which transfer them to each local unit monthly or, in the case of non-municipal facilities, have the central coordinative administration transfer the funds directly to the individual childcare centre accounts.

Current legislation for this taxation-financed solution has been in place since 1992 (when it replaced earlier legislation to the same end). There are minor differences between the net amounts transferred to municipal and non-municipal childcare providers in the city. For municipal facilities, the city keeps a certain percentage of the funds to cover administrative costs generated by the system. For non-municipal facilities, this is not intended to be the case. Arguments concerning the status of this part of the state funding sometimes arise between municipalities and childcare facilities.114

---

114 For non-municipal care in Stockholm, this administrative “tax” or overhead cost is only a few per cent. In Östersund, it is a great deal heavier, about 25 per cent. This level can hardly be considered motivated, we suggest, but the local non-municipal childcare sector has so far been unsuccessful in trying to make the gap more moderate.
After the introduction of the *maxtaxa* in January 2002, the ability of individual childcare facilities to supplement public funding by fees has decreased.\(^\text{115}\) Before the reform, there were two main options for facilities to improve their economical situation. They could either charge higher fees or rely on unpaid work contributions by members or users. Today, the first of these possibilities has disappeared. The national standard set by the *maxtaxa* does not allow for fees above a certain limit. Since the introduction of the limit in 2004, it remained at SEK 1140 – approximately € 127 (at a 9:1 conversion rate). As we point out elsewhere this has made childcare affordable to the vast majority of Swedish families, particularly given the falling cost to be enrolled in the publicly financed care system both for preschool and 0-6 grade school children for each successive child after the first one. For the second child the original maximum fee was SEK 760 (€ 84) and for the third SEK 380 (€ 42). From the fourth child on there was and is no fee.\(^\text{116}\)

It is worth repeating here that the official long-term aspiration of the Social Democratic party is that all childcare be free of charge. In current rhetoric, childcare is described as being, ideally, a citizenship-based social and political entitlement. The party has taken a first step in this direction by initialising legislation in which 4-5 year olds with a maximum use of childcare of 15 hours weekly are exempted from charge. Within the *maxtaxa* system, there is also regulation in place that reduces fees for 1-3 year olds using childcare less than 30 hours/week; for 4-5 year olds in care over 15 hours weekly; and for school children up to 6\(^{\text{th}}\) grade in wrap-around childcare in the early mornings and late afternoons on regular school days.

Earlier, fee levels could thus be used to deal with altering economical circumstances, or to maintain operational standards that would otherwise have been difficult to achieve. This option was, however, mainly used by non-municipal care givers. Today, this possibility is marginal. Variable fees

\(^{115}\) The two linguistic parts of the concept “max-taxa” are etymologically derived from an abbreviation of the Swedish [or, more precisely: Latin] word *maximal* [maximum] and the word *taxa* [fee or tariff].

\(^{116}\) The primary system is designed for children 1-3 y/o attending childcare full time, i.e. for more than 30 hours/week. It does, however, not merely refer to absolute prices. As is pointed out above, parents are not required to pay the maximum fee if their incomes are too low. The relative cost of the fees for children 1-3 must not exceed 3, 2 or 1 %, respectively, of the family’s combined taxable income.
are still legally allowed, but may not exceed the limits imposed by the max-taxa system.\textsuperscript{117} The second alternative mentioned above, i.e. to use the unpaid work of childcare users, or of members of the staff, or of parent co-operatives, still plays a role in the organisation of Swedish childcare: though mainly at co-operatively run facilities. As indicated below, co-operatives are able to use this means to maintain an edge over municipal facilities. In the latter, this solution is rare. It is not completely unheard of, but cases are few and far between. The main reason appears to us to be that the municipal mode of organisation has no natural way of incorporating this kind of regulated, irregular user participation. Publicly provided welfare services are in this sense defined by a bureaucratic rather than a participatory ethos. The public state or municipal logic is hard to combine with voluntary labour contributions – at least today in Sweden.

Access

As indicated above, the extension and coverage of the childcare system in Stockholm today is good. Accessing care for preschool children generally involves little cost or effort for families. In this sense access appears to be adequate.\textsuperscript{118} The legal pressure on Swedish municipalities to provide child-

\begin{footnote}
\textsuperscript{117} Nor are sub-municipal wards in, for instance, Stockholm permitted to increase fees with the use of any local additions to the max-taxa’s stipulated fees. In September 2003, however, the new Swedish national budget for fiscal year 2004 heralded a 10 % rise in the max-taxa’s cost ceiling, from SEK 1140 to 1260. There is one other aspect that deserves mentioning here, though. Individual non-municipal co-ops have the right to require members to pay a membership fee yearly to the association. This membership fee, however, must not be large enough to risk being considered a regular financial contribution to the running of the service. Common membership fee levels are in the interval of SEK 500-1000 [€ 55-110]. Non-municipal facilities are also able to require that parents/users pay for their child’s nappies and similar consumer goods, within reasonable limits.

\textsuperscript{118} The city of Stockholm adheres to the following principles when admitting children to municipal care: (a) siblings have priority to slots at facilities that their brother(s) or sister(s) already attend, (b) children who have left a certain facility for a period on grounds of parental leave have a right to return to the same facility prior to other applicants, (c) age is decisive; older children are admitted first and other slots are distributed equally at the regular autumn admittance time on grounds of age to children without a slot or who require transfer from one facility to another, (d) children in need of special support are granted a stronger right to a slot than specified by the general “guaranteed-place” policy, (e) consideration is
care was tightened in 1995, when new legislation was adopted requiring that all families were to be offered care for children in the 1-12 age span without undue delay. The relocation of the legal regulations on (as well as the political responsibility for) child care from the social to the educational sector can partly be interpreted as a shift intended to increase the availability of care. As the educational aspect of childcare was emphasised more strongly than before, the argument for general accessibility gained ground. The historical link between childcare access and parents’ paid work was thus weakened. Under this legislation, childcare was seen rather as a political and social entitlement for all families, regardless of occupation or various aspects of social conditions. In 2000, the 1995 legislation was further strengthened, making the right to care even more general and strict.

Other aspects of access are whether there are systematic differences in accessibility between different social strata or whether families with specific needs can be accommodated within the system. Here, our analysis is partly inconclusive. We find no major indications that the local childcare system as a whole should be unable to provide childcare for children from different social backgrounds or with special medical or socio-psychological needs. If the child is able to attend childcare at all, the (legally required) means in terms of extra staff and pedagogical support or supervision for the facility are available in the municipality.

At the time of the present study, there has been no substantial public debate concerning discriminatory practices or treatment in this field. Children with special functional conditions are thus generally cared for within the ordinary childcare system. It is conceivable that tasks of this kind may even be actively sought after by individual facilities, particularly, we assume, if the child’s needs are in the lower part of the needs scale. An effect of the extra staff/support could then be increased staff density, which could be favourable for the whole group. But such considerations are possibly a marginal phenomenon, even if they do exist, both in the preschool and the primary school system.

---

Concerning the issue of social differentiation or segregation in the context of childcare there are no indications that the system actively differentiates between different social groups or families from different backgrounds. Such explicit behaviour would not only be out of the legal bounds of childcare, but would also threaten its universalist ideological foundations. Service is to be provided to citizens and legal residents who demand care, without exception. Of course, these legal ramifications do not in themselves warrant equal access to the childcare system for families from different social strata. In fact, the figures show that – even though there was an increase in the number of 3-6 year olds in childcare nationally during the 1990s from 64 to 82 % – it is apparent that the system is used in a rather non-conformist manner by different social groups. Given this general note, however, parents of Swedish descent, with higher educational levels, higher professional positions, stronger private economies and stronger social networks, are proportionally less inclined to use municipal services than parents from other groups in the population. This ties in with our observations in preceding chapters.

Interestingly these observations seem to contradict the official policy goal of creating meeting places for children and families from different social, ethnic and socio-cultural strata. A relevant question in this context, however, is whether the childcare system should be interpreted as a producer or reproducer of these broader patterns. It seems clear that not even the expanded Swedish universal childcare system provides bars against social segregation per se. But does it improve or worsen the situation? To assess this, contra-factual reasoning would be necessary. At present, we are unable to provide any definitive reply to the question. Both scenarios are conceivable. On the one hand, it seems plausible that the formal universalism of the childcare system does contribute to decreasing social segmentation. Were it not for the fundamentally egalitarian ambition of the system, to make childcare available to families and children from all social groups, the situation could possibly be worse than it is now. To give up on the ambition of social levelling and adopt a different policy goal creating specific

---

120 Cf SOU 2001:79, p 97. In Stockholm, our central level interviewee states that the municipality takes a liberal view on parents’ geographical childcare desires. But generally, parents want childcare in the close vicinity of their homes.
childcare solutions for particular groups would surely, if anything, be a far weaker challenge to the development of social differences.

A more pessimistic interpretation, on the other hand, is that the universalist principles underpinning childcare make discriminatory social patterns harder to discern and thus address politically. We suggest, however, that the former hypothesis is somewhat more plausible. In this study, we have found no clear indications that the childcare system in itself is a main cause of the social demography visible within the system. We would rather assume that the causes of these patterns are external and of a more general kind. The official policy aim to make availability and access as equal as conditions allow is clearly visible in the Stockholm case. Accordingly, it is more likely that the system promotes equal social relations than that it generates hierarchical and segregational practices autonomously. Even if this seems to be the general social and political thrust of childcare, the issue should no doubt be considered seriously. Let us make one last remark concerning the contextual question.

How should one, then, interpret the empirical relationship between the childcare system and its social setting, given the actual differences between the Stockholm wards in terms of institutional and social patterns? The most ready answer is that the local logic or character of prevalent childcare solutions to some extent corresponds with local social, cultural and political patterns. In inner city middle-class wards, childcare seems to be more imbued with the values and needs prevailing in this group. In less socio-economically privileged parts of Stockholm, the local childcare system – illustrated, for instance, by a lower relative proportion of parent co-ops and academically trained staff – seems to cater less to needs and demands of the kind associated with middle-class values in the sector. Childcare could thus be assumed to generally mirror and reproduce its own social context.

But even this may be too simple an answer. The parameters of this investigation prevent us from drawing clear conclusions about this issue. It is conceivable, however, that the idea of a mirror-relationship is misleading. One way to provide a firm ground for this notion, would be to analyse a larger number of middle-class inner-city wards. It is possible that this would uncover differences in style between different but similar demographic and social contexts. One paradoxical element of Stockholm’s childcare system is that families in generally less liberal or conservative parts of the city (such as the culturally and intellectually left-leaning Maria-
Gamla Stan ward) to a greater extent turn to untraditional, non-Social Democratic welfare solutions than families from more liberal or conservative parts do. As will be shown below, the number of non-municipal facilities in Maria-Gamla Stan is exceptionally high. This may be interpreted as an expression of lower confidence in traditional Swedish welfare solutions.

Yet the local area in itself is hardly reputed for its devotion to the neo-liberal privatisation agenda challenging the notion of a publicly run welfare system. The supremely affluent Östermalm ward (which is not included in this study), however, relies on traditional childcare options to a far greater extent. Here, the investment of private time in co-operative childcare, for instance, is not so attractive. In both settings ideology and everyday-life choices thus seem to be somewhat at odds with each other.

Service quality

The service quality of childcare in Stockholm has been touched on in part in tables 4 and 5 above. We have also pointed out that the share of academically trained staff employed in day care tends to be above average national levels. This could be interpreted as an indication of better quality of service. Another aspect that should be mentioned here is the continuous supervision by municipal officers of local childcare facilities – both municipal and non-municipal – conducted to ensure that educational, curricula and social standards are upheld. Physical facilities are also inspected regularly by fire, health and safety inspectors. In 2000, all Stockholm’s childcare facilities were required by the central municipal administration to temporary install technical equipment to monitor air quality. Properties housing childcare facilities are subject to the same yearly legal controls of ventilation and air quality as other real estate properties.

As mentioned above, however, the main indirect indicators of service quality in the sector are often considered to be (a) staff to child ratio and (b) level of staff’s education. In neither case does Stockholm’s performance appear to be exceptionally poor. During the 1990s the child to staff ratio in
childcare increased nationally from 4.2 to 5.4.¹²¹ These indirect factors took a turn for the worse during the 1990s, but the more precise impact on childcare quality – in terms, for instance, of families’ impression that they are provided with excellent care – is hard to assess independently (as is also pointed out by the government’s official 2001 analysis of the whole Swedish welfare sector). Again, tables 4 and 5 above seem to at least point in the direction of fair levels of satisfaction amongst parents in Stockholm with the service they are given. The city’s childcare coordinator – our interviewee – notes that levels of reported satisfaction with different modes of provision are highest for families using child minding homes (the main, but marginal alternative to day care), but that the real difference in satisfaction levels is very small.

As touched on above, there are three professional categories working in the Swedish childcare system: preschool teachers holding an academic degree [förskolepedagog], preschool assistants [barnskötare] with secondary education and unqualified staff (often young people, particularly women, who see this as a temporary job comparable to other unqualified health/care-related work). In Stockholm, the city is sponsoring preschool assistants with secondary education to study for an academic preschool teacher degree. Candidates for this scheme do not have to run up student loan debts, but are instead paid 80% of their regular salary for the three years of the academic programme. The city considers this a way to not only raise the professional competence and status of the staff, but also to indirectly boost service quality levels in childcare practice.¹²²

In 2003, the Swedish minister Lena Hallengren, in charge at the time, suggested that serious thought should be given to the idea of creating a one-year academic programme specifically designed to raise the professional

¹²¹ SOU 2001:79, p 98. The overall financial conditions of the childcare sector during the decade did not, however, change dramatically. A similar amount – about SEK 40 billion (€ 4.4 billion) – was spent on this service both in 1990 and 1999. Ibid., p 97.

¹²² The cost for the city is not modest. Recent estimates put the price tag in the area of SEK 660,000 (€ 73,333, at a 9:1 exchange rate) for each person going through the programme. The number of students is 30-50 each term in Stockholm and the length of the course is six terms. This puts the maximum cost span for the city at the peak of the reform at million SEK 118.8-198 (million € 13.2-22). The argument for this hefty investment is that the shortage of academically educated preschool staff is expected to reach serious proportions in the medium term – not only in the capital, but nation-wide.
competence of preschool assistants in childcare employment. But no major steps towards a reform of this kind have yet been taken. Critics argue that such a step would instead devalue the degree, and thus indirectly the profession. One connected problem is that the professional field of this group of employees has widened since the shift of all six year-olds from preschool to the school system. Preschool teachers are now able to find regular employment in both these sectors. To invest in competence-raising measures for non-academically educated preschool staff thus does not necessarily mean securing qualified staff for the preschool system. With basic academic preschool teacher qualifications, this group may also choose to work at the introductory levels of the primary school system. By adding a relatively modest extra effort in addition to their basic degree, they can qualify as regular teachers up to grades 3-4 or higher in the nine-year primary school, or even continue on to the secondary school level. At this point it is debatable whether preschool pay levels will be able to match the going average levels in primary or secondary education. On the whole, this makes the (very costly) Stockholm initiative politically interesting. It is not quite clear if or to which degree it will serve its purpose.

Integration

The main issue in this section is whether the character and logic of the universally available childcare system in Sweden is helpful or detrimental to social integration. In relation to Stockholm city, our material gives little information in this issue. One conclusion that can be drawn, however, is that in times of scarcity of childcare, varying accessibility could conceivably be of importance. As indicated by other European analyses of the sector, the question of who receives childcare is often related to issues of social integration. It is in many cases obvious that the availability of care is unequally distributed between families with different social, economical and cultural backgrounds. Resourceful middle-class families often seem to be more successful when it comes to using these (and probably other) so-

---

cial services to their advantage. This is surely an integration/segregation-related phenomenon.

In this regard, the Swedish experience is somewhat peculiar. When coverage is nearly complete, and availability all but sufficient, integration problems relating to bare accessibility seem to fade from focus. The question then rather becomes how childcare practice per se connects to patterns of social segregation/integration. Among immigrant Swedes, for instance, this aspect of childcare needs to be systematically addressed. Policy-wise, it is difficult to see how care could be interpreted as particularly conducive to segregation. As we have seen, one of the central aims for childcare (as well as primary schooling) is to provide a place where children and families from different backgrounds can interact. The marginal role played by private primary and secondary schools in Sweden is related directly to the long-standing Social Democratic commitment to non-separatist modes of welfare and education. However, given that local areas in Stockholm exhibit different demographic patterns, we suggest that the childcare system tends rather to mirror local social characteristics, than function as an arena for integrationist policy implementation. In the end, local facilities have to cater to local needs, i.e. enrol local children, and different local areas are not built up in the same way. Socio-economical and geographical segregation are thus facts of life in the greater Stockholm area, as indicated by our choice of wards.

The central Stockholm childcare coordinator notes, however, that city-wide, different social groups do not seem to choose different forms of care on the basis of their social situation. It is more a matter of choosing a style of pedagogy than being tacitly connected to different modes of provision on brute socio-economic or ethnic grounds. The question then becomes: how is this visible in local childcare? We will return to this issue below.

Participation

Participation is a wide and complex concept, with many possible interpretations. In this investigation we have chosen to divide the concept of participation in the following three parts: social, political and economical participation. Social participation indicates the interrelation and interaction between childcare and social context. In Stockholm, as in the rest of Sweden,
the main institutional form of childcare provision is municipal. Often, a substantial majority of available facilities for childcare at any given location are municipal. The question then is to what extent these facilities interact with the local context and allow for parents to take active part in the operation.

Generally speaking, the main institutional format performs rather weakly in this sense. There are neither any strong traditions, nor incentives, for individual day care centres to interact continuously or systematically with any other local civil interests or welfare institutions – particularly non-municipal. There is, however, substantial interaction primarily within this municipal welfare sector, but also to some extent across this and other sectors. What broader social interaction that does exist mainly seems to take place “within the family”. This is hardly surprising, since municipal childcare in principle belongs to one and the same organisational and institutional structure. Regulations, improvements, incentives, policy styles and institutional characteristics valid for one Stockholm facility are more or less directly valid for all others as well. Reform in the sector concerns the whole sphere.

Similarly, co-operative facilities seem to interact mainly within their own family or sphere – where contacts and channels for cooperation and synchronisation are present between childcare facilities as well as across this and other co-operatively managed services. In greater Stockholm there is even, as mentioned earlier, an organisation designed specifically to cater for and safeguard the interests and needs of the co-operative sectors: the SEFIF. This organisation is a main tool for the sector to influence the municipality, but activity levels are not very high. There are, however, regular reference meetings between different SEFIF-partners and between the organisation and the municipality. Workshops on various aspects of non-municipal welfare provision are also organised for members. But today, there are no rallies, campaigns or mass mobilisations.

This other “world” is thus set somewhat apart from the municipal welfare sector. Here, social participation and energy is significantly stronger, but mainly manifested in the form of parents’ participation in the daily running of individual childcare facilities. In broad contextual terms of social participation, the situation seems to us to resemble that of municipal services. Extensive neighbourhood involvement – either of local childcare
facilities in other aspects of local life or the other way around – is very rarely developed even in the co-operative sector in Stockholm.

The non-municipal for-profit sector is yet another separate world, connecting, when at all, mainly to other levels or institutions of the market sphere. Social participation in this sense seems to occur mainly vertically and vary somewhat across the different worlds of provision, but the differences are usually fairly modest, except for the special involvement required by families with children in co-ops. It should be noted that a secondary issue applies to the structure of sphere-organised participation. If it mainly occurs within each “family” of services, then we must ask ourselves how these spheres in turn are each organised in terms of promoting the social good of participation. It appears (as will be further discussed below) as if the for-profit sphere of social welfare is the obvious low-performer. Regarding the remaining two spheres, however, we would suggest that both of them are hypothetical high-performers.

The co-operative sphere naturally emphasises and revolves around the value of social participation, and expects high levels of input from users. One problem here, though, is the relative marginality of the sector itself in society. Strictly speaking, the economy of welfare is not social in this way. Under these circumstances, the co-operative sphere is unable to function as a main force towards promoting social participation. In order to strongly increase social participation in welfare production by way of supporting the co-operative sector, the sector first has to expand its scope considerably. For the municipal sphere, the opposite is true. The scope and centrality of this sector is not an issue. The municipal sphere defines the applied field of social welfare in contemporary Sweden. But even though there seems to be a growing emphasis on social participation, the municipal sphere cannot be compared to the degree of user participation in the co-operative sector. Thus, it appears reasonable to suggest that both of these spheres could be used as starting-points for any serious attempt to strengthen this aspect of social welfare production. The co-operative sector can surely offer ways to accomplish this, whereas the municipal sphere is in a situation to provide the required institutional clout. In neither case, however, is there any record of (or hope for?) more developed social participation in a horizontal, local neighbourhood sense.

The image of economic participation appears rather homogenous throughout today’s Swedish childcare system. As we have seen, funding for
the service is provided by the national, central government through the means of taxation. After the introduction of the maxtaxa, the minor financial contributions from parents and other non-state sources have become almost symbolic. Participation on this level is thus not particularly significant. It is not possible to use financial means to promote involvement or “participation” in today’s Swedish childcare system. There are no legal provisions for alternate schemes in this sense, regardless of provider. As noted, all childcare services are integrated in one and the same national funding system, and the system covers this entire welfare service sector. Parents do, however, contribute their unpaid time to co-operative childcare, and no doubt receive better service in return.

Political participation, lastly, comes in different shapes across different types of service providers. The municipal sector is effectively a part of the Swedish political structure. Childcare provided municipally is thus in a sense already politically orchestrated. The aims and logic of municipal care are manifestations of local and national policy goals. It should be noted here that in Stockholm, and most other parts of Sweden, the municipal political landscape mirrors the national scene. The same parties are involved in the same ideological struggle on both levels. (In Sweden, there are no strictly separate regional political bodies like in many other European countries. There is a regional council level, but constitutionally these councils are referred to as “secondary municipalities” – i.e. besides the 290 primary municipalities. The same party structure organises this political level as well with, however, a certain presence of independent local activist policies and visions.)

Given the universal nature of Swedish childcare, in order to exert a real influence on the operation of childcare, political initiatives and incentives would have to be made through national political structures. As we have seen, municipalities have limited scope for independent action. Voting for a certain party (and indirectly the views and visions it entertains for this sector) in the municipal elections does not translate too readily to political influence. At this point in time, it is difficult for municipalities to fundamentally alter or redesign local childcare practices. Change can be accomplished (and has indeed occurred in some non-Social democratically governed well-off suburban municipalities around Stockholm – like Täby,
Solna and Nacka), but in such cases always within legal parameters and in line with the aims provided nationally.\textsuperscript{124}

These changes have therefore concerned the structural balance of provision in the field, rather than the way childcare works. Even in municipalities with a non-Social Democratic majority, the primary conflict has concerned public or private provision of care, and not the quality of care.\textsuperscript{125} This illustrates the fact that this substantial aspect of care is not a bone of political contention in Sweden today. One reason for this is perhaps that the conventional argument for the abolition of municipal provisions of welfare is efficiency. Productivity, the standard market argument claims, increases on all fields of production if market mechanisms, \textit{ceteris paribus}, are allowed to do their work. But market thinking is perhaps harder to establish in the field of social welfare services than elsewhere. As implied above, it is difficult to offer a relevant definition of the important issue of measuring quality and productivity. The system is thus organised from the top down. Does this make it monolithic? Today, we would claim that this is not the case, not to the same degree as earlier. Municipalities appear to be sensitive to public charges of childcare being badly run or overcrowded. The overall impression is that they pride themselves on well functioning care and seem strained and defensive when the local system falters. Given the national legal requirement that childcare should be generally available, lack of success in the field is both morally deplorable and even vaguely criminal, although legal sanctions are absent.

It would, in a similar vein, be difficult to claim that the central government is insensitive to families’ and children’s care needs. On the contrary, we interpret childcare as a main locus for the state’s attention. Nor are we able to discern any indications that this is undergoing any process of fundamental change. In every Swedish election campaign in the last decade,

\textsuperscript{124} As touched on above, in the northern municipality of Täby, for instance, all municipal provision of childcare was abolished in the 1990s on ideological grounds, to the dismay of the national Social Democratic minority government. The support for this radical move amongst the local electorate was and is, however, varied.

\textsuperscript{125} Again, this main ideological difference is a function of the corporatist nature of the main structural divide in Swedish post-war politics. This divide does not make for a reasonable level of recognition of the fact that non-public provision must not be market-driven in the commercial sense. It is by and large blind to the co-operative alternative, because of its position outside the division between labour and capital.
the rhetorical improvement of the welfare fields health, schools and (child)care have been central political elements. All contending parties have had to deliver systematic thinking and reform (which generally equals “maintenance”) strategies for this sector of society. In Sweden, this is a highly visible political rallying-point.

Some remarks on the City of Stockholm

In conclusion of this chapter, there is no simple way to avoid the observation that, organisationally speaking, Stockholm seems to be running a tight ship. In the following three chapters, we will have the opportunity to investigate whether the picture we have painted here of the central municipal level of childcare provision corresponds to operational and user experience. It can, however, be worth pointing out before we continue that the political set-up of the city of Stockholm, by virtue of its sub-division into wards, makes for a different approach to childcare policy than in smaller Swedish municipalities. Here, the main question seems to be to what extent the municipality is able to channel and adapt national legislation and policy structures to a relatively greater variety of social needs and conditions.

Given the political organisation of welfare, the City Council is thus less practically involved than could be expected in what is purportedly a municipal system of care. This reflects the structure of the contemporary Swedish government in an interesting way, with a number of formally independent state agencies responsible for monitoring and supporting particular political sectors and social activities. Reformulating a current social scientific catchphrase, this could be described as soft government. Similarly, the Stockholm City Council has little influence over ward provisions for care. The system is structurally unified only in “hard” policy matters, not in terms of applied problem solving or handling of specific cases. Let us now turn to the specifics of childcare.
5 The Maria-Gamla Stan ward

This first chapter on micro-level childcare practice in the ward of Maria-Gamla Stan in central Stockholm partly serves as an introduction to the actual practice of every-day care in today’s Sweden. In this chapter, we will hear the different voices of both the local ward authority and users of local care services. In order not to fragment the narrative unnecessarily, chapters 5 through 8 will primarily be descriptive and our main conclusive arguments will be elaborated in the final chapter 9. Given the focus of the text on the nature of Swedish childcare, we also feel that too heavy a weight should not be placed on the analysis of each particular local case as such. We are rather interested in the broad patterns that evolve from the overview of the different cases.

Goals

The overriding pedagogical, educational, developmental, cognitive, social and political structure of goals for Swedish childcare cover, as indicated elsewhere, the entire sector, regardless of who provides the care or how operations are in fact run. Local facilities can only develop or alter goals within the basic national parameters.

One aspect that deserves to be elaborated here, though, is that the introduction, in the late 1990s, of the intermediate zero-grade for six year-olds between preschool and primary school has led to a more coherent institutionalisation of pedagogical goals. The national preschool educational programme LPFÖ 98 adopted by the National Agency for Education has shifted the attention from preschool matters only to the integration of preschool
primary school perspectives in the statutes. The political ambition is to provide a comprehensive body of policy that treats children’s development as continuous and ongoing all through childhood, not as consisting of radically different phases that should be seen as separate entities, subject to different modes of thinking or dealt with in isolated professional and institutional contexts. One implication of the new mode of goal formulation is that greater stress is placed on the educational agenda of childcare, compared to the traditional approach, which made a point of childcare’s non-educational, sensu strictu, nature. As we shall see, however, the value of this change is disputed. There are those who hold that (some) children may not be mature enough for this change to make sense. Critics note that the reform may also (or, indeed, ought primarily) be interpreted as economically motivated.

Diversity

The argument, according to our interviewee for this case study, the Maria-Gamla Stan ward’s administrative official Anita Keuter, in favour of having different forms of childcare provision is the same as on the city level (and indeed as in the rhetoric on all levels of government): to ensure alternatives of choice for families who desire childcare. In this inner city ward, this has surely also been achieved. Keuter describes this in terms of preferences concerning location, ideology and pedagogical styles.

In 1999, the proportion of non-municipal childcare facilities in Maria-Gamla Stan was exceptionally high, almost 50%. In 2002, the rate had decreased to a more conventional 36%. The availability of different forms of childcare in the ward is thus in line with the goal of full and variable childcare coverage. Our interviewee, Keuter, points out that a very large

---

126 Cf Ivarsson 1999, p 12.
127 Cf Ivarsson 1999. In 1985, the Swedish parliament passed legislation requiring full coverage to be available no later than 1991. The following real expansion was somewhat slower. Swedish municipalities had substantial difficulties in keeping pace with the soaring reproduction rates during the late 80s and early 90s.
It may be worth mentioning here that the central parts of the Maria-Gamla Stan ward (i.e. without the later addition of the adjacent former Hornstull ward) scored an exceptional 99%
proportion of the ward’s facilities are situated in one particular residential area built in the 1980s on industrial grounds around Södra station (the South Stockholm railway station). During the 1990s, this area had a high concentration of young families. The children of these families have reached adolescence today. The need for childcare has thus fallen steadily since 1997. Keuter reports that since then the number of places provided in childcare has dropped by 700. This change appears dramatic, compared to the 2002 1-5 y/o children cohort of 2512 children in the ward. Many of the disappeared facilities/places have been municipal, but this is also a possible explanation for the relative decrease of non-municipal centres between 1999 and 2002. It seems as if the proportion of non-municipal facilities taken out of operation could be even larger.

In theory, there is no waiting time in the ward to get a place in childcare, but in practice waiting may still occur since families “have become used to having a facility right outside their doorstep”. As Keuter points out, however, distances within the ward are very modest. In the most extreme cases, parents may have to travel 2-3 kilometres from their homes to reach their respective facility. But normally, distances are much shorter. The ward has excellent public transportation means: buses and underground. This tendency amongst some families to prefer waiting for a slot at a first-choice facility near the home could be interpreted as an access or diversity problem. In reality, however, the difficulties should not be overstated; it does not necessarily require great sacrifices on the family’s part.

Moreover, the parental insurance scheme can be helpful for parents with children waiting for a place in care, since it is very flexible. It requires no planning ahead. Every two weeks parents claim the benefit report, indicating to what extent they want to use it (how many days during each week and how large a part of each day), to the local public insurance office. With

in terms of childcare enrolment in 1998/99 (Ivarsson 1999: 4), making this the highest-rater in Stockholm at the time. This can partly, we suggest, be explained by the demographic change wrought by the production of a new large residential area, Södra station, during the mid/late 80s in the ward.

At this point, Stockholm’s childcare system had not yet expanded to today’s scope, which also sheds a good deal of indirect light on the large amount of non-municipal childcare in the ward into the 90s. There were simply nowhere near enough facilities to cope when demand dramatically went up. So parents went into private childcare production on a massive scale.
some foresight, parents are thus able to keep the window of opportunity for childcare admittance open for quite some time. Half a year is not an exaggerated period. Should admittance be given early, the remaining insurance days can be saved and spent until the child’s eighth year. It is easy to see how this makes for certain flexibility on the part of families’ choice of date for enrolment of their children in care, given that employers are happy to live with the same flexibility.

Another change in the overall conditions for childcare of conceivable importance here is the introduction of the maxtaxa-system. As mentioned earlier, the logic of this reform effectively removed one of the competitive tools formerly used by different forms of non-municipal childcare: to – in the co-operative case – offer fees lower than municipal tariffs, and make up for the loss of funding by using parents’/members’ unpaid labour or – in the for-profit case – finance higher quality standards with higher fees. Both of these alternative methods to finance childcare provision were forced to conform to the change, and facilities have no doubt been discontinued under the pressure of this tightening of financial conditions. Locally in Maria-Gamla Stan, however, the main reason for changes over the last decade in the childcare system is surely demographic.

Another aspect of the diversity-availability theme pointed out by Keuter is the uneven distribution of ability and willingness in different forms of childcare provision to cope with children with special emotional, cognitive, pedagogical, psychological and social needs. She reports a marked increase in the number of children in this group over the last decade. But the main part of the group does not necessarily include children with clinical disorders. Instead, Keuter gives the impression that the number of children between those clinically defined and those functioning well has increased. It is not possible for us to assess this argument independently. Keuter primarily links the change to altered economical circumstances for childcare in general, and mainly to the fact that during the 1990s a larger number of children were attended to by fewer staff. But she also offers the interesting interpretation that staff in municipal childcare “today work a lot more consciously with taking care of each individual”, hinting that improvements in professional approach has made it possible to give each child more attention. The pedagogical approach to the way children function, both personally and socially, is thus believed to have developed strongly during the 1990s.
The group indicated by Keuter consists of children who have difficulties adjusting to the social and pedagogical day care environment and children with unusually high levels of stress, worry or otherwise “nervous” behaviour. These children, as well as those with clinically diagnosed developmental disorders, are to a larger extent cared for in municipally run childcare. Municipalities are obliged to care for all children, as opposed to non-municipal facilities. Of course, there are no formal obstacles to the enrolment of these children in co-operative and other non-municipal care, but in the end, it seems as if the municipal sector is more practically open in this sense. This suggests that there may be quality-related differences between municipal and non-municipal facilities, given the greater pedagogical burden carried by the former in this regard, though this difference is hardly more significant than the quality difference caused, say, by the ability of co-operative childcare facilities to call in members/parents to replace staff on sick leave. This is a formidable asset. In municipal day care, the consequences during the harsh 90s of staff being sick and unfit for work were more often than not temporarily understaffed groups or facilities. In non-municipal forms of childcare this contingency may be handled without sudden losses of pedagogical density.

Financing

Childcare in Maria-Gamla Stan is part of the national financing system. Keuter reports that there is a financial difference between different forms of provision, with, as we mention above, the municipal sector being slightly worse off than the non-municipal. If non-municipal facilities are able, for instance, to dramatically cut costs (for rents, food, commodities, activities, wages, pedagogical materials etc), they can use the surplus to change the staff/child ratio, maintain smaller children’s groups or make extra activities. Keuter assumes that parent co-ops have the best position in this sense, with their ability to use unpaid pedagogic labour. She notes that the aspiration and ongoing effort of the ward is to minimise these differences, but is unable to be more precise in terms of how this should be brought about.

The prevailing political logic seems to be an impediment to bridging this gap. It is not politically viable today to legally or economically favour municipal solutions in this field of social welfare (even if this without doubt
was the case earlier). And the main way to improve infra-structural conditions for municipal childcare, is through legislation or funding hikes, measures that any facility could take advantage of. These solutions cannot be tailored to fit municipal care exclusively. Logically speaking, it appears as if this difference between the different sectors has little to do with political provisions made for the childcare sector in general. Non-municipal and non-public solutions are rather able to use what amounts to extra-political resources according to their different logics. Associational organisations may use resources related to their own sphere, and market-oriented solutions are able to draw on market-related resources and maybe a more flexible, cost-effective approach. Municipal facilities are unable to compete in any of these fields, whereas alternative facilities are free to immediately and fully take advantage of any accommodations that are introduced for the whole sector. Competition is in this regard tilted in favour of non-municipal solutions. In Stockholm, finally, approximately 20 % of the total municipal revenues go towards financing childcare.

Access

As mentioned above, access to childcare in Maria-Gamla Stan is ready and easy. No waiting time is required today to get a place in local care. Of all Stockholm wards in 1999, childcare users/parents in Maria-Gamla Stan (which then still consisted of two wards) received medium/above medium ratings in terms of adjusting opening hours to family needs. Our interviewee Keuter notes that in the ward parents may demand municipal childcare for any period and amount of time between 6.30 am and 6.30 pm. The ward also manages a night-open childcare facility seven days a week for parents working nights and/or weekends.

A problem implied by the fluctuating demand for childcare (cf above) in the ward is that the number of required physical facilities constantly changes. Given the shrinking size of the local childcare sector over the past few years, the situation in the ward is good in terms of available leases on proper facilities. As the number of small children in the inner city parts of

---

Stockholm is now increasing, however, and as the municipal policy goal is to reduce the size of each pedagogical group at the rate of approximately 10%, new facilities will be needed. Keuter envisages that this will be a challenge for the ward. The municipal policy is that the cost of individual leases should be paid with the regular funds received by each facility, under a certain (fairly high) commercial limit. If leases for day care centres (regardless of provider) that incur costs over this level are contracted, extra funding may be applied for from the municipality.

There is thus an incitement for the city to have a certain amount of control over how leases are contracted. Even many co-operatives sub-rent their facilities from the city, which controls the first-hand lease. Historically, this has been a convenient solution, not least because Swedish municipalities have traditionally run their own real estate and housing companies, owning large amounts of primarily residential property. It has thus been fairly easy to make general or individual agreements between these two municipal areas of responsibility regarding leases for childcare facilities. In the past, relatively speaking, a larger number of childcare centres were located in municipal properties. During the last non-Social Democratic City Council period 1998-2002, radical measures were taken to sell off much of this property, which is claimed, among other things, to have made it substantially harder to procure facility leases. In this – as well as other welfare sectors such as care for the disabled, elderly or mentally ill – private property owners in central parts of Stockholm are markedly less eager to arrange favourable (if any) contracts with the city or the wards.

This corresponded well with the earlier non-Social Democratic municipal coalition’s goal that social welfare should not necessarily be conceived of as a public matter. As things stand in Stockholm today, however, it seems clear that a private housing sector is less prone to contribute to general social welfare needs in this particular sense. Since the Social Democrats together with their coalition partners – the left and the greens – regained municipal power in 2002, the trend has been to stop and maybe revert this development in the local housing sector and real estate market.
Service quality

As already observed, it is difficult to provide a simple definition of the concept of “service quality” in this field of social welfare. We therefore address this issue by indirect means. In Maria-Gamla Stan, according to Keuter, the level of academically trained pedagogical staff in 2003 stands at 53%. This seems like a reasonable level, not least in quality terms – given that there is a positive correlation between higher levels of education and quality. As a high-status inner city ward, Maria-Gamla Stan has a relatively strong professional market pull in the sector, which may explain this high level.

As non-municipal facilities are non-publicly provided, the level of supervision differs between the two modes of care. Municipal care is regulated by political structures that are in turn transparent. Even so, discontent amongst users is, as shown above, very limited. In terms of quality, municipal facilities may have a slight edge, due to the fact that they are supported by a larger municipal framework of institutions. It is therefore likely that the specialised help needed to handle difficult situations will be more readily available. Professional psychological, clinical, social work and/or educational assistance is comfortably present for this sector in a way that one can not expect in non-municipally run care, partly for reasons of volume and partly because these lack the width of municipal social service provision obligations.

However, one role played by the central municipal administration for non-municipal childcare and schools is to provide exactly this kind of assistance.130 In addition, there are also non-public resources for these tasks available for non-municipal care facilities. In the end, the difference may not be significant. It is also conceivable that the structural edge of municipal care in terms of permanent special resources is less obvious today, after many years of economic downscaling in the public sector. Whether problems of this sort are more effectively solved with permanent institutional means like these or by momentary mobilisation, individualised psychological efforts etc is another issue. Our material provides no information on these matters. Nor is there any debate that brings these things to the public

130 Again, this body has since been abolished.
mind. We therefore find little reason to suspect any relevant differences between different forms of provision in this area.

Integration and participation

One aspect of institutional integration in childcare in Stockholm is the recent reform of the school-preparatory zero-grade for six year-olds. These children, who were earlier part of preschool childcare, have now been integrated into the school system. This has brought the introduction of new pedagogical and educational modes of thought designed to care for this threshold age group. The zero-graders now attend school instead of preschool, but possibly more in terms of where they spend their time than what they spend it on. The educational dimension of zero-grade schooling is very preparatory and rather indirect. In a sense, this could be interpreted as a softer model for transition than what was possible when there was a more radical institutional difference between preschooling and schooling proper. The change in environment for each individual child thus occurs a year earlier, but the step is reasonably shorter and less emotionally and socially dramatic.

In terms of social integration, little evidence for discriminatory practices can be found in our material. Given the fact that childcare is universally available in the Maria-Gamla Stan ward, it seems far-fetched to suggest that it is unequally distributed. The policy problem does not effectively arise. It seems inevitable to conclude that virtually all families requiring care have excellent possibilities of finding a satisfactory solution to their need for care. There is still a preponderance of provision catering to parents with conventional office work hours, but even in this regard, the local framework is fairly accommodating.\(^\text{131}\) As the basic system stands, the cost and effort involved for parents or other interested parties to meet demands of this kind are not prohibiting. The legal framework itself presents no major obstacles to initiatives in this vein.

If there are any systematic differences between different population segments’ relations to childcare in the ward, these social patterns should be

\(^{131}\) One potential criticism could be that opening hours should be more flexible.
interpreted as indirect. Being a high-status, and relatively affluent ward, Maria-Gamla Stan is not representative of the demographic or socio-economical set-up of the entire city. But the provision of local childcare rather exists under these conditions, than creates them. In an indirect sense, this is illustrative of the criticism that the group that primarily benefits from a universal and comprehensive welfare regime is the well-educated and well-positioned middle-class. We have no possibility to further explore the mechanisms behind this phenomenon here. Suffice it to mention, however, that ever since the public childcare system began to be perceived as a self-evident and widely accessible part of Sweden’s welfare system in the late 1960s and early 70s, the middle-class has generally been the first group to use it to its advantage.132

According to Keuter, there are numerous ways for parents to participate in and influence the way in which childcare is provided. Like schools, all municipal childcare facilities have regular meetings with parents for discussion and exchange of views regarding how care ought to be organised. Parents at a day care centre also usually organise a parental board to articulate families’ views and represent them in contacts with both the facility manager and staff and the municipality. Keuter stresses that there is also a forum for exchange of views on a municipal level, where municipal politicians and ward administrative officers meet with parent representatives.133 After the municipal and national elections in 2002, such meetings have, for instance, taken place to discuss the yet unfulfilled election campaign promise that the size of children’s pedagogical groups should decrease.

In terms of interaction of different types of facilities with the local social context, nothing substantial can be added here to what is already conveyed under the corresponding heading in the previous chapter. The same goes for the issue of participation. One aspect of the ward’s ability to function well emphasised by Keuter, however, is the fact that all social service branches relating to children and children’s needs are located in the same building. In-house knowledge of the conditions of the ward’s 1-20 year-olds is there-

---

132 As Möller notes in the mid-90s, the system, regardless of provider, had by then acquired an obvious orientation towards this group’s social trait and values. 1996, p 41.
133 On a more abstract organisational level, there is a corresponding forum for exchange of views between officials and bodies like the SEFIF, i.e. national and local interest organisations in the sector.
fore unusually comprehensive. She stresses that this arrangement both makes it easier to follow up on the development of individual children/adolescents and radically shortens the distance between different branches of welfare. This could, we feel, be conducive to a more integrated approach to children’s needs throughout their early years. As the coordinator rightly points out, it is better not having to move families between different bureaus at different places in the ward.

One last aspect of social integration for local childcare – in terms of social interaction – mentioned by Keuter is that both police and fire brigade officers regularly visit facilities to discuss safety issues and how to respond to different types of crises with the children. As this, as far as we know, is a tradition throughout the country it does not, however, set Maria-Gamla Stan apart. The same practice exists in the other local cases.

User experience of municipal childcare in Maria-Gamla Stan

The parent/user interviewed for this section has one child of three who is attending a regular municipal childcare facility in the second year, and who has earlier been enrolled at a for-profit centre. The working name of this interviewee is parent A. For the three local parent interviews in Maria-Gamla Stan (as well as for those in Skärholmen), we have chosen to focus on some primary aspects relevant from a parental point of view: service quality, access, participation and, partly, changing conditions.

Regarding service quality levels, parent A is very content with the care provided. The facility has three departments, with up to 17-18 children in each one. The group of child A is organised according to the “sibling-

134 Technically, the facility in question does not belong to Maria-Gamla Stan, but to the adjacent Katarina-Sofia ward. This choice of interviewee and facility was, however, more convenient for us to make. Both the physical and political distance is minute, which makes the exception quite reasonable.
135 The identities of parents A-C (as well as D-F and G-I) are known only to the project’s researchers. All parents will, for reasons of simplicity, be referred to as ‘she’, but this linguistic practice will not necessarily be a reflection of the interviewee’s gender. Nor will any social or cultural traits be unnecessarily disclosed.
principle” – i.e. age-integrated – and there are three employees. The group of staff is very stable. Two of these women have been working together for fifteen years, and the third joined the other two eight years ago. Parent A considers the staff very competent. She is not quite sure, but guesses none is a preschool teacher. She wonders, however, at the work ambition and loyalty in the group, considering the very modest pay levels in the profession. She estimates that these employees earn in the vicinity of SEK14,000 [€ 1556] a month (a figure that indeed indicates that it would not be a question of preschool teachers). The manager of the facility, with its three pedagogical groups, is also the manager of two or three other facilities and present at this particular one only once a week. Parent A cannot recall that any of the staff has been ill or absent since the family enrolled at the facility. The need for temporary staff thus appears marginal. We have no information on what would happen if the need were to be more pronounced.

The competence and professional dedication of the staff is obvious in the way activities are structured. Each day in the week, parent A observes, is thought through. There is a model for what children should work with and how each week should be spent. There are, for instance, regular outdoor activities. Wednesday is excursion day. This day, the children have to be dropped-off at a certain time, and may not arrive at any point during the morning, which is ordinarily optional. The staff’s views on acceptable dropping-off and picking-up behaviour is flexible. There is a willingness, parent A feels, to adapt to changes in time schedule, even at short notice.

The children, parent A states, always have something new they have worked with to bring home in the afternoon. The days seem to be spent in different creative areas, such as drawing, building, making music, painting, using natural materials, water etc. The facility is located in its own separate building. It is next to a park area with a manned, municipally run playground [parklek] with live animals and a barbeque, and, in the other direction, Stockholm’s great lake Mälaren is situated a couple of hundred meters away. On Wednesdays, these two are both popular places for excursions. Many stories are told of how the ducks and swans in the lake have been fed with crumbs. But the private yard of the facility is also very functional and has its own playground. In the winter, there is sleigh riding in the small hills at the back of the facility, on the way to the parklek – which also has a great slope for the older children.
This kind of municipal playground/park touches on an element of the Swedish childcare system not discussed before. A digression is therefore perhaps motivated here. At the particular parklek mentioned above, there is also a branch of the öppna förskolan (the open preschool). We have so far left this aspect of care out of the analysis, since it is of a completely different kind than regular childcare. Open preschool facilities are generally – but not always – connected to the old public institution of the municipal parklek. Here, younger preschool children (generally 0-3 years old) who do not attend childcare are able to take part in preschool-resembling activities, like playing and singing with other children of the same age. Open preschools are municipally staffed and usually operate for a few hours in the morning, often outdoors at the adjacent, always available parklek. In Stockholm, this is a popular meeting place for those on parental leave. There are about 40 of these establishments in Stockholm today. At the peak of the system, there were about 200.

The style of these open preschools is rather laid-back. There are no application systems or waiting lists, no registrations to attend are necessary beforehand and there are no fees. They are simply there for people with children of the right age. As they are generally located at parks where there is a parklek, parents and children are able to hang out and have coffee, cakes and ice-cream at non-commercial prices. Technically speaking, neither the parklek nor the open preschool are parts of the childcare system as such. There is no national legislation regulating operations but the threat to have the service shut down or reduced in times of economical hardship regularly creates uproars in local opinions. Families seem to be very appreciative of these places in Stockholm. They ought maybe rather be seen as a general, supplementary welfare service for families with young preschool children. In Östersund, however, this is also a field for the involvement of churches and other social actors in the broader childcare sector. In Maria-Gamla Stan, for instance, there are a few open preschools of this kind organised by the local Swedish church, as well as by other confessional orientations. But we are unable to assess the relative proportions between municipal and other open preschool providers. Since there is no registration for this service, we also lack figures concerning the amount of families taking advantage of it.

The municipal staff and facility studied in Maria-Gamla Stan, our interviewee parent A points out, is open to parents’ views. In the afternoon, she
goes on, there are excellent possibilities to get an account of what the individual child and the whole group have been up to during the day. Communication is clear and direct and no members of staff appear to feel threatened by parental engagement or curiosity. Parent A assumes this has to do with the group of staff feeling secure in their professional identity. There is no question that each child is seen and his or her needs adequately recognised by the staff. Relationship patterns between staff and children seem to be reliable and stable. The only real criticism of the facility parent A volunteers is that the size of the pedagogical groups could be smaller. At a level of, say, 15 children (instead of 18-20) in the group, conditions would probably be ideal.

Apart from the ongoing every-day discussions, there are also the conventional meetings between all parents and staff once every term. Our interviewee considers these meetings to be held in a constructive and relaxed manner. Views are never ignored. In the spring, there is a traditional picnic excursion with all the families at the facility. Each child also has an individual “development and assessment plan”, that is defined together with the parents and followed-up on regularly. Participation levels are thus, we feel, as ambitious as can be expected from a non-co-op. There is little interaction, however, between this facility and the local environment (as in all other modes of Stockholm childcare, showing how the world of childcare is a world unto itself, or maybe rather: three differently sized worlds unto themselves).

Our interviewee, finally, has no way of assessing if any structural changes have affected this facility’s childcare performance over recent years. As a municipally employed schoolteacher in the Maria-Gamla Stan ward herself, though, she has some insights into the system. She is thus aware of the overriding quality-securing programmes that apply to the entire municipal welfare sector and assumes that these work for the facility as well.

As a recent user of for-profit childcare in Maria-Gamla Stan for the same child, she is also able to compare these two modes of provision. Her criticism of the first solution is severe. Her discontent with the poor ambitions and low standards at the facility where the child spent a year is wide and scorching. She even refers to this as an “underclass” establishment. One year’s enrolment was more than enough for the family. Concerning the present facility, parent A, however, senses that the socio-demographical
patterns of this part of the city come across fairly clearly. There is a tendency for parents to be of Swedish origin and reasonably well-off. As pointed out above, this clearly reflects the composition of the ward.

User experience of co-operative childcare in Maria-Gamla Stan

The parent interviewed here is referred to as parent B. This parent has been a user of the same parent co-operative facility for six consecutive years with two children. In terms of service quality, she feels that the staff is phenomenal: no doubt the best in the world. What quality levels are possible to maintain, however, primarily hinges on the group of member parents at any given time. In this regard, she says, parent co-ops are vulnerable. At her particular facility, the group has not always been stable enough for things to work smoothly. Luckily, the practical consequences for the children have been small, because parents at this particular co-op do not normally contribute with pedagogical work. Instead, all parents have cooking weeks. So the quality, our interviewee points out, of the service given to the children has been remarkable throughout these years.

The facility enrols 15 children and employs a staff of three. Its opening hours are 8 am to 4.30 pm. This implies that the service is not accessible to families with different working hours. Our interviewee notes that this certainly creates a basic kind of segregation, adding to the general impression that nuclear families have least trouble fulfilling the facility’s member obligations. The food is excellent and prepared in the kitchen by the parent on duty. The children tend to spend a large amount of time outdoors. Our interviewee feels that there has been a reorientation over these years from more structured and visibly thematic pedagogical approaches to more unpredictable ways of organising the children’s time. The idea now seems to be to allow the directions and inclinations to grow in the group and maybe not impose day-to-day goals quite as much as before.

In terms of access, our interviewee senses that the staff is very forthcoming and active when it comes to adapting to parents’ needs. There is visible flexibility in the views of what is considered legitimate habits for dropping children off and picking them up. Parents’ needs and children’s security
take precedence at the facility over staff convenience. “If you’re in a great hurry in the afternoon, you’re able to call them and ask them to dress the child for you and wait in the hallway.” This is not considered over-stretching the norms for appropriate levels of service. Parent B (who herself works as an academic social scientist) reads this as an example of collective mothering, which in turn hinges on a hetero-normative conception of motherhood. In these terms, the facility culture does strike her as very conventional.

Regarding participation, our interviewee notes that the co-operative solution requires that a lot of work is put in by members of the co-operative. At this facility, pedagogic work does not, however, belong to the tasks required. The staff prefers to have parents stay on the outside of the daily care. Temporary teachers to fill in for sick staff are hired directly by the manager, using private and official contacts. The manager may also ask parents if they are able to fill in at the level of pedagogy. The reasons for the choice of candidates, however, are only the manager’s business. All temporary staff are thus hired at the manager’s own discretion.

Besides cooking and being responsible for the running of the entire operation, parents are organised in work-groups with different tasks. Decisions are reached at meetings with all members of the co-operative and must be unanimous. There is no board. Our interviewee observes that the amount of active fathers in the co-operative has decreased since her first child was enrolled. She offers no explanations why, but suggests it could have to do with increased work-life or socio-economical pressure, which requires men in particular to work longer hours. Another notion is that it is symbolic of a gentrification-related backlash for gender equality.

The facility is located in a part of the ward with a more suburban, than urban spatial structure. The block is built openly around a common central court and there is a park (with the usual parklek-open preschool combination, as described in the preceding section) nearby. There are a few other co-ops in the same local area and between these, everyday and pedagogical bonds are strong. There are, for instance, common schemes for the 5 year-olds from all the block’s co-ops during their last preschool year. The managers also cooperate tightly, not least when it comes to influencing the common (municipal) landlord about ways to improve the court’s play area and court.
One recent change in the structural environment of this facility, parent B notes, is that fees have fallen sharply since the introduction of the maxtaxa in 2002. Today, they are a fair bit lower than the conventional maxtaxa-levels, mainly, she assumes, because of the modest rent levels in the block. Another possible explanation is the absence of a cook.

User experience of corporate childcare in Maria-Gamla Stan

The parent interviewed here is referred to as parent C. The main themes addressed in the interview are the same as in the foregoing two sections. This parent has been a user of for-profit childcare (and primary schooling) provided by the same major company in the sector for six years.

Parent C starts out by observing that quality levels in the preschool service she has been using have not been very impressive. Conventional quality agenda issues – such as the staff to child ratio – have hardly appeared in the company’s rhetoric or on its list of priorities. There is an impressive educational vision – comprehensive and systematic – for care and schooling elaborated in the brochures and at meetings directed to interested parents. The arguments are very persuasive, and the level of competence and integrity of the company formally seem impeccable. The level of practice, however, is a completely different story. Throughout parent C’s user years, the childcare facility in question has suffered heavily under the strain of shrinking resources, huge turnover of staff, and a chronic shortage of regular, as well as temporary, staff. The atmosphere thus seems to have created a certain social and relational insecurity for the children, as well as a noticeable indifference to continuity in parents’ or children’s relationship to the service. This, parent C observes, has been a main characteristic of the service and evolved into a major problem for her as a parent using it.

Parent C describes herself as inadequately informed at the original time of choice of this childcare solution. If she had known then what she knows today, she would have opted for a co-operative facility. Now, she sees that her choice had a clear political dimension, but at the time she was unaware of this. As the corporation has expanded over the years, the character of the individual facility and service has, moreover, changed. The hierarchic na-
ture of the organisation has become more and more pronounced. It is obvious, she says, in this kind of care that those working “on the floor” have no say over how activities should be planned or carried through, even at the remotest local level. Instead, standards and goals travel down the hierarchy. Our interviewee feels that, over these years, the consolidation and “corporatisation” of the company has been obvious. The distance is increasing between the managerial level and what goes on in the children’s day-to-day lives. This may suit some people, but parent C is indeed no more one of them. She considers this form of care inferior to both the other main options: municipal and co-operative care, and mainly for organisational reasons. She acknowledges, however, that there are people who in fact support this mode of provision both for pedagogical/quality reasons and on ideological grounds.

One serious consequence, she argues however, of the corporate structure is that hiring temporary staff to fill in for sick regular staff generally does not happen. The guiding principle is that the work should be possible to perform also when someone is absent. In reality, she remarks, this is impossible without grave practical implications. The main idea is instead to cut labour costs. The unavoidable implication of this approach is that otherwise ambitious staff is often physically unable to maintain more than minimal levels of activity and pedagogical control. At these not so rare times, the service ought to be described more in terms of looking-after, than caring-for the children and helping them to develop their personal abilities in a professional way.

As we have noted, the quality issue is often connected to the size of children’s groups. In this mode of provision, the rule is maximum group sizes. As far as our interviewee is aware, the company never refrains from enrolling enrollable children. Throughout her years as a user of the service, there were never, she feels, any doubts about the priorities of the company. Productivity in this sense seems to be the company’s key policy goal. Pedagogy thus generally came across as a rhetorical, rather than a real parameter. In the advertising material provided by a similar, competing major educational corporation the point is made, rather explicitly, that the company’s childcare views are flexible in terms of pedagogy. This does not appear to be a profile issue in the corporate, for-profit sector. The core motivations for the entire enterprise are of a different kind. Of course, this does not mean that high educational, institutional or pedagogic standards
cannot in principle be met by corporate welfare providers, but in this case the revenue priority seems to have been very strong, and would possibly partly explain the comparatively poor overall practical performance visible in this particular variety of childcare provision.

Regarding patterns of access, the facility has been rather flexible. Parents’ requirements for individual time-schedules were recognised and often adapted to, parent C observes. There were also individual assessment and development plans for each child in care. The plans were discussed at regular meetings with the parents each term and seriously dealt with. The staff thus entertained satisfactory levels of tolerance and receptivity.

In terms of parental participation, however, our interviewee stresses that her corporate facility was extremely underdeveloped. There were no channels for user influence and no routines in place to cope with views from parents engaging themselves anyhow. Parent C describes how she thus at one time was directed up from one level to another in the corporate structure and ended up discussing a trivial problem concerning her child’s daily routines with the acting director of the entire company.

The same regular meetings between staff and parents that take place everywhere in the Swedish educational system are, however, part of this world as well. Our interviewee describes these meetings as peculiar. Starting out as a user of this service, she expected these meetings to be constructive and reciprocal, a primary forum, as it were, for stakeholders to exchange views. But she soon experienced that any view put forth from the parent level was considered a potential threat. The usual staff reaction was that, in the end, parents had no knowledge of pedagogy or of service provision. It took some time until she had digested the managerial style, but after some terms as a user she had a clear enough idea, she argues, to be able to assess what was happening more freely.

She describes some of the observations she was then able to make at our interview. One of these is that the staff in charge (i.e. the manager of the facility) of these meetings had a consistent, clearly visible style of discouraging parents from organising themselves in groups regarding any of the topics addressed. All points and arguments made by the parents were considered as isolated phenomena, unrelated to other views and reflections. Discussions generally ended, parent C conveys, with the manager asking the person in question to “send me an email on this”. Another issue related to the theme (if not reality) of participation was the presence, after all, of a
parent’s committee to channel and make use of latent user involvement. This committee, however, in which parent C was active for a brief time, had all the trappings of committees of the same kind in municipal and other care or primary schooling, but almost immediately turned out to be something quite different. At the first meeting, the local manager and the company representative stressed that from now on, this engaged group of parents was to consider itself local “ambassadors for the company”. These parents were encouraged to take advantage of information material provided by the corporation and work to spread its message in different ways. Again, the function of this purportedly participatory body was clearly not to encourage participation, but rather to secure and increase revenue levels.

Our interviewee states, lastly, that this mode of childcare service and provision overall did not lack dimensions of integration. But they were of one kind only: the in-company and corporate-consolidating kind. She also points out that the shrinking resources in the sector were clearly visible and reflected on the level of practice during her six years as a user of this mode of care.

Some remarks on the Maria-Gamla Stan ward

In conclusion, the childcare service structure in Maria-Gamla Stan seems rather consolidated. Access and social cohesion levels create no grave or insurmountable difficulties for the provision of the ward’s care. One distinguishing local factor, however, is perhaps the efficiency by which the local administration has dealt with fluctuating service demand through the 1990s. A sharp decline of volume has followed on very rapid growth without serious deterioration of service accessibility or quality. This capacity for institutional adjustment is perhaps not intuitively associated with heavy-handed municipal welfare service provision. To some degree, this chimes in with the professed social policy approach of the government, inasmuch as the national legislative norm leaves to local forces to guide and implement policy solutions that fit local demands. In this case, this approach appears to have been successful.
6 The Skärholmen ward

In this chapter, the second Stockholm ward is investigated. As will become apparent, the local childcare experience in Skärholmen differs somewhat from that in the other three cases, as the local demographic set-up is partly of a different character. Similar patterns of social heterogeneity do not obtain in any of our other cases. On this score, this setting is perhaps the most challenging for a universalist welfare system of the Swedish kind. A fair amount of the analysis of this case will thus dwell on the impact of this greater social differentiation on the field and structure of childcare service provision and orientation.

Goals

Besides the all-encompassing national and city goals described at length above, the Skärholmen ward’s professed activity goal is that “preschool children and their parents feel welcome to our preschool facilities and partake in a stimulating and developing preschool activity”. The ward assumes a direct responsibility to offer preschool slots for all children whose parents so desire; to offer a good environment for the development of children’s language and knowledge skills; and to create good conditions for parents’ participation in and influence over the local preschool system. This generates a range of practical priorities that we will return to in the following. The administrative official responsible for the ward’s overall social welfare for children, families and young people, our interviewee Anna-Bella Kraft, stresses unequivocally that the language goal is the main priority for the municipal childcare sector. Given the many different non-Swedish first languages of the children enrolled in municipal care in the ward, strengthened Swedish language skills has to be accomplished before it becomes
possible to address many other issues. Consequently, the ward places much emphasis on this aspect of care.

Diversity

Together with some wards to the northwest of the city, Skärholmen in the southwest has one of the most socially and ethnically heterogeneous populations in the entire city of Stockholm. Approximately 80% of all children in care in the ward are of non-Swedish descent. Social diversity levels are thus great. The levels of institutional diversity in childcare provision, however, are modest. The overwhelming majority of facilities is municipal. As indicated in table 1, there is only one parent co-op in the ward. This care format amounts to “inner city-solutions to inner-city needs”, declares our interviewee. Nor are there any corporate commercial facilities. The non-municipal childcare facilities in Skärholmen are virtually all of one kind: separately run companies converted from former municipal facilities. This is an institutional reflection of the ideological agenda of the non-Social Democratic city councils 1991-94 and 1998-2002 to privatise social welfare, preschooling and schooling. During these periods, employees were encouraged to take over their municipal facilities/work places. It should be noted that in Skärholmen, virtually all of these facilities are located in the same local area: Sättra. Kraft considers this mainly a spill-over effect. When some facilities started to convert, others suddenly recognised that this was realistic and possible, and decided to follow suit. In Skärholmen, there are thus no equivalents to the corporate providers of non-public care to be found, for instance, in Maria-Gamla Stan.

One direct consequence of the legal changes made in the 1980s-90s in order to allow for different childcare providers, our interviewee observes, has been a massive increase in the shaping of a facility’s profile. Today, most facilities have qualities of their own that they often stress publicly to attract families. Earlier, the need to argue for certain kinds or orientations

136 The amount of children with another first language than Swedish has increased by 30% since 1995. A 2002 estimate numbers 74 languages as spoken in the ward. The largest of these languages are: Arabic, Kurdish, Somalian, Spanish and Turkish.
of care was marginal indeed. Now, in Skärholmen and elsewhere, it is more or less expected that individual facilities elaborate on the specific unique advantages of the service offered. If this rhetoric is matched by a true specialisation at the level of local pedagogic practices, we are unable to say.

Financing

The financing of childcare in the ward follows the same model as elsewhere. One aspect highlighted by our interviewee and the ward’s 2003 budget and activity plan, is that the local policy emphasis on the development and strengthening of Swedish language skills for preschool children is followed-up financially, and not only rhetorical. Additional funds are available on top of the regular state/municipal contribution to the ward. The point that early development of these skills is necessary for later social and educational progress, is thus implemented institutionally by providing each childcare facility with resources to strengthen the pedagogical competence in this field. The additional funds are meant to help create conditions favourable both for the development of children’s first and second language (i.e. Swedish). Models for language development as well as for the evaluation of the policy itself are worked out during 2003 by the teams responsible for this welfare level in the ward’s four sub-areas. The ward’s 2003 budget for the welfare of children, families and young people is given in table 6.

One observation that can be made here concerns the relative overall cost for preschool childcare in the ward. The figures set it at 43% of the cost for primary schooling. Its share of the total welfare budget is almost 24% (compared to the 20% reported for the ward of Maria-Gamla Stan). This is evidently an economically major policy field for Swedish municipalities.

---

137 The average contribution level to the regular funding system by this addition is 9%.
Table 6. Welfare budget 2003, Skärholmen ward, million SEK [million €]

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Service</th>
<th>Cost</th>
<th>Fees etc</th>
<th>Net cost</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Care for families and individuals</td>
<td>73.6 [8.2]</td>
<td>1.2 [0.1]</td>
<td>72.4 [8.0]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preschool childcare (1-5 y/o)</td>
<td>129.9 [14.4]</td>
<td>5.7 [0.6]</td>
<td>124.2 [13.8]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wrap-around school care (6-11 y/o)</td>
<td>33.4 [3.7]</td>
<td>4.4 [0.5]</td>
<td>29 [3.2]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary school</td>
<td>301.2 [33.5]</td>
<td>19.4 [2.2]</td>
<td>281.8 [31.3]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other modes of care</td>
<td>10.0 [1.1]</td>
<td>0.2 [0.02]</td>
<td>9.8 [1.0]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total budget</strong></td>
<td><strong>548.1 [60.9]</strong></td>
<td><strong>30.9 [3.4]</strong></td>
<td><strong>517.2 [57.5]</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Budget and activity plan 2003, Skärholmen ward

Access

Patterns of access in Skärholmen resemble those in the other wards. The same citywide “guaranteed-place” policy applies here. The ward is able to keep up with demand, and intends to do the same in the future. The city’s Office for Research and Statistics (USK) estimates an increase in the ward by 400 preschool children until 2010. This is noted in the 2003 budget and activity plan, and no indications are given that these children should be left without care, even if specific plans are too early to make.

Our interviewee notes that one effect of the demographic set-up of the ward is that new children are admitted into childcare throughout the year, as new families with preschool children arrive to settle in the ward. The ordinary childcare admittance cycle has a large input at the beginning of each autumn (the start of the educational year) and supplemental admittance at the start of the spring term in January. In Skärholmen, the cycle is not as regular. Or rather: the introduction of new children is going on

---

139 The Swedish educational system is divided into two terms per year: August-December and January-June. The main Swedish holiday month is July. But preschool childcare is generally provided throughout the summer for those requiring it. The municipal sector rationalises this operation by directing all families to only one or a couple of local facilities from late June to early August. There is also a winter break around Christmas time.
evenly throughout the year. At the end of 2002, 86% of all local preschool children were enrolled in childcare.

This connects to the language issue. Skärholmen is the largest receiver of newly arrived refugees and asylum seekers in Sweden. As from January 2003, preschool children in families in these groups are entitled to the same childcare provision as other residents. As is readily understood, Swedish language skills for these children is generally the first and main issue that has to be dealt with. The strong language development emphasis in the ward touched on above thus makes practical sense. There is some distance between this experience, however, and the average Swedish childcare system. But it is still the same system, which in Skärholmen shows surprising levels of social adaptation. Kraft notes that one interesting consequence of the local linguistic and ethnical patterns is that a number of parents – both in the primary school and preschool system – try to get their children into childcare facilities or schools/classes where Swedish is the predominant language.

Another issue here that we have not had reason to address above, but which springs to mind in Skärholmen’s particular context is that in the city of Stockholm today, preschool childcare is compulsory for families/parents who lack the means to support themselves economically. Families with preschool children, Kraft points out, who have no regular incomes from paid work, unemployment insurances or the like, are thus in effect barred from keeping their children at home. The main argument for this is that people in this group have to be considered as looking for work and should on these grounds (in the same way as other job seekers) be available to the labour market on short notice. With preschool children at home, this time flexibility would surely be impossible, the argument goes. This municipal norm implies, however, that families with major social problems (such as drug abuse, alcoholism, petty criminality etc, but whose children are not in the actual custody of municipal authorities) also have to make use of the childcare system. This policy could be read as a strategy to better reach (out to) these families/children and indirectly to understand and assess the care and social conditions provided (and required) for them in a better way.

In a certain way, this policy may be read as indicative of an aspiration to further cohesion in the ward, as it attempts to involve otherwise potentially alienated families and children in the local social web. This piece of policy thus seems to open for the interpretation that the state and/or municipality
may indeed work rather offensively as a prime supporter of denser social bonds in a given local setting. Now, if childcare in Sweden were not as readily obtainable as it actually is, and the group of potentially alienated families was substantially larger than at the time of this study, it would be possible to envisage a situation in which the state used the web of different social welfare services systematically in order to strengthen social cohesion, in a manner similar to the one adopted by the Skärholmen ward today. Historically speaking, this interpretation has some bearing on the politics and development of Swedish welfare service patterns. One hypothesis that we want to put forth here is that, regardless of the intentions behind, and historical contingencies that characterise the growth and consolidation of the sector, a consequence has clearly been precisely this: support for social solidarity between citizens and between citizens and the state. It seems apparent that the structures of childcare have been adopted and expanded with the primary aim of making life easier for Swedish families in late capitalist society. It is a reasonable guess that this has not weakened the faith of these families in the public concern for their welfare. So, trust in this sense seems like one obvious effect of the historical development, intended or unintended.

Another manner in which the childcare system is consciously used in Skärholmen is as a channel for communication with newly arrived families. Our interviewee points out that refugees often arrive in Sweden with very rough experiences behind them. The childcare facility in these cases works both as an introduction to the workings of this new social setting for these families, a separate support system for their children, and as a way for the ward to reach them and provide what social, psychological and other kind of aid that may be necessary in each case. Since childcare coverage is fairly comprehensive even for this group, this is often a good means to establish a confidence-based relationship between families and the ward. This is particularly the case for unemployed newcomers, who lack access to the other main route into Swedish society: the workplace.

Service quality

In the Skärholmen ward, the city’s overriding quality policy provides a basis for the work to maintain and improve quality levels in childcare. One
difficulty is the issue how to transform general and thus rather vague policy goals to specific tasks that are possible to implement in day-to-day practices. How is the abstract transformed to the concrete? The main method here is to specify the main dimensions of care – such as “security”, “teaching and development” and “influence”. Then each facility is required to report back to the ward administration the means and strategies that will be used to accomplish the goals. We have no way to independently assess the degree of success for this model, or if there are alternative means for this task. But it seems like a reasonable method.

One of the indicators of service quality that has been discussed above, however, is the relative proportion of academically trained staff employed in the local childcare system. In this regard, this southern suburban ward exhibits a different pattern than the other two analysed Stockholm cases. Preschool teachers/educators are not as many in Skärholmen as elsewhere in Stockholm. In January 2003, the local proportion in municipal childcare facilities of this category was 22%; hardly an extremely low figure. The impact of this group on practical care, however, can be assumed to be lower than the figures suggest.

In the public sector, as we have already pointed out, facilities containing only one pedagogical group, following the “sibling-principle”, are rare. In the ward, the share is about 10%. The academically trained staff almost invariably combines her (men less frequently work as preschool teachers/educators) time between administrative and pedagogic work. Multiple units are generally managed by one preschool educator, who is then unable to actually work with the children to a proportional degree. When units consist of three, four or even five groups, the time available for pedagogic work for this senior group of employees is minimal. Increasing the size of units thus decreases the likelihood that the most highly qualified staff category is present in day-to-day work, although, even in Skärholmen, this does not necessarily amount to making the group totally absent. The data indicates that there are active preschool teachers working pedagogically at most facilities in the ward. The ward administration does, however, consider the levels too low and actively works towards raising them.

One observation that can be made here is that if the proportion of preschool educators in childcare is a valid criterion of service quality, the conclusion must be that to boost the numbers is a potentially powerful means to improve childcare. One main problem at this particular juncture is eco-
nomical: highly qualified staff is more expensive to hire. Today, supply
does not meet demand. Nor would, however, the economical conditions of
most Swedish municipalities allow for extremely high proportions of aca-
demically educated staff in childcare. The challenge thus seems to us to be
to strike a constructive balance between structural economic conditions and
pedagogic excellence, given that there are no clear principles to validate an
optimal balance between different categories of staff, or different tasks.
These matters are essentially disputable.

One last issue that deserves to be indicated in terms of service quality is
that the model for how to structure children’s days at the childcare centre is
comprehensive. The idea is that every element in day-to-day life may be
approached pedagogically. Children in Skärholmen (and elsewhere) thus
spend all of their time in a pedagogic environment, be it indoors, at excursions, at the local playground, at mealtimes or in the bathroom. There are
no breaks, in this sense, in the staff’s pedagogic relationship to the children.
There is a continuous structure and activity plan at each childcare centre.
This is generally seen as one of the main relative advantages of day care
over child minding solutions. In this latter, more private care model, the
possibilities to provide well-structured, professional care are possibly not as
good. The arguments for child minding are, on the other hand, the closer,
more home-like environment and lesser scale of the service.140

In Skärholmen, heavy resources are thus invested in professional devel-
opment for those employed in the sector. The main reason for this is the
character of the ward. Given the linguistic pluralism amongst the local
population, the first issue that has to be dealt with is the children’s devel-
opment of working Swedish. As stated officially, skills to work with small
children’s linguistic development are necessary and central.Given that “the
meeting between the staff and the child decides the quality of preschool
care”, good communication is vital, and hinges on Swedish language skills
for non-Swedish children. To achieve such skills, competent education is a
necessary precondition. The element of cognitive development is also

---

140 28 % of all children in preschool care in Skärholmen in November 2002 attended child minding homes. This is the highest proportion in Stockholm. It is possible that this connects to the unfamiliarity on the part of many new-coming families with the style of Swedish childcare. It is perhaps easier to intuitively make sense of the idea of child minding than of day care, if you lack previous experience of this welfare solution.
stressed by the ward. The goal is for children to understand and speak Swedish adequately, through well structured teaching, skills that are essential to improve and fulfill the children’s possibilities later in life.

The options for municipal employees to develop their professional competence during 2003 almost exclusively concern different linguistic aspects of childcare and tuition, as suggested by this passage from the budget and activity plan: “this year’s professional development programme is extensive and primarily consists of opportunities for linguistic education. Two competence-raising programmes, one for staff with secondary education and one for non-trained staff, supervision for the four geographical team coordinators and pedagogical leaders [academically trained staff, i.e. förskolepedagog] will take place.”

Another local initiative likely to increase quality levels, our interviewee Kraft reports, is a major extra input of resources during 2003-04 to twelve groups of 1-3 year olds at selected facilities. Here, staff will get salary hikes, and pedagogic groups will be smaller. An important aspect of this initiative is a strong emphasis on documentation and individual development plans for the children at these facilities. Two functional goals have been specified: providing conditions for more excellent childcare and boosting the – sometimes questioned – status of the professional field.

Integration and participation

As we have seen, integration and participation are at least rhetoric goals of Skärholmen’s (as well as Stockholm’s) childcare system. Our interviewee observes, however, that the levels of parental participation are actually very low in the ward. It is impossible, Kraft points out, to encourage newly arrived families to attend evening meetings at their child’s facility and take part of parental information and discussions. Oftentimes, she assumes, there is no readiness to understand that this is a conventional dimension of Swedish childcare and schooling. The policy point of these meetings – i.e. to become involved in, reflect on and generate impetus concerning the care that is provided for the children – is seldom appreciated by families from this group. As in many other aspects of Swedish childcare, activism of this kind seems, to a certain extent, to be a prerogative of the more established, socially resourceful and generally well-to-do. Does this mean that childcare
in the ward is less than excellent? We hesitate to draw this conclusion, feeling that it is perhaps too simplistic.

The issues at stake here are complex: the question is how to interpret a situation where parents are happy with the service provided, and thus remain silent about what could be done to make it better. It is no doubt possible to regard this silent consent as a basically rational attitude. In this context, however, we can only mention this. On the whole, however, it seems to us as if the main participatory and integrative patterns in Skärholmen are similar to those exhibited by the other two Stockholm wards: i.e. modest at best. As there are very few parent co-ops in the ward, the relatively stronger patterns of participation connected to this form of childcare provision can make no material difference in the Skärholmen case.

Local managerial level in municipal childcare in Skärholmen

Goals

Our interviewee at the local managerial ward level in municipal childcare in the ward, Despina Gramenidis, is one of four intermediate managers responsible for roughly one fourth each of the ward’s care. When asked about the ward’s childcare goals, she refers to the national preschool educational programme. The United Nation’s convention on the right of the child provides general guidelines, according to Gramenidis, and the central City Council provides more specific rules. As for her personal visions as an area manager, she emphasises diversity and multi-cultural experiences. Her main priorities for the Skärholmen/Vårberg sub-sector of the ward are to develop language training and parent networks.

These goals demand special qualities from the staff, according to Gramenidis. She says that a profound interest in multi-cultural life is a basic requirement for staff; one should see the multi-cultural environment as both an asset and a challenge. Gramenidis’ ambition is to hire both older and younger employees, as long as they are interested in the multi-cultural social thematic.

Gramenidis also shares some thoughts on preschool pedagogy. “Few children are very mature at age six”, she says, and argues that it is unfortu-
nate that school pedagogy is gaining ground at the expense of preschool pedagogy. Gramenidis does not approve of the new system of preparatory classes for six-year olds at school, but holds that children of that age should develop through play and not by going to school. Gramenidis feels, however, that the focus is slowly shifting back to the preschool from the regular school. The government and political elite, she remarks, are beginning to recognise preschooling’s special role and circumstances. Efforts are presently being made, she notes, to provide the preschools with extra money for raising the wages of the staff in the groups for small children. The purpose is to raise the status of the profession through higher wages and supplementary education.

**Diversity**

Gramenidis recognises private provision of childcare as being of sufficient quality but she does not see that there is any real need for alternatives: “There is already so much flexibility in the municipal system that there is no need for private actors, at least not for this reason”, she says. She does not think it is right to run preschools privately, but states that “preschools are part of the educational system and education should not be privately run”. When asked why she thinks private actors do participate in the institutional provision of childcare as well as schooling, she answers “to make profit”. She believes that some parents choose private alternatives “because of the prestige, it is considered classy to use private preschools”. Gramenidis is also asked why she thinks there are less private childcare alternatives in the Skärholmen ward. “Parents are not as interested here, not in that way”, she says. Parents of non-Swedish descent are not very well informed about different alternatives, she says, “The municipal preschools feel safer for them”.

Gramenidis is asked why traditional Swedish families opt for private alternatives more often than families with non-Swedish backgrounds. “Lots of people make that decision because there are too few Swedish children here”, she answers. Swedish parents are aware of the socio-cultural set-up of the municipal preschools and look for alternatives, according to our interviewee.

Gramenidis is furthermore confident that the municipal preschools are very serious alternatives in their own right. They have the best education
programmes for the staff, and are in the forefront of the pedagogical development in the childcare area. Educated people in the childcare sector therefore tend to favour municipal employment. “Many of the ones that leave us for private alternatives come back because of the job security here”, our interviewee says. Since this is a different thing than favouring municipal employment because of its superior possibilities for professional development, we assume that this latter remark refers to other than the senior staff category.

Gramenidis additionally offers some reflections on the years of liberal/conservative city government in Stockholm. According to her, the City Council exerted heavy pressure on the wards to privatise preschools. “I almost had to hide from them some days,” she states, referring to officials at the city level. Relatively few preschools where actually privatised in the Skärholmen area, something Gramenidis is happy about. “I’m really glad we stood up to them”, Gramenidis says, in a way offering a slightly unconventional interpretation of administrative activist resistance than most other sources and analyses do. The pressure to privatise completely has waned, however, since the Social Democrats regained municipal power in Stockholm in 2002. Gramenidis even talks about the liberal-conservative years in power as an ordeal that is now over.

**Financing**

The local municipal preschools are part of the same public financing system as all other preschools, but Gramenidis observes that the public preschools have received more funding lately. She has the impression that politicians are becoming more attentive and responsive to the sector’s needs. The Skärholmen/Vårberg area is also receiving extra funds because of the special needs here. It is a challenge, she continues, to keep the right number of employees in a business with rapidly changing basic conditions. The number of children varies and thus also the demand for childcare. “We try to be flexible and adjust to the demand”, she says.

The introduction of the maximaxta has not greatly affected municipal childcare, according to Gramenidis. The one effect she is able to think of is that parents who already used public childcare now demand longer hours. But the difference is marginal. The reform has not had a real impact on the economy of care; the municipal sector gets its funding regardless.
Access
Demand for childcare is greatest in the spring, our interviewee notes. Access is always readily available, in compliance with the general Stockholm three-month rule. Nor is there any significant waiting time for a slot in the area or ward. Gramenidis does, however, point out that public childcare in the ward and area will have to expand. The ward is in preparation for this. New preschool facilities are being planned. The increase in demand is thus expected and will, Gramenidis estimates, be adequately met.

Service quality
In the area, municipal preschools have a relatively lower ratio of academically educated staff. Gramenidis observes that it is very hard to find properly educated staff today but that they make every effort to guarantee the quality of the staff. All educated preschool teachers are offered an extensive complementary course. The year-long, part-time course focuses on the special need for preschools in areas with many non-Swedish children. The course is organised in the workplace. All academically educated preschool teachers must take this course sooner or later, but they are free to initiate their studies at any time the course is given. Gramenidis also believes that the way the staff feel about the workplace is of great significance for service quality. “We try to work with staff issues in a long term perspective”, Gramenidis declares and continues: “We try to think about what kind of employers we want to be”.

In the municipal childcare facilities under Gramenidis’ responsibility, children’s groups are fairly small. The average group has 14-15 children, but there may sometimes be as many as 16-17 in one group. The number of staff per group is always high because all positions are planned as full-time, which makes for high density of teachers throughout the entire day.

As noted above, municipal childcare in the ward is divided in four sub-areas. Each area (or team) has one unit manager like Gramenidis, and three or four deputy managers. Each team is responsible for about 8 preschools with 20 departments. The municipality also employs pedagogical leaders that supervise two or three preschools each. These pedagogical leaders are intended to compensate for the relatively low ratio of preschool teachers, and to ensure that adequate pedagogical standards are met.
Gramenidis thinks that a large public organisation like the municipality has a far better chance of providing high quality childcare than small non-public actors are able to do. A large organisation can be more effective by having some functions provided by experts common to 25, or so, preschools. Our interviewee refers to an economics of scale. She argues that bigger units have greater flexibility in that spare resources are always at hand. There are always substitute teachers, when needed, since the work pool is substantial. Temporary preschool teachers are always available when regular staff is ill or absent. The economy is also generally better, she says.

Integration and participation

Integration and participation are two significant issues in the ward. Gramenidis says that there is a major tradition of language pedagogy in the municipal childcare system. On top of this, local additional methods have been developed to meet special needs there. These local methods concern development of everyday skills, such as learning the new language in every possible situation at the preschool, not just in specially designated slots. Gramenidis thinks it is important to read to the children, but even more important is to let the children talk among themselves and develop at their own pace.

The municipal employees have special meetings, where the unit manager informs them about changes in the organisation. Employees are then expected to share their opinions with the management. There are also central meetings for the ward’s entire managerial staff once a month and regular meetings at the different preschools, also once a month. Gramenidis notes that they don’t get many suggestions from the employees; she would like to see more. She is, however, confident that the organisation works in this respect – which may be reflective of the fact that she has been involved in developing it herself.

Parental participation is a complicated issue in a ward like Skärholmen. There used to be a system with regular meetings with parents. But this did not work very well, according to Gramenidis. This form of parent participation did not seriously recognise or address some of the difficulties in a culturally diverse community such as Skärholmen. Now, there is instead a case-based method where staff sit down with parents and talk about educa-
tion and raising children from the parents’ own perspective. The important part is to establish contact with the parents, Gramenidis says. It is all about getting the parents involved. Cultural difference is another topic often brought up in discussions with the parents. Gramenidis says that they try to meet and interact with parents in many different ways. Sometimes there are parties, sometimes staff talk with parents about the children’s work, or watch videotapes of preschool activities. Taping what the children do is a popular way to give the parents insight into what goes on at the preschool, which is especially important, Gramenidis observes, when it comes to non-Swedish parents who otherwise may have difficulties relating to everyday childcare life.

Another method is to let the children make collages with their parents. They can make personal exhibitions about themselves, their families, pets and so on. These works are framed and exhibited at the preschool, so that the children have something to show the group when trying to express who they are and where they come from. Gramenidis tells the interviewer a story about one particular father who came to the preschool and found that some of the other children had more pictures than his son/daughter in their collage. The proud father brought his son’s/daughter’s collage with him home and sent it back the next day with twice as many pictures in it. Gramenidis uses this story to show how this technique works to make parents involved in their children’s care.

User experience of municipal childcare in Skärholmen

Our first Skärholmen user interviewee, parent G, is very happy with the care received by her daughter at a municipal preschool in the ward. She now has her second daughter attending childcare; the elder one has moved on to primary school. Parent G was first offered a place in child minding, but she preferred to have her daughter attend regular, public day care.

Parent G declares that she chose municipal childcare because she wanted her children to be in a larger group of children and staff. “I think it is better for [the daughter] to meet more people”, she says. Parent G does not seem to share the usual preference for small groups, but instead feels it is good for the child to get accustomed to a lot of people, and municipal childcare provides a good opportunity for this. “She can develop more there”, parent
G explains. The family originally had to wait for four months to receive care at a municipal facility in the ward, which exceeded the three-month limit to waiting time. Parent G knew about the three-month limit and brought up the exceedingly long waiting herself during the interview.

Parent G had her children attend childcare already before the *maxtaxa*-reform and says that it made a real difference for the family’s economy. Before the *maxtaxa*, the family paid in excess of 2000 SEK [about € 222] per month for their two daughters. With the system in place, they pay a total of 1260 SEK [€ 140] for childcare and after-school care, for the older girl. “It makes a big difference”, parent G says. She does think, however, that people are taking advantage of the current *maxtaxa* system. In her opinion, people are using the system to consume more childcare than they actually need. “People who used to have childcare on a part-time basis are now using it full-time”, parent G says.

The economic situation has become worse over the last years, according to parent G. She senses that municipal funding of childcare is less generous today than during her first spell in the system, and offers this illustration: “there were less gifts and candy for the children at this year’s *julgransplundring*” (“Christmas-tree plunder”, i.e. the traditional Swedish Christmas-farewell party, when the tree is robbed of its sweets and literally thrown out in the street). Parent G would also like to see more activities for the children but guesses that “there is no money for that”. Conditions do, however, seem to vary between different preschools. She contends that some municipal preschools apparently fare worse economically than others.

Parent G is not aware of any forum for parents to influence the way the preschool is run. Meetings are, however, held twice a year between staff and parents. There are also some social events, like an international potluck once a year, to which all the parents bring traditional foods from their country of origin. Other than that, parent G does feel that she can talk with the staff about things that concern her, when dropping off and picking up her daughter.

When asked what she likes about her preschool, parent G immediately responds: “the teachers”. She is really happy with the teachers and she feels good about the fact that her daughter runs off and hugs her teacher every morning when she is dropped off at the preschool. “She sometimes doesn’t want to go home”, parent G says, half jokingly. The wonderful teachers contribute to make her impression of the preschool very favourable. She
thinks that she might be lucky to have found this particular municipal preschool. She has heard of other places where the situation is not as good. “Some preschools have lots of substitute teachers”, parent G says who is happy with the fact that she always meets the same staff at her daughter’s facility. But she has no particular affection for the municipality itself: “they just want to save money”, she says.

Parent G says that she has recognised one general trend during her years as a mother of children in municipal childcare. “When my oldest daughter went to preschool there were many more Swedish children there, now there is just one at the entire preschool”, parent G says and adds: “we are also foreigners”, referring to herself and her family. When asked why she thinks this is so, she answers “I guess it is that kind of an area”. She would wish that there were a more even distribution of children, with both Swedish children and children of foreign descent.

Parent G has gotten the impression that there is an especially high ratio of children of foreign descent at municipal preschools. She suspects that this has to do with lack of information. Families arriving from other countries do not know of the different options or are uncertain about what they imply for their children. Parent G uses her own family as an example: “I was introduced to a Montessori preschool but I did not know anything about it”, she says and continues: “I know it is really common here in Sweden but I didn’t know what it meant, so I picked regular childcare”.

Local managerial level in co-operative childcare in Skärholmen

Goals

Our interviewee at the co-operative Skärholmen facility, Bodil Steen, refers to herself as the co-operative’s senior employee, not its manager. In terms, firstly, of goals, Steen argues that Björken (Swedish for “the birch tree”; the name of the facility) specifies no pedagogical goals other than those stated in the national preschool educational programme (LPFÖ 98). All three employees have, however, extensive experience from different kinds of pedagogical schools. Steen mentions the major well-known orientations: Montessori, Waldorf and Reggio Emilia that have been mentioned above.
“We’ve picked the bits we liked best in different schools”, she says. According to Steen, the employees have in their previous careers come to understand what works and what does not, and at Björken they adjust their work accordingly. She does not feel any great need to affix a certain pedagogical label on Björken, but instead stresses flexibility and attentiveness to the children’s needs.

Steen summarises the basic philosophy at Björken in the following way: “every child must feel equally important, everybody must be recognised. Every child must learn to show respect for people around them”. Björken favours outdoor activities and Steen talks proudly about the wild piece of rocky nature behind the preschool, where the children spend lots of time every day. Björken is located in an earlier school building and its 15 children can roam playgrounds designed for a much larger group of children. “Sätra [the local neighbourhood] is a beautiful area with great possibilities of outdoor life and we have decided to take advantage of this”, Steen says.

**Diversity**

Björken was originally founded as a parent co-operative; it was in other words already up and running when Bodil Steen was employed nine years ago. At first, Björken built on loose cooperation between parents who were baby-sitting each other’s children. The organisation of the co-operative was developed from this practice. Steen is one of the three employees that constitute the backbone of everyday business at Björken. Parents are responsible for some of the everyday work; they are scheduled to work on three Tuesday afternoons out of four. As in other co-ops, parents are also responsible for the general management of the preschool and do a lot of unscheduled work at the facility, in three different work groups. All significant decisions concerning the running of Björken are taken at special board meetings, where both parents and employees are represented. Parents also fill in when regular staff is absent because of illness, vacations or for other reasons.

Steen thinks that the parent co-operative model has more benefits than disadvantages. She has previously been employed in municipal childcare and likes the co-operative workplace better. She says she is happier here and feels better about going to work in the morning. “It is a wonderful place to work”, she declares. “It is cosier than in municipal childcare, a
better atmosphere, you get closer to the parents”. She regards the parents as friends and appreciates the closeness she feels towards them, something she has not experienced at any of the municipal preschools where she has worked before. “The parents are really sweet” she says, and continues, “they take care of us [the staff], they provide money for preventive health care and recreation”.

When asked if she can think of any less favourable things with parent co-operatives as a form of provision of childcare, Steen brings up two points. The first problem is that there is both an upside and a downside to the fact that all the parents are part of the running of Björken. She feels that it is great to have such active parents, people that the children know and trust. But parents’ familiarity also causes some problems. Everybody feels so much at home that they tend to treat the place as a second home rather than a regular workplace, Steen notes. Everybody has their own keys and they sometimes go there to borrow things and let their children play there after hours. It is also a problem that parents remain at the location after their scheduled care hours, just to hang out and have the children play outside Björken, together with children who are still formally in care. “Sometimes I must find nice ways to tell the parents to get themselves together and go home after they have picked up their kids”, Steen reports. This problem did not exist at the municipal facilities she worked at earlier. There, none of the parents would think of staying on at the premises after picking up their child.

Another problem concerns parents in management positions. “Members of the board only stay on for one year” Steen says, and goes on: “when they leave the board, they are just beginning to learn how things are run, it takes a long time to learn everything”. The positions at the co-operative’s board are refilled so often that there is no continuity, which in turn creates a certain lack of business knowledge among board members at any given time. “A lot of time is spent on informing the parents how to do things, time that could be spent with the children”, Steen says and continues: “then we have to start all over again with the new parents the following year”. The parent’s lack of information ranges from not knowing in which drawer to find certain things, to not knowing how to handle staff recruitment. This testifies to one aspect of co-operative care that has not been touched on before: its varying degrees of organisational professionalism If the major advantages of this solution are its tightly controlled environment and the extraor-
ordinary levels of social participation, the main drawback is perhaps that it is
normally run by amateurs. At times this probably creates administrative
problems of varying degrees.

Even though Steen stresses that she really likes the parents and appreci-
ates their trust and companionship, she still speculates about the possibili-
ties of running *Björken* as a staff co-operative, without parents in manage-
ment positions. She has no plans, however, to actually work for a solution
of this kind. Steen believes that non-public forms of childcare have an edge
over municipal ones, but is not completely certain to what extent the parent
co-operative is the best non-public alternative. “It means a lot of extra
work”, she says, adding that she would rather spend time talking with the
parents about the children than about how to do this and that.

Steen also touches on the fact that *Björken* – as a parent co-operative –
does not have a manager, something she thinks might be a bad ting.141 At
times it could be good to have someone making everyday decisions without
having to ask the board. This, however, is no significant issue to her. “It is
not easy to change things in these organisations” she says, and continues:
“it takes a long time until all the people involved in the management recog-
nise changes”. Steen brings up the facility’s menu as an example. If the
staff realise that the children do not approve of a certain item, they might
want to change it. Even if the board accepts the change in the menu, it still
takes a long time until all the parents are informed about the change. Some
parents might continue with the old menu although the board has approved
of the new one.

Steen generally thinks that the mode of provision of childcare is less
significant for the quality of care and that the quality of the staff is what
really matters. At a parent co-operative like *Björken*, the quality of the co-
operation amongst the parents is of vital importance. This varies as parents
enter and exit the association.

Steen has not experienced any uncooperative behaviour from the City
Council. The City Council has a special department for privately run child-
care and, as far as Steen knows, the cooperation with this department has
been excellent.142 “Someone from the City Council comes out to see us

141 This, however, is not the rule for parent co-ops. Practices vary.
142 Again, this department has since been abolished.
once a year and they are always supportive”, Steen says. She does not feel that Björken is being treated better or worse than the municipally run facilities where she has been working before. She does feel, however, that they are a bit isolated at Björken, and that, being such a small facility, that they could need to come out and meet children from other facilities. Björken has therefore initiated cooperation with another co-operative for the oldest children; the five-year-old group.

Steen can only think of one instance where Björken has been treated differently than the municipally run preschools. One of the parents at Björken had heard of an event for children’s arranged at the Skärholmen ward and suggested to the staff that they bring the children to this event. Once they got there they were informed that only children from municipal preschools were allowed. Steen thinks that this was a petty distinction, since Björken is run on taxpayer’s money and follows the same regiment as all of the municipality’s preschools. The only relevant difference she can think of is that “the municipality offers continuing education to its staff, but that offer does not apply to us, of course”.

**Financing**

Björken receives public financing, just like all other preschools. It used to be a low cost alternative until the introduction of the maxtaxa, Steen says. The idea was that you as a parent contributed with some work and therefore paid a lower parent fee than in other modes of provision. The maxtaxa made all the other forms of childcare as affordable as the parent co-operative, but without obliging parents to work. “I do not understand it”, Steen says, referring to the maxtaxa. “Why do we need it, the ones that needed financial help to pay for childcare got it anyway”. She cannot see any point in giving the people that can pay the same cut in expenditures.

The maxtaxa has, however, not affected the finances at Björken. “We feared that it would get much worse”, Steen admits. There has been a steady flow of new children even after the reform, when the alternatives seemed to offer the same fee but without the parental work obligation. This indeed suggests that people have other motives than strictly economic ones when they choose (co-operative) care for their children.
Access

Steen senses that it is the buyer’s market when it comes to childcare. *Björken* is dependent on a steady flow of children. But the flow of children fluctuates, which gives an element of uncertainty to the planning at *Björken*. At times the co-op has feared that it would not get enough children to make ends meet, but so far it has always managed to reach the necessary numbers in the end. “I even got notice once, because we did not have enough children” Steen says. On that occasion, as on all others, they managed to enrol enough children in the end.

Steen thinks that the difficulty to find children, which happens occasionally, might be due to local demography. She suggests that the high ratio of people of non-Swedish descent might hamper the general interest in parent co-operatives. The special information needs that exist with parent co-operatives are perhaps hard to meet when it comes to newly arrived residents. “Maybe it is hard for them to understand the concept”, Steen says. She illustrates her argument with the opinion that parent co-operatives are much more common in other parts of the Stockholm area, where there are fewer non- or new Swedes.

Steen also suspects that a lot more people would be interested in enrolling their children at *Björken* if they could provide better opening hours. But *Björken* is too small and has too few employees to offer long opening hours. Access to *Björken* is readily available (at the time of the interview, there was one family waiting for a place). The only access problem would be that it is too readily available, meaning that the staff at *Björken* has to worry about finding new children while parents are guaranteed care within three months.

Service quality

*Björken* has a high proportion of educated staff. Two out of the three employees are academically educated preschool teachers. The third employee is an educated caregiver. Our interviewee Bodil Steen is thus one of two preschool teachers. Some of the actual care, however, is provided by parents, who generally lack any formal education in the area of childcare. But as Steen points outs, parents are only present in regular care on Tuesday afternoons, three weeks out of four. The rest of the day-to-day care is per-
formed by the three employees. And they are very experienced. The labour addition of the parents is thus marginal, quantitatively speaking. It seems far-fetched to argue or suspect that its impact might jeopardise the pedagogical environment, even if one were to assume that all parents with children in co-operative care were potential social disasters. At Björken, there are 15 children in one group. But sometimes there are as few as 11-12, which is too few – and sometimes there are more than 15. Steen says that they try to give all the children proper attention and she feels they can manage this with three teachers on 15 children.

The staff must, however, spend some of their time cooking and doing the dishes. Steen would rather spend all of the time with the children but she must spend hours every day with other things. This leaves the group of 15 children with two or even one member of the staff while the others are performing duties that are done by extra non-pedagogical staff at most other preschools. Steen regards this as another result of Björken’s modest size; it has very limited resources. Steen is not happy about having only three full-time employees. She thinks that it might have been more effective to have more part-time employees. The staff sometimes take courses in various educational and policy fields. Lately, she notes, there has been recommendations from the City Council to educate the staff in language analysis, something especially important in this local community.

When it comes to service quality, Steen emphasises the homogeneity of the group. The small group is like an extended family where all the children know all the parents. She willingly admits to one problem with service quality; the less than perfect building of the facility. Björken is located in the old library of an earlier primary school. The older children have no problems with the building but it is obviously not built with the needs of the smaller children in mind. The staff, for instance, has to climb a set of stairs to get the children to the bathroom.

**Integration and participation**

The social integration is not such a big issue at Björken, at least not presently. It is suggested by the interviewee that it is a special kind of parents who choose parent co-operatives. This rarely includes immigrants. Steen says that only one family at present is of non-Swedish descent at Björken, which is a poor reflection of the demography in the local area. “We do not
have as many as they do in municipal childcare”, Steen reflects. Björken is thus a very homogenous preschool facility.

However, the co-operative has the experience and knowledge necessary to deal with the special needs of children from non-Swedish families. Steen practices a special kind of language analysis where the children’s speaking patterns are analysed so that efforts can be made to improve on their communication capabilities. The children are taped, and the tapes analysed according to special methods.

Parental participation is of course significant at a parent co-operative. The parents are the employers and make all major decisions, even if they do so after consultations with the staff representative at the board. Steen points out that the staff has all the necessary information about how to run the co-op. Judging from Steen’s general description, participation from parents as well as staff is nearly complete, possibly at the expense of management efficiency. The most important decisions are often made by people who do not have all the know-how, according to Steen.

User experience of co-operative childcare in Skärholmen

To turn from the managerial to the parent level, the first thing our interviewee parent H has to say is that it is the parents who are running things at the Björken co-operative. Parent H is both mother of a child at the co-op and head of personnel. She makes clear that she likes the co-operative way of running things; she likes that she is allowed to get really involved in her son’s childcare. “It is a lot of work”, she says. She explains how all parents have to participate in one of the three work groups or the board, which is also in this sense regarded as a kind of work group. The groups are the fixing group that deals with chores outside the everyday routine, the food and cleaning group that does all the shopping and the heavier cleaning, and the recruiting group that tries to ensure that there are always new children coming in when old ones leave. Then there is the board, where two parents serve for one year. Parent H is an exception to this rule; she has done two and a half years on the board.
When asked why she chose a parent co-operative, parent H admits that she picked *Björken* because there was a majority of Swedish children there. “It is really mixed at other places”, she says. She doesn’t live nearby *Björken*, but in her mind it is worth the effort to drive a little further in the morning if you like a particular preschool facility. She tried municipal preschooling before, but found that too much effort was put into language-training and other elements that she did not believe were beneficial to her son, whose needs were different than those focused on at the municipal facility. “They had pictures everywhere on the walls so that the children could communicate by pointing”, parent H says and although she thinks this is fine for children who do not speak Swedish, it is not what she wants for her son. Parent H thinks that time is better spent for her son if he does not have to go through the same stages as relatively newly arrived children.

Parent H did a lot of research on childcare in the area, before deciding on *Björken*. She looked everywhere, both close to home and in other parts of town. She says that most other parent co-operatives had very long waiting times. There is not a great demand for parent co-operatives here, she says. *Björken* is one of the few that exist but there still isn’t much of a waiting time. She thinks that local families generally just want to drop their kids off in the morning and not have to worry until picking them up again at night.

Parent H can think of a number of things that make this form of provision especially attractive to her. One is the fact that there is always enough staff. Staff is replaced in case of sickness. Her experience from the municipal sector is that sick employees are not always replaced; sometimes it has no substitute preschool teachers. At *Björken*, they can always call in parents to take care of business. “There is a feeling of security in that”, parent H claims.

Parent H also likes the fact that she gets to know the other parents, something that would not happen at a municipal preschool, according to her. There are different kinds of people among the parents at *Björken*, with academic as well as non-academic backgrounds, artists and workers and so on. There are also a few non-Swedish parents, which parent H finds positive. She feels good about being a part of her son’s care during the days, even though she has to go to work. “You know that he is in a good place”, she says. “It feels good to know what happens to my son during the day”.


Parent H is also very happy with the staff. She says that the different sets of parents are very important to the way things are handled at Björken. The quality of the cooperation between parents and staff also varies with different parents. Right now they have a great set of parents, parent H says. When asked about what is less good about a parent co-operative, parent H admits that “it can be a bit of a chatter at times, but there are no real problems. You get used to it”, she says. She is also less than satisfied with the building.

Parent H stresses that one family makes the difference between what is economically viable and what is not, at a small non-public preschool like Björken. It used to be easy to get a slot in care at Björken, she says, but since the fall of 2003 it has become much harder. This might be because families from other parts of Skärholmen move children to the local sub-area, which is regarded as a somewhat more respectable part of the ward.

Parent H feels that she plays (at least) double roles at Björken, with partly conflicting interests at times, being the head of personnel and employer/manager at the same time. This means that she has to represent the staff’s interest towards, amongst others, herself. She senses, however, that she has learned to handle this situation fairly well. “We all know each other’s positions”, parent H says. This is a very small preschool and everybody is able to make their opinion known to the others.

Local managerial level in for-profit childcare in Skärholmen

The second studied facility in the Skärholmen ward is called Förskolan Femtiettan (Preschool number fifty-one), which refers to the street number of its location. In the account, it will be referred to as Femtiettan, i.e. “Number fifty-one”. Our interviewee Ulla Hedberg is CEO.

Goals

The goals for Femtiettan are all assembled from the national preschool educational programme, LPFÖ 98. While following the general guidelines in the national educational programme, Femtiettan has also used it as an inspi-
ration for the preschool’s special profile. Hedberg says that the nine, later eight, co-founders read the document and sat down to discuss which specific segments in the national preschool programme they considered to be the most essential. These segments provided the foundation to Femtiettan’s own pedagogical programme. Key words in the facility’s own programme are: happiness, safety, development, self-confidence, empathy, playfulness, responsibility and cooperation.

Hedberg argues that there is a clear development towards more school-like pedagogies in Swedish childcare today, something she does not approve of. Femtiettan embraces the “classical Swedish childcare ethics”, which emphasises the pedagogical value of playing games and developing freely as a child. Hedberg points to a division between school and preschool pedagogy in Swedish childcare today. “We are on the play-side”, she declares proudly, meaning that children enrolled at Femtiettan are expected to play, rather than attend school-like education. She also recognises a problem in the fact that preschools now tend to be situated together with or actually in regular primary schools and even share some activities. The schools are so much bigger and so influential, she argues, that the special needs for preschoolers are set aside in favour of school pedagogy and the needs of older children.

As for other goals, Hedberg especially stresses the health and environmental ambitions in the facility profile. Femtiettan is certified to use the KRAV-label for environmental sustainability, a stamp of approval from the KRAV-association, which is a key player in the market for environmentally friendly and organic products in Sweden.

Diversity

As far as our interviewee is able to tell, there are few or no real differences in the actual childcare provided by different childcare givers. She holds that there are thus no substantial differences between Femtiettan and the neighbouring facilities run by the ward – at least not in the general approach to children. The main difference, Hedberg attributes to the staff, and not to the organisational structure. Femtiettan was earlier municipally run. Hedberg illustrates the importance of the staff by pointing to the fact that all families at Femtiettan chose to remain after it was reorganised as a for-profit preschool. She says that the parents do not care about the organisa-
tional structure as long as they are pleased with the staff, or as long as the chemistry is right between parents, staff and children.

Hedberg protests (somewhat oddly) against the notion, supplied by our interviewer, that Femtiettan is in fact a private childcare solution. “We are not really private” she argues, referring to the fact that Femtiettan is run along the same guidelines and follows the same regulations as the municipal preschools. She also reminds the interviewer that the only real source of income is from the national financing system and with the maxtaxa in place, the financial freedom of Femtiettan is minimal. The only differences between Femtiettan as a municipal preschool and today’s for-profit Femti- ettan are that the staff is more loosely associated with its employer, at least in a legal sense, and that the for-profit Femtiettan establishment has a somewhat higher degree of freedom in deciding its pedagogical orientation. Apart from that, “the municipality and the educational board at the city level decide everything”, Hedberg declares. She even goes so far as to say that “this is basically a municipally run preschool”. So why did she and the other co-founders go through the trouble of transforming Femtiettan to a for-profit preschool?

“I was dead tired of the municipal organisation” Hedberg says, describing a situation in which she was called to one meeting after another to receive the latest instructions from a distant, anonymous, municipal administrator. That policies changed a lot with the change of civil servants, eroded her confidence in the municipal organisation. Hedberg willingly admits that she also “wanted to decide more myself”. The decision to break free of the municipal organisation was a way to gain power over everyday decisions. “I like to be in control over the decisions that concern me”, Hedberg says.

But there is also another reason why Femtiettan was transformed into a for-profit establishment: pressure from the City Council to try alternative forms of provision for childcare. According to Hedberg, the liberal/conservative City Council of 1998-2002 was aggressive in its efforts to increase the share of private alternatives to the municipal childcare in the Skärholmen ward. Femtiettan was thus strongly encouraged to shift to private management. They were provided with education, information and professional help from consultants, free of charge, from the Council. The Council’s efforts were maybe less successful in Skärholmen than in other parts of the city, but Femtiettan did decide to privatise in the year 2000,
since they were tired of the municipal organisation, and since the backing from the then Stockholm City Council was unconditional.

These favourable conditions changed when the Social Democrats gained power in 2002. The positive attitude towards the new for-profit Femtiettan was replaced with a more neutral stance from the city. In some respects the attitude even became slightly hostile. Hedberg mentions one example. Femtiettan pays rent to the city of Stockholm. Recently there has been a change of status in their contract with the city; they are now considered a “for-profit organisation” which means that the rent has doubled. Hedberg notes that this has put enormous strain on the facility and indirectly on the members of the staff that put up the money when establishing the preschool. Conditions have, in other words, changed considerably with the political shift of power in the City Council.

With the benefit of hindsight, Hedberg today offers a more sceptical view in terms of why the City Council once pushed them so hard to privatise. “They wanted to collect more taxes” she says and explains that a for-profit preschool must pay value added tax. Even though they are compensated to some extent for this, Hedberg is quite certain that more is paid in taxes than is received in VAT-compensation.

Hedberg briefly touches on how the municipal preschools reacted on the establishment of for-profit actors in the field of childcare. Many of the municipal employees reacted with distrust towards the changes, according to Hedberg. She argues that the long tradition of municipal welfare solutions for childcare has established a sense of self-righteousness among municipal actors. “They are stealing our children,” was the kind of reaction Hedberg faced from the municipality, even though she does not claim to have heard those exact words from any municipal official.

“Non-municipal operators don’t have the same safety net as municipal ones do”, our interviewee concludes. She holds that the non-municipal actors are much more exposed to the economic and political reality of the day. During periods with fewer children they experience economic hardship, and if there should ever appear a surplus in the budget, this would be needed as a buffer fund for the next downturn.
Financing

The nine founders (all former employees from the time when Femtiettan was run by the ward/municipality) founded Femtiettan on a system of equal size stock investments. Hedberg has since acquired one more of the 9 shares, now holding two, one more than all the others. Since the first year of for-profit management (2001) generated a SEK 300,000 (about € 33,333) surplus, some of the investments have been repaid as yields. The second year Femtiettan gave a profit of SEK 80,000 (€ 8888). The first two years of the new establishment, earnings were above expectation. “The accountant usually brings pleasant surprises”, Hedberg says. The book-keeping is done in a down-to-earth manner. “I do most of the work with the economy back home on my couch”, remarks Hedberg.

A for-profit preschool such as Femtiettan is supposed to generate a profit but this is hard to achieve when the only source of income is taxpayer money, Hedberg says. She also feels that it is somewhat awkward to seek profit in a business such as childcare. She makes very clear that economic gain was not a motive for privatising Femtiettan.

The number of children at the preschool is vital for the economy. Femtiettan is permitted to care for fifty children. More is paid for younger children and children with disabilities. They therefore welcome young children and try to recruit children for the spring term especially, since this maximises earnings.

With the transition, Hedberg and Femtiettan simply took over the municipality’s bills. In fact, they still share utility bills with a municipal preschool facility next-door and pay half of these. The biggest expense is the monthly rent, which has recently been doubled by the City Council, from SEK 25,000 (€ 2777) to SEK 50,000 (€ 5555).

The maxtaxa-reform had little effect on the facility’s budget, Hedberg notes, since fees were already, at the time of the reform, kept roughly in line with the municipal fees. The maxtaxa only meant a minor loss of income, for which Femtiettan was to a large extent compensated. It did, however, impose more severe limits on the economic flexibility of the establishment, according to our interviewee.

The economy is a source of great concern and uncertainty for the staff at Femtiettan. It is seldom known just how many children there will be the following year, which makes economic prospects hard to ascertain. There is
now a very slim margin but, for the time being, it is possible to make ends meet. Hedberg is unable, however, to say if Femtiettan will face bankruptcy in a not too distant future. Still, she thinks that today’s uncertainty is easier to bear than the feeling of being controlled by uninformed civil servants during the municipality years.

Access

Access to Femtiettan fluctuates somewhat but there is usually no problem getting a slot within a reasonable amount of time. Parents generally do not have to wait the specified period anyway, Hedberg explains. The three-month waiting limit is a legal standard that in her interpretation prohibits longer queues. She prefers to have a time of notice before accepting a child, so that he or she can be properly introduced, but occasionally children have been enrolled as early as two weeks after first contact was established. Femtiettan accepts children with disabilities and has a special group with fewer children to care for those with special needs.

Service quality

Femtiettan has a low ratio of academically trained pedagogical staff, as only one out of eight staff members holds an academic degree. The rest of the eight have lower level childcare training, but all of the employees have extensive experience, Hedberg notes. The average age among the staff is relatively high. At times, Femtiettan employs temporary staff to cope with increased workloads. Recently, three younger people have been hired, one educated in the field and two without formal education. Femtiettan also employs two part-time cooks who do all the cooking.

Ulla Hedberg is currently seeking an academically educated preschool teacher, but these are hard to find, she says. The interviewer asks if she thinks a for-profit preschool has a special disadvantage in competing for skilled staff. Hedberg answers, “yes, maybe”. The municipal preschools can offer better job security and social benefits that a for-profit preschool is unable to match. “Once you get employment in the municipality, you are certain to have a position for a long time somewhere in the municipality” Hedberg says, and continues: “We are too small to offer such job security”.

157
In other words, skilled childcare staff is generally hard to find and possibly especially hard to find for non-municipal actors.

The pedagogical groups at Femtiettan are somewhat smaller than in most comparable municipal preschools. The ideal number is 15 in each group of children, according to Hedberg. Sometimes there are as few as 10 or 12 children in one group, but this is not economically viable. At other times they are forced to jam 16 or even 17 children into one group, but this is pedagogically very bad and groups of that size are avoided if at all possible.

**Integration and participation**

Social integration concerns come naturally for any practitioner of childcare in the ward (Femtiettan is located in the Sättra neighbourhood), because of the high levels of ethnic and social heterogeneity in the local community. Hedberg regards the many ethnic groups as an asset for the preschool, in which about 50% of the children are of non-Swedish background. Hedberg remarks that immigrant families at first pressure her to get their children into pedagogical groups with many other immigrant children. They usually reconsider these demands later on, however, and request to have their children in groups where the other children speak fluent Swedish.

The language issue is important at Femtiettan. Activities are designed to provide natural language training in a calm environment. There is a reading-session every morning where stories in Swedish are read and explained to the children. Femtiettan also uses a lot of music and nursery rhymes. All of the staff sing with the children and one of the employees with a musical education accompanies on the piano, according to Hedberg. “Some children learn to sing in Swedish before they know the meaning of the words”. Hedberg believes in the importance of a peaceful and reassuring setting where the children can develop their language abilities at their own pace.

The most important decisions for the facility are made at board meetings where all the shareholders/employees participate. Everyday decisions are taken at the daily planning session during the 9.30 am coffee breaks. At these informal meetings, activities for the different groups are decided. “Sometimes I do informal inquiries among the staff before taking a decision, sometimes I just decide by myself”, Hedberg says. Femtiettan has no
formal participation by parents in the running of the preschool, but Hedberg stresses that the staff tries to be open to wishes from the children’s parents.

User experience of for-profit childcare in Skärholmen

Parent I is the mother of one of the 50 children at Femtiettan. Her son is two years old and thereby in the lower age span that Femtiettan favours because of the higher revenues generated by younger children.

Parent I was recommended Femtiettan by a relative. The relative’s son already attended Femtiettan and the family had only positive things to say about the preschool. The outstanding quality of the staff was one particular point that was made. When parent I’s family decided to move to Sätra, Femtiettan was a natural choice. The quality of the staff is a recurring theme during the interview. Parent I had previous experience from municipal childcare and she finds that the staff at Femtiettan is much more actively involved with her child. They simply seem to care more, she feels, for the welfare of the children.

Parent I had no problem to get a position for her son at Femtiettan, but recognises that she probably was lucky to get a slot so smoothly. The family was notified in April that the child was welcome after the summer. Another two-year-old boy had left, and this opened a vacancy.

As for parental participation, parent I knows of no formal function that would allow her as a parent to influence how things are run. During parent I’s earlier experience with a municipal preschool, she had some possibility to contribute in a special parent council. She is not aware if there is such a council at Femtiettan, but she has not heard of any such channel there. She has not, however, felt the need for a special parent council since the staff is so receptive to parental views and suggestions. “I really feel that I can talk to the staff”, parent I states. She also receives a weekly newsletter from Femtiettan. This contains the latest information on what goes on at the facility. Parent I exemplifies with a notice by Hedberg that Femtiettan is about to modernise and improve the kitchen area in a recent issue.

Parent I is not completely sure of in what organisational form Femtiettan is run. She seems aware of the fact that it is not a municipal preschool but the interviewer is the one who to her surprise informs her that Femtiettan is a for-profit business. This could be consequential of Hedberg’s philosophy
that *Femtiettan* is “not really private”. It should be noted, though, that the child of parent I at the time had only attended *Femtiettan* for a few months and that the organisational structure of the preschool might not be one of parent I’s greatest concerns when the child is obviously being well cared for. It could also be mentioned that, curiously, no one our interviewer interacted with in the Sätra local area seemed to be aware of the fact that *Femtiettan* was a for-profit venture, which does suggest that it is not regarded as a merit for a preschool to be run as a company locally. Another aspect that may be illuminated here is that, for newcomer families, there are no very obvious traits distinguishing small-scale for-profit care from care that is provided by the municipality. Generally speaking, this is logical in an institutional field of the Swedish kind, where, as stressed repeatedly in this text, the same standards apply to all providers of childcare.

Parent I thinks that the relatively small pedagogical groups are positive, although she is aware that her son attends an especially small group. Parent I also admits that a child of this young an age might not put the quality of the care at *Femtiettan* to any real test, and that there might be deficiencies that she could not know about yet. The relative of the family that originally recommended *Femtiettan*, however, has an older boy attending a special group for five-year olds and, as far as parent I knows, that family is very pleased with the care provided there.

Parent I is, additionally, asked about the many different ethnic identities among the children at *Femtiettan*. She considers this positive; she was aware of the fact that there would be many children of non-Swedish descent. She finds it interesting to meet parents from other cultures. On the same note, *Femtiettan* sometimes arranges social events for parents and children, after regular business hours. Parent I mentions a potluck to which families from a range of countries contributed with traditional foods from their country of origin. This was highly successful, she says.

Parent I’s overall impression with *Femtiettan* is, as can be surmised, very positive. She recalls the information leaflet she was handed at the introduction. This contained the preschools keywords (cf CEO Hedberg’s enumeration above) and parent I does feel that every one of those keywords is practiced in the actual care given at *Femtiettan*. She seems to imply that the staff at *Femtiettan* deserves praise for making it such a great preschool. In this perspective, our interviewee unambiguously seems to indicate that the mode of organisation be of lesser importance.
Some remarks on the Skärholmen ward

As in Maria-Gamla Stan, the provision of childcare in the Skärholmen ward seems to function well in most senses addressed by this investigation. One feature worth stressing here, however, is the relative lack of challenge to the main municipal mode of care. The organisational set-up of the ward’s entire childcare sector thus comes across as less diversified than in inner city wards. This is somewhat paradoxical, since the demography of the ward is far more heterogeneous than all the other studied cases. Is this an adequate way to meet the needs of the local population? On the one hand, it may be argued that the superior cumulative welfare resources available for municipally run care are necessary in order to cope as well as possible with a multi-layered and non-conformist setting of this kind. On the other, that the patterns of social heterogeneity ought perhaps more clearly be reflected by institutional diversification in systems designed to deal with social needs that must likewise be interpreted as heterogeneous. If the main policy goal thus is large-scale normalisation and integration of newcomers, then the former approach would perhaps be more effective. But if other values were to be pursued instead – like cross- or multi-cultural recognition/autonomy – then the picture becomes more complex.

The ultimate issue here seems to be if and to what extent heterogeneous needs/demands can be sensitively met by large-scale municipal institutions. The local administration seems quite aware of the challenge, and obviously mobilises to respond as pro-actively and specifically as possible. But even so, the question remains. It is not inconceivable that a more varied structure of the organisational level of provision would be even better equipped for success in this regard than the ward currently is.

Another aspect that deserves to be brought up in the Skärholmen context is the report from the management of the converted for-profit facility of the heavy political pressure that was applied by the earlier City Council on the ward to shift from municipal to private forms of care. This pressure was apparently felt strongly even at the level of individual childcare facilities. As similar views have not been reported from our other cases, the question springs to mind whether the Council’s attitude at the time was similar to all wards in the city. We have no way to independently assess if this was the case, but one notion – if the Council approach indeed varied – could be that this was occasioned by the social demography of the different city wards.
One hypothetical scenario could then be that socially less well-to-do parts of the city were considered easier targets for an offensive ideological agenda of reform. Another possibility is that the reform was considered a more effective means to promote and confirm patterns of social cohesion in less homogeneous wards, like Skärholmen. We can, however, only point out these questions here, and have no way of answering them.

However, given the repeated observation in this study that alternative childcare seems more compatible with the values characteristic of more well-to-do segments of the population, it interestingly opens for the idea that the earlier urge on the part of the City Council to privatise municipal care was motivated by an ambition to make childcare service provision in Skärholmen (and, possibly, other less affluent wards) more diversified. The underlying notion would then be to introduce or foster middle-class value patterns and social welfare demands through organisational reform in these wards. By diversifying provision, the desired values of participation and engagement would possibly end up being strengthened. Whether this (if the general account of the motives behind the pressure is indeed correct) was or would be a viable strategy is impossible to ascertain. As indicated above, however, one thing that can be asserted for the Skärholmen case is that a striking result of the earlier, modest wave of conversion has been to drain the municipal childcare system of a number of sorely needed Swedish-speaking children. In the end, it seems as though the reform contributes to an already segregated system.
7 The Bromma ward

This third empirical chapter deals with childcare provision in the Bromma ward, on the western brink of the inner city. The local set-up, emphases and general experience, differ somewhat from the ones in the Skärholmen and Maria-Gamla Stan wards, but as in all four geographical cases covered by the study, structural formats for provision are the same.

Goals

Apart from the national goals, Bromma has defined two goal levels for childcare. One kind has to do with directions to reach quantifiable stages; the other concerns more general, policy-dimensions of care. According to Monica Ullvede, an official of the Bromma ward who is responsible for childcare, an illustration of the first level this year is that all employees in the municipal sector should have a satisfactory work environment by 2003. At the end of each fiscal year, the presentation of the ward’s financial and other results include assessments of this goal level. At the second level, another goal for childcare is to teach the children to relate democratically and fairly to each other in their peer-groups. The issue of children’s socialisation thus constitutes a basic aspect of the ward’s intentions. In this sense, it reflects the preoccupation with democratic values at the central level of the Swedish state.

Diversity

In the ward, some 30 % of all childcare facilities are non-municipal. The conditions for this group in Bromma mirror the conditions for the group citywide. The coordinator points out that the ward (just as other Stockholm
wards) only has indirect control and influence over this sector. As indicated in the discussion above, a central administration for non-municipal preschools and schools was in place at the time of the study. This implied a lesser level of direct municipal supervision, but, our interviewee stresses, the ward has no indications that quality or operational standards are lower for the alternative providers than for the municipal sector.

In terms of reproducing, producing, or simply coping with patterns of social diversity in Bromma, the situation seems to us to be similar to that of most other Stockholm wards. There are such local patterns, but the system itself is not necessarily a main cause of these. Both in purpose and practice, it tends to follow the national priorities for preschools that have been mentioned above. Neither this nor any of the other wards could get away with handling local childcare needs in any blatantly discriminatory way.

Financing
Financing structures and patterns are the same in Bromma as elsewhere in Stockholm. Our interviewee concurs with the dominant interpretation that non-municipal facilities maintain a slight economical edge over municipal providers since they do not carry the same administrative burden. In this sense, small-sized, decentralised solutions could be read as a more effective means of provision than the traditional large-scale system is able to offer. The question, however, is complex. Superficially, this theory seems to hold water. But from a broader perspective, one could argue that private providers of different kinds benefit from a legal-institutional superstructure in the field of welfare that they have to assume very little responsibility for. If, for instance, the financial structures were not already established, the non-municipal sector would play a completely different game than it does now.

The empirical indications thus fit with the general notion that non-municipal childcare is slightly ahead of the municipal sector in terms of financial structures. This advantage can often be converted to better care, but the causal relationship here is not clear. It would be misleading to assume that there is a direct relation between financing and quality. Social context and other structural dimensions would seem to play a prominent role as well. It could be argued that general service levels and characteristics to a great extent mirror the local context. A socio-economical context
like Bromma’s would thus seem to generate a certain attitude and culture in the field of childcare, broadly speaking, regardless of the mode of provision.

Access

Bromma is covered by the same “guaranteed-place” provision as other parts of the city. In practice, parents may not be able to get a place in childcare right on their doorstep, but this aspect aside, supply meets demand. Ullvede notes that some families decline the place they’re offered, because it is not at the location they would like. But throughout the ward, only some 25 children do not attend preschool childcare. The main reasons for this voluntary abstention from using the system, according to the coordinator, are one unemployed parent or that the family hires a nanny.

A strong impression conveyed by our interviewee is that parents do not choose facility on grounds of the family’s socio-cultural or economical circumstances. Instead, the choice is practical. Families want childcare to be convenient, i.e. fit well with everyday work and commuting patterns. The demand for childcare places in the ward is steadily on the increase. The ward recognises that local expansion in the sector will have to take place, even though the central city’s view is that the overall number of available places in Stockholm should rather decrease. The area is already densely inhabited, and there is some worry that the expected volume of new resident families will put too great a strain on the provided childcare (as well as schooling). There is scepticism as to whether the “guaranteed-place” strategy will be possible to uphold in the coming years, particularly considering the ambition of the city to make pedagogical groups smaller.

One accessibility dimension highlighted by Ullvede is that family patterns are different than they used to be. For children who divide their life between two separated parents at different addresses there is the option to use two different childcare facilities half-time, one according to the choice (and in the vicinity) of each parent. This is not considered as an ideal alternative, but if needs can be met in no other way the ward is flexible. This solution can be required or demanded for other reasons as well.

There is no night-open municipal care facility in the Bromma ward. Instead, a system is provided where a caretaker spends the night in the child’s
home as parents work. This is a rare solution, subject to a complex screening process, where other conceivable ways to deal with the situation are first investigated and discarded. Main alternatives are to have children minded by relatives or friends of the family, and to consider the option for parents to get other jobs. If the former alternative is viable, it is possible to apply for remuneration from the municipality. Grandparents may thus, for instance, get paid to care for their grandchildren. (A similar solution has for a long time been in place when it comes to personal assistants for disabled people who live in their own or their families’ homes. Care for this group is often provided by their own kin, but paid for and professionally regulated by the public welfare sector, either at the primary or secondary municipal level.)

Non-municipal facilities differ from municipal ones for instance by the fact that they independently control admittance. This gives more influence over whether siblings should be kept together in the same pedagogical groups. As shown earlier in the analysis, another dimension here is that parent co-ops, for instance, tend to be smaller in size. This means that the “sibling principle” is a less prominent phenomenon in facilities run municipally. There, groups often have to be restructured and reshaped to adjust to population changes in the area. Since the municipal services have to be accessible to everyone, as a system they cannot protect themselves from demographic effects and focus only on social and pedagogical continuity as their competitors are free to do. Ullvede observes that non-municipal services, all in all, can keep activities more coherent. The same staff is generally present through the day and children’s groups are more actively formed by the facility. Care can thus to a greater extent be cast in formats that suit the preferred ideas of childcare.

One piece of additional information supplied by our Bromma interviewee, however, is a feeling that parents who make an “active” choice of childcare are more inclined to carry a greater burden in various regards than others.

Service quality

In the ward, a “psycho-social” inspection round, including every municipal facility, is arranged each year. At this point, Ullvede meets with each local
facility manager for an assessment of the state of the complete facility. The current working of the facility and potential goals and directions for the coming year are discussed at these meetings.

Ullvede also stresses that the ward’s quality work has improved radically over the last decade. It is now more conscious and systematic than before. This has both caused and resulted in a stronger emphasis on the continuing professional development of the staff. Today, there is a collegial network for local municipal facilities where various issues can be handled. One problem here, however, is that there is not always sufficient time to act on the insights reached in this way. The network certainly produces creative views and solutions, but implementation is not always adequate; be it on the level of the facility, the ward or the municipality. Time and resources are limited.

One issue highlighted by our Bromma (as well as Maria-Gamla Stan) administrative interviewee is that overall quality levels in childcare have risen over the last decade. Staff is now able to focus harder on children with “special” psychological and other needs. The main interpretation is that average stress levels in today’s families are high – and may have increased in the course of the 1990s. Conceptually, Ullvede claims that the general trend has gone from emphasising the “faults” to stressing the capabilities of individual children in the zone where social, cognitive and other difficulties are clearly above average. The higher level of professional competence today is repeatedly stressed by the coordinator. As in Maria-Gamla Stan, the ambition to work for comprehensiveness in the social welfare sector is a main priority for the ward’s administrators. The increased professionalism is visible when it comes to coordinating and adjust to the complexity of the spectrum of social needs amongst local residents. Again, the levels of in-house competence and overview seem to have benefited from Stockholm’s ward reform in this respect.

Gaps between municipal and non-municipal services in terms of quality are reportedly very hard to see in the ward. Standards of performance are not the same in all facilities, but do not seem to co-vary with the type of provider. It is stressed, however, that non-municipal services allow greater margins for flexible solutions. Opening hours may be designed to fit specific demands and can be adjusted as circumstances change, as long as a minimum eight hours of availability is provided. As indicated above, the
standard opening hours for municipal facilities in Stockholm are 6.30 am to 6.30 pm.

Integration and participation

The situation in Bromma concerning integration and participation resembles that of most other Stockholm wards (even if the local social set-up is far less heterogeneous than, for instance, in the Skärholmen care). There is, however, a “family centre” in the ward, where parents on parental leave and others may spend time, relate to other parents, and solicit support from the ward’s resources. The centre organises a range of courses for parents where different aspects of child rearing and family life are discussed. And a non-public, educational organisation [bildningsförbund] arranges other courses, on cooking, nutrition, and everyday skills for parents, in the same building.

Some remarks on the Bromma ward

This third and final investigated Stockholm ward appears rather mainstream and similar to the initially described ward of Maria-Gamla Stan. In contrast to the situation in Skärholmen in the preceding chapter, there is again a fair diversity of provision in place, dealing with the care needs of local families. With a far less heterogeneous demographic set-up, the tensions between reasonably diversified supply and demand patterns are very modest. Again, this at first comes across as paradoxical. But the image alters if one moves beyond the mechanical notion that high levels of organisational diversity are (or ought to be) built up primarily to cope with social diversity. As pointed out in the foregoing, this interpretation is too simple, although its logic might seem compelling at first.

Instead, it appears from our Stockholm study that highly varied patterns of care provision are more likely to exist where the local population is or has been actively seeking alternate modes of care. This in turn seems to be connected to levels of socio-economic prosperity and stability – at least up to a certain point. Diversification thus seems to be a prerogative of the socially able and powerful.
8 The City of Östersund

Our aim in this final geographical case is to study the provision of childcare in the municipality of Östersund. Since the municipality both consists of the city and a number of surrounding villages, we have chosen to study one municipally run facility, and one parent co-operative centre, both located in the centre of the city, and another parent co-operative in a village just outside the city. One of the parent co-ops was selected on grounds of pedagogic style and the other for its location. Of the studied facilities, the parent co-op in the small village is situated in the most socially and economically well-to-do area. The families living in this area are often married, employed, and own their own house, all indicators of social stability. The other co-op is also located in a well-to-do area with high levels of social homogeneity.

The municipally run childcare facility is located in an area from the early 1970s. Originally many families with small children lived in the area, and when the children grew up and moved to other places the parents stayed on. Very few new families with small children have since then moved to this area. Now there are mostly elderly and some single parents who live in the neighbourhood. Because of the lack of local children in this area, this municipally run childcare centre is a transitory or buffer childcare facility [buffertförskola], attended by children from all over the city. This implies that the children enrolled come from different socio-economic areas, and also that if they were offered a place in a centre closer to home, they would probably accept it and move their child. One direct consequence of this is that some of the children stay for only a short period of time in this particular facility, which in turn means that it becomes harder to work with the group in a pedagogically developed and developing way.

---

143 Nina Seger is the main original contributor to this empirical section.
Östersund: city-level

Goals

Our interviewee at the central municipal level in Östersund, Mrs. Svaleryd – who is the administrative head of the city’s childcare provision – describes the goals of the municipal childcare as set at two different levels of the organisation. The more general goals originate from the political level. These include local quality goals and criteria, establishing minimum standards for childcare provision within the municipality. Mrs. Svaleryd emphasises that the goals set up at the municipal preschools reflect the wishes of the personnel: “Of course the staff is involved in that process as well”, she says. Setting up goals based on the wishes of the staff is, however, somewhat problematic:

If you ask the staff, they would say that it is hard because of all the different interests and of course that creates conflicts. The politicians say that we have to meet goals and have this quality but we do not get enough money to do it.

Municipal childcare normally offers parents to participate in a parent committee, meeting twice yearly. These meetings are, however, information meetings rather than real channels for influence at the preschool. Details on how each of the public childcare facilities runs are worked out by the staff at individual preschools, in accordance with political guidelines.

Diversity

The distribution among municipal providers of childcare is dealt with by a policy of complete equality, at least judging from the description given by Mrs. Svaleryd. All the municipal services get the same administrative and economical support, Mrs. Svaleryd says. She would, however, like to see that every individual childcare centre starts its own local board. “That would really be good”, she states and adds, “both for them and for us”. Mrs. Svaleryd seems to be of the opinion that the co-operative providers of childcare could act as role models when it comes to democracy in the preschool organisation. They already have the kind of local boards she wishes for the municipal preschools to get, which, supposedly, would make them
better equipped to deal with diversity. “To develop democracy in the childcare services is important and a lot remains to be done”, Mrs. Svaleryd notes.

The municipal strategy for democracy in the childcare services is fairly diverse in itself. The municipality has one explicit plan for equality, another for environmental control, a third for how to tend to children with special needs, and so on. The municipality’s rules and criteria are, in other words, split up between many different policy areas. They are, however, the same for all the childcare centres in the municipality.

Financing

The municipality uses the same national resources to fund childcare in Östersund as in Stockholm and elsewhere in the country. It does, however, retain a substantially larger portion of the state’s funding meant for non-municipal services for local administrative needs than is the case in Stockholm. Municipal 2003 statistics furthermore indicate that municipal childcare is more costly in Östersund than the national average. That year, the total cost (including overhead) per child was SEK 101,000, compared to 95,900.144

Access

The municipality is obliged to offer a place in a public childcare service to parents within six months, compared to only three months in Stockholm. The municipality has no obligation to provide a place in childcare close to where the families live. Preschools do not, in other words, have to be in the immediate vicinity of a family’s home. The six-month rule only regulates the right to be offered a place in childcare somewhere in the municipality within that period of time. These, rather relaxed, regulations imply that parents may have to travel with their children for quite some distance, in order to leave them in the morning and to pick them up after work. This is justified by a consideration of the service quality, according to Mrs. Svaleryd. She argues that it is better to concentrate resources to a few loca-

144 Statistics are available at www.ostersund.se.
tions than to stretch them too thinly over many small day care centres, even if it means that transportation to and from the services becomes more difficult: “This is something we have to do, it is better to shut a smaller centre down so that we can maintain our good quality, but of course there is a problem for the parents”, she says.

Service quality

Mrs. Svaleryd stresses that the municipal preschools are regularly monitored and that their quality levels are controlled every year. It is up to each one of the preschools to undertake a yearly control of quality, which includes both staff and parents. The municipality collects the results from the different preschools and any failure to maintain the desired service quality is followed up. The findings from the different preschools are compared to the goals that are set in the rules and regulation described above. This way, the municipality claims, they can confirm that they have reached all the goals for any given year. Given, however, that there are no independent quality assessment methods, we assume that these monitoring process results perhaps run the risk of being slightly unreliable.

Integration and participation

The more detailed plans for how preschools should be run in the municipality are designed politically on the municipal level. Policies on such matters as integration and environment apply to all forms of childcare provision, not only the public kind. The co-operative preschools have their own local boards whereas the municipal schools only have the municipal plans as guidelines. Participation in the shaping of these is, thereby, closely associated with political involvement in the municipality
Local managerial level in municipal childcare in Östersund

Goals
The municipal preschool, where our interviewee, Mr. Johansson, is the manager, is run in accordance with the curriculum of the National Plan For Education, the LPFÖ 98, just as all other preschools in Sweden. The LPFÖ 98 is designed to provide a high minimum standard for Swedish preschools and lays the foundation for the managerial goals at Mr. Johansson’s facility. Exactly how the plan is implemented differs from year to year, however, depending on which parts managers like Mr. Johansson choose to emphasise any given year. The guidelines in the LPFÖ 98 are general and they leave room for each manager to develop a special profile for their preschool. At the time of the interview, Mr. Johansson was promoting mathematics and language in his particular municipal preschool in Östersund. The preschool is also focused on outdoor activities. Children spend a lot of time outside, Mr. Johansson says, regardless of weather conditions. This is saying a lot in a northern town like Östersund, where weather conditions during the winter can be quite severe. The preference for outdoor activities is illustrated and possibly inspired by the large garden and the playground that surround the preschool. The immediate surroundings, thereby, logically influence the shaping of the goals for the preschool.

Diversity
The childcare provision in Östersund shows relatively low levels of diversity among providers. As shown by previous studies, diversity among providers is generally greater in the major cities than in smaller towns like Östersund. There are no for-profit providers in Östersund. There are, however, several co-operative preschools in the area, even if the municipal solution still constitutes the norm. The manner in which the preschools handle the general diversity in society is another aspect of the question of diversity. Mr. Johansson’s preschool handles this aspect according to the LPFÖ 98 and the municipal plans in the area, which regulate the work with diversity in greater detail. The municipality has official plans for equality as well as for the care of children with special needs, which provide the guidelines
for Mr. Johansson’s preschool. The question of diversity is closely associated with a more general discussion of democracy. The municipal preschools do not have local boards for discussing urgent matters with parents at the preschool, as do the co-operatives.

**Financing**

Financing of childcare in Sweden is completely dominated by public funding. This is, of course no less true for the preschools in Östersund. Both municipal services and the co-operatives are funded municipally. Mr. Johansson’s preschool receives a larger sum than the co-operative preschools, as do the other municipal facilities. The larger sum for the municipal preschool is about €6000 per child and year, varying with the age of the child, the remuneration for younger children is somewhat higher. The €6000 should, however, cover all the major expenses for the child, such as rent, staff, food, pedagogical materials and so on. Mr. Johansson claims that this sum is basically insufficient. There is a possibility for each preschool to apply for supplementary funding for special events other than the usual day-to-day activities. Mr. Johansson has done this in the past and he senses that there is an element of competition to such applications, not unlike the funding of non-public events: “Maybe one should try to get some sponsor money,” he says half jokingly. The parent fees are not a viable source of additional funding. As mentioned above, the introduction of the *maxtaxa* has made the municipalities conform so that the parent fees are now income-related. Before the reform, Swedish municipalities themselves could decide on local tariffs more directly in line with local economical and political circumstances.

**Access**

As mentioned above, the municipality in Östersund is obliged to offer a place in childcare services, somewhere in the municipality, within six months. The preschool where Mr. Johansson works as manager is a “buffer facility”, which means that children from all over the city are enrolled there. The idea is to guarantee service quality by centralising care provision to a few preschools with a sufficient number of children. Mr. Johansson’s facility clearly reflects this strategy. The area where the service is located
used to have many families with small children. Now demography has changed and more families with older children and elderly people live there. The immediate effect for Mr. Johansson’s preschool is a low attendance and uptake rate which made that particular preschool well suited as a “buffer-facility” where the children enrolled come from far and wide within the municipality.

Service quality
The managers in the municipal childcare system have procedures for quality assessment of their service. The procedure involves the staff at each preschool, which jointly makes an assessment of the development of service quality. One interesting finding from these surveys, which seems to be common among preschools, is that the maxtaxa has lowered stress levels among the children. The reason for this is that now parents don’t have to rush to and from the preschools, as they did before. Since the maximum cost for their childcare is set, they don’t have to fear being charged extra by the preschool, if they exceed their children’s time limits. The children can arrive a bit earlier in the morning and stay on somewhat later in the afternoon without parents having to think about it costing them any more. This, in turn, means that the children and the parents can take the time to finish what they are doing before they leave. Mr. Johansson finds this development very positive, especially with regards to the parent’s involvement in their children’s care. The parents spend more time talking to the staff about what has happened during the day: “Now they ask more about the kid, and not only what we had for lunch”, Mr. Johansson reflects.

Integration and participation
The interview with Mr. Johansson suggests that the general level of parent participation at his establishment is very low. Parents are virtually absent both from the running of the preschool and all actual decision-making. Parents are neither very involved in the day-to-day activities, nor in the decision-making or organisation of the facility. Participation at his municipal preschool is largely limited to family committee meetings twice a year. These are, however, information meetings rather than real fora for democratic discussions and decisions, which limits the element of real participa-
tion. Mr. Johansson suggests that most parents, according to his experience, do not want to participate in the work at the preschool. This can be explained by the fact that most parents work full time and when it comes to their children they are content as long as the child appears to be cared for in a satisfactory manner during the days. Previously, parents were allowed to use the parental insurance scheme twice a year, to spend time at the preschool with their child, however. This opportunity was not used by many parents and at least some of those who used it were parents who possibly would have taken time off to do it anyway. In Mr. Johansson’s mind, there are two categories of parents: First, there is a group that really cares about the child and what she or he is doing all day. These parents usually stay on an extra half hour every day, asking questions not only about their own child but also about the whole of the group, plans for the future pedagogic work, etc. Second, there is a group consisting of parents who work full-time and who don’t feel that they have any extra time for asking questions about how things are going at the preschool. These parents show up each term at the regular parent and staff meeting, but that is all, Mr. Johansson concludes.

The generally speaking low level of participation at the municipal preschools might also reflect the low level of independence for the municipal childcare facilities. Mr. Johansson claims that control over every preschool is exercised by politicians at the central municipal level, and not at the provision-level of the organisation. Managers have little say, according to Mr. Johansson. Everything from staff issues to the size of children’s pedagogical groups is controlled from the municipal level and neither staff nor parents have any chance to influence any basic decisions. This fact does, of course, affect the enthusiasm towards parent committee meetings and the parents’ willingness to become involved negatively. The meetings do not stand out as a forum for influence for the parents. Parents who have issues they want to deal with usually bring these up directly with the staff.

User experience of municipal childcare in Östersund

Our interviewee at the municipal preschool in Östersund, here called parent D, wants the facility to take care of her child during the day and she wants her child to learn to communicate with the other children in the group at the
preschool. She also sees the preschool as an important introduction into the school-environment, even if she wants the preschool to be mainly a place for play and fun. It is also very important that her child has an opportunity to establish stable friendships and relationships. Parent D does not exercise any real influence on how the preschool is run, but rather leaves that up to the municipality. The major issue for her and the preschool in general today seems to be lack of funding and financial problems. The economic difficulties lead to larger groups, less staff per child, which in the end, adds up to less time for activities with the children as well as lower levels of attention to each individual child. Parent D expresses concern that she has little control of the service quality at her child’s preschool. She can, and often does, tell the staff what she thinks of the contents of the provided care, but she feels that they in turn have little or no say in these matters. Parent D even senses a kind of indifference towards the parents’ views and the concerns of the parents. “The staff always know best”, parent D says.

Parent D does not, however, seek full control of her child’s care during the day. She falls rather somewhere in between the two groups described by Mr. Johansson. She does not want full control as in co-operative day care but she does care about how the childcare facility she uses is run and mentions that she often stays a bit longer when dropping off and picking up her child, just to ask how her child is doing. Her main concerns are what the children had for lunch on each particular day and how her child gets along with the other children. Parent D mentions, however, that the staff do not always find the time to talk to her.

Local managerial level in co-operative childcare in Östersund

Due to the similarity in views and experience of the managers of both parent co-operative day care facilities in Östersund, they will be presented together. One co-op is located in central Östersund, while the other is found in a town outside the city. Mrs. Rydstedt is manager of the first and Mrs. Hedberg of the other.
Goals

The general theme in Mrs. Rydstedt’s and Mrs. Hedberg’s goals for their co-operatives is that care should feel comfortable and natural for all parties. The co-operative’s goal is to be a natural part of the child’s day, which means that some parents are always present and engaged in the daily activities. Mrs. Rydstedt as well as Mrs. Hedberg find that the continuity in staffing helps the children to feel at ease. The familiarity with the different parents makes the children feel more secure and embedded in a continuous social space. Here, both interviewees touch on the values that are thought of as leading principles at the co-operatives and conclude that respect and understanding towards each other is always very important. The facilities formulate their general orientations once every year in a special activity and orientation plan. All parents are involved in designing this yearly orientation, which comes naturally since all parents are active in the day-to-day running of the co-operative.

Diversity

As mentioned above, diversity among providers in Östersund is less significant than in a major urban area such as Stockholm. Yet, there is a considerable presence of popular parent co-operatives. The interviews with Mrs. Rydstedt and Mrs. Hedberg provide little indication that co-operative day care would have encountered special hardships because of its position as an “outsider” in a largely municipal childcare system. At the co-operative, the parents themselves largely do the planning for how to deal with diversity among the parents and children. While the municipal preschools arrange their work with diversity, according to the municipalities plans for such different areas as environment, accessibility for disabled children/families and equality, the co-operative simply meets challenges as they come. The co-operatives create their own plans. It is up to each individual facility to decide what is important, within the parameters of national and municipal goals.
Financing

Mrs. Rydstedt’s and Mrs. Hedberg’s co-operative day care facilities are funded the same way as other preschools. There is, however, not an equal distribution between the two kinds of provision. At the time of this study, municipal childcare facilities in Östersund received about € 6000 per child and year, while co-operatives received only € 4500 per child and year. The co-operative managers resent this discriminatory financing system, which causes problems for their preschools. The people involved in co-operative childcare spend a lot of time and effort to protest this inequality and they have tried to lobby for a reduction in the gap between the two forms of funding. However, these efforts have been largely unsuccessful. In spite of the economic inequalities, co-operative day care facilities still have a better financial performance than the municipal facilities. This is achieved even though they, on top of everything else, provide special services for the staff, such as continuing education.

Compared to the total cost for Östersund’s municipal day care in 2003, official statistics indicate that co-operatives actually may only be receiving as little as 62 % of the funding of these.\footnote{SEK 65,000, compared with 101,000. Official figures are available at www.ostersund.se. The main explanation for the discrepancy that is offered is that the municipality is obliged to maintain buffer-centres, departments for children with allergies and special needs, and that rents are substantially higher for municipal facilities. Still, it is hard to avoid the conclusion here that the gap is very significant indeed. It should be noted that two sets of information exist regarding levels of remuneration in the material. There is the € 4500/6000 information provided by our interviewees in 2003, and the SEK 65,000/101,000 (€ 7222/11,222) figures in the official statistics for that same year. The only reasonable explanation (if both sets are correct) is that the difference is attributable to municipal overhead costs. (This is also perhaps more likely, considering that the two sets of information have different sources. The former is provided from the receiving “floor”, the latter from the central municipal office.) If that is the case, however, one mathematical consequence is that Östersund “taxes” its municipal facilities at higher levels than it does non-municipal childcare. Municipal care retains 53 % of the overall cost per child; non-municipal care 62 %. Still, this hardly changes the disproportionate relationship between the sectors in absolute terms.} One explanation of this gap (if interpreted correctly) could be that the non-municipal sector in Östersund is weaker politically. Another that the competition on the level of practical provision – the local “market” of childcare – is very limited. As indicated
in foregoing sections, the gap between the funds received by public and non-public establishments to our minds ought to lessen.

As seen in the Stockholm segment of this study, the maxtaxa affected co-operatives especially. With the introduction of the maxtaxa in Swedish childcare in 2002, parent fees for a first child were limited to a maximum of 3% of the family’s combined taxable income. This is a substantial difference from the financing system in use before. In the old system, parents had to make sure that their child did not receive more than 40 hours of care every week or else they would have to pay extra. This is no longer the case, since the maxtaxa puts a ceiling on the maximum amount each family pays each month. The parents at the Östersund co-operative day care facilities pay less since the maxtaxa was introduced. They pay between €45-65 a month but they also provide unpaid labour to the preschool.

Perhaps this partly explains the reluctance on the city’s part to lessen the funding gap between municipal and co-operative care. As indicated, among other things, by the ability to retain such low fees, it does appear as though co-operative childcare in towns like Östersund already have a substantial economical edge over other providers. Were the City Council to refrain from having co-operatives contribute to the funding of the entire system at the reported level, the already visible difference in performance between the different providers would perhaps risk becoming extreme. Now, in a universalist welfare system, this would possibly be entirely unacceptable. According to this interpretation, it would jeopardise the legitimacy of the system to allow alternate providers in Östersund to get a fairer share of the state funds, since people might disapprove of such a difference. It would doubtlessly be hard to reconcile a situation of this kind with a reasonably egalitarian vision of social welfare.

Access

It is clear from the interviews with Mrs. Rydstedt and Mrs. Hedberg that the co-operative day care facilities in Östersund have little problem filling the empty slots at their preschools. There seems to be a steady demand for the co-operative alternative to municipal care. Therefore, co-operatives have long waiting lists and have had so for many years. It often takes a year or more for a family to get a place in a co-op. However, the co-operative form of provision might be less accessible for single parent families.
work obligation requirements for parents at co-operatives cause a tacit selection where single parent families are less inclined to choose the co-operative form. One such requirement is the cleaning and service that is performed during evenings, after regular work hours. Single parent families sometimes have little choice other than to bring along their child, which means that these children spend both all day and sometimes part of the night at the preschool. Co-operatives therefore have few single parent member families. There is, according to both Mrs. Rydstedt and Mrs. Hedberg, usually only one or two of them at any given time and it is not uncommon that they drop out after a year or so. Mrs. Rydstedt reflects on the situation for the single parent families:

No matter how much they want this, in the long run it is too much [work] for a single parent. They have to be engaged and enthusiastic all the time and they have nobody to share [the work] with. That can be too burdensome.

Another observation made in the study in regard to access is that parents in Östersund tend to choose childcare facilities in the vicinity of their workplace rather than their home, something that doesn’t seem to be the case in Stockholm.

**Service quality**

Both Mrs. Rydstedt and Mrs. Hedberg run a yearly process of quality self-assessment, just as other preschool managers in Östersund. The cooperative evaluations and plans for service quality differ inasmuch as both the staff and the parents are involved, rather than only the staff, as the case is with the municipal preschools. In our view, this evaluation method appears more reliable than the one preferred in the municipal sector. One finding in these assessments corresponds with that of the municipal preschools, namely that children tend to experience less stress since the max-taxa was introduced. Just as in the municipal preschool, parents tend to take their time when visiting the facility, which provides a less stressful and more secure atmosphere for the child.
Integration and participation

One of the key elements of a co-operative preschool is, of course, parental participation. In a co-operative, like the ones Mrs. Rydstedt and Mrs. Hedberg manage, the parents understand the organisation and make decisions about virtually everything. Their participation also extends to the daily routine activities, since they have to work an average of one week every year in addition. Every parent is involved in the board of the preschool at some time during their time at the co-op. Work on the board includes at least one meeting a month. The meetings between parents and regular staff, however, generally occur more often. There is a lot of time that has to be put into the preschool with the week of regular daytime work that is required by each parent. The work means, however, that many questions that arise among the parents can be addressed right away, during the daily activities. Many parents at Mrs. Rydstedt’s preschool say that they would not want it any other day. At co-ops parents thus, in other words, are in control of the proceedings. They work as a board and, within the legal parameters, they actually decide everything themselves. Both of the co-operative manager interviewees claim that they are receptive and tolerant in situations of conflicts and problems. They purport to try to deal with every kind of situation right away.

One unexpected aspect of the co-operative day care facilities in Östersund was that they have been involved in a European Reggio Emilia network for the past two years. They have visited different childcare facilities inspired by Reggio Emilia, both in Norway and Italy to learn more about the pedagogic style. There is, however, no formal cooperation between the different co-operative services in the municipality and almost no common activities among them.

User experience of co-operative childcare in Östersund

The interviewed parents at the co-operative day care facilities – referred to as parent E and F – had very similar expectations on their children’s preschools, compared to the views expressed by parents at municipal preschools. Of course, they both want the childcare service to take care of their children during the day. They also want the child to learn social skills,
which is an important introduction into the school environment. Parent E talks about the special requirements for parents at co-operatives. She has to work for one to two weeks a year in the co-operative and she also has to put in extra time for meetings at least once a month. The requirement for extra time is usually quickly filled by those engaged on the board. Parent E argues, however, that even if she has to put in a lot of time, taking time off from work, it is still worth it since she has superior control and gets an overview of the childcare quality, environment and pedagogy, compared to parents of children in municipal services. Parent E expresses this thus:

[I] get to see my child more, when it is my turn to work in the co-operative we go there together and leave there together and we do things together all week. We share something [together].

The parents are more than just a supplementary human resource pool at the co-operative preschools, however. They are in charge at the facilities, which is emphasised by the interviewed Östersund parents. In the co-ops, parents themselves decide on goals, staff, intake, and so on. They have basic control over the staff per child ratio (within limits given by the current economical circumstances), how many children that are enrolled in each age and pedagogical group, the formulation of specific pedagogical goals for the facility and so on.

Openings for a slot in co-operative day care are fewer than in municipal childcare. As mentioned above, parent E waited over a year for a place. It is quite common among parents to let their children attend municipal preschools while waiting for a place in co-operative day care, as indeed this parent recounts that she did. She never considered settling with the temporary place at the municipal preschool, though. The family felt that what the co-operative could offer was superior in a range of ways. Our interviewee speaks in very positive terms about such things as service quality and opening hours. She is also more content with the relation between staff and parents. Parent E feels she has to know that her children are taken good care of and, by working in the co-operative, she has the possibility to influence the daily work at the centre. It takes a lot of time of course, but it is only for a few years when the children are young and the time at the preschool is really well spent and there can be no question about whether or not it is worth it. Parent E also thinks it is good that all the parents have to take part
in the activities because that way the children also get to know the parents and families of the other children. When it is the fathers’ turn this also provides an opportunity for the children to interact with men during the day, an important point, considering that most preschool teachers are women. It is a paradox therefore that children of single parent families, where the single parent most often is the mother, should be the ones that most commonly use the municipal childcare service.

**Some remarks on Östersund**

The case of Östersund does not differ radically overall from the other cases. As is readily surmised from our account, both the municipal and co-operative modes of provision largely conform to the performance and logic of the same sphere of childcare in Stockholm on most dimensions studied here. There are contextual biases and differences in style, but structurally the situations are quite similar.

One aspect that may deserve to be highlighted in this closing paragraph, however, is the local economics of care. Apparently, the co-operative sector in Östersund is able to use its organisational advantages to outperform the municipal sector. Co-operatives are reportedly able to provide equal quality care at a substantially lower cost. In the Stockholm cases, this is not an obvious feature. Either the municipal sector in Stockholm is more efficient or alternate provision less organisationally apt than in Östersund. In this latter case, however, the difference is striking. To assess whether these co-operatives actually outperform municipal care at a rate that corresponds to the funding gap, investigations would be necessary into precisely how great a share of the held-back funds that goes towards meeting the actual costs of the co-operative sphere’s needs at the municipal level. As we have no way of doing this in the present effort, we can, again, only raise the issue and indicate that the ramifications of this observation – in terms of money, as well as of policy, autonomy and quality in childcare – are potentially serious.
9 Conclusion: social cohesion and Swedish childcare

As has become apparent in the course of this analysis, universality is an obvious and distinguishing mark of the Swedish childcare sector. Personal social services in the field are expected to be available in a standard fashion to all citizens and residents entitled to them – in this as in comparable areas of welfare. In order to achieve this goal the municipal sector has become the primary provider of welfare services. And childcare is no exception. It provides a rather telling example of this universality at work. Standards of provision and legal norms are national and virtually comprehensive – even though municipalities provide and supervise the services throughout the country, as well as add local priorities to the list of policy goals.

But the universality of the system is primarily structural. It embodies a comprehensive and well-established design on the level of public policy. Even while its legal, financial and professional parameters are uniform, our investigation shows how Swedish childcare has different faces on the level of practice. One way to describe this is in terms of social flexibility. The system is apparently able to bend, as it were, to local social, pedagogical, demographic and cultural patterns. The universality at the systems level is not necessarily reflected at the level of practical provision in such a way that identical practical arrangements or policy solutions are produced in each individual facility or every corner of the country. Instead, our different cases diverge visibly from each other. In Skärholmen, for instance, the specific local social structure generates a mode of provision different from that in Bromma, Maria-Gamla Stan, or Östersund. Needs and demands are approached in a different way, due to the relatively large proportion of refugees and newly arrived Swedes in the ward; i.e. groups who generally have higher levels of unemployment and make more extensive use of social insurance systems.
In this setting, the childcare system becomes an important tool to assess and strengthen bonds of social solidarity. It provides the local polity with a direct means to reach (out to) families with little or no footing at all in Swedish society. The emphasis on language development is a prominent aspect of this. Thus, childcare in Skärholmen is far ahead of the other cases in terms of explicitly working to promote social cohesion. In this instance, the ward’s preoccupation with issues linked to the strengthening of the social web clearly diverts from the other cases. In terms of the universalist welfare format, we find no indications that the national system itself makes it difficult to foster this policy orientation. The system instead seems to be adjustable to local needs. Looking at the situation in Skärholmen, it is both easy and hard to believe that childcare is provided on the same rationale and the same basis as in the other units of analysis (or, for that matter, the rest of the country).

One conclusion in this regard is that the issue of social solidarity or cohesion is impossible to approach in the same way across Sweden. The significance, relevance, and even the meaning of the concept varies. In fairly homogenous places like Bromma and Östersund, it makes less sense to focus on the cohesive functions of childcare. Here, the issue of social cohesion is not salient. In neither of these places are local social bonds in serious disarray, as far as we are able to judge. The childcare system is thus not geared towards restoring or strengthening them. It would make no sense here to think of childcare as a means to accomplish this; other goals are pursued instead. The point we would like to make here is that, although today’s system is comprehensive and uniform, it apparently provides a structural form that is quite malleable on the level of policy practice. The locale defines the manner and style of childcare production in Sweden. The national system provides for the “hard” economical and legislative aspects, but allows the local administration or non-municipal actors the latitude to let the “soft” dimension of childcare respond to local needs.

One question here is whether this should essentially be interpreted as a uniform/universalist or a fragmented/particularist system. Both views can be applied, but, as we have tried to point out, to different aspects of care. Some precision is required to proceed in this discussion. It would be too easy to state that the system is either too comprehensive (and running the risk of insensitivity to local needs and demands) or too fragmented (and running the opposite risk of not quite being a “system” in the first place). It
seems to us that any serious evaluation of the Swedish childcare sector would have to acknowledge that it is essentially heterogeneous and markedly socio-culturally supple on the level of practice at the beginning of the new century.

To recapitulate: the earlier more distinctly uniform Social Democratic system began to change in the mid-1980s, when demand for childcare outstripped supply for many consecutive years. After a change in the law, parents were permitted to form parent co-operatives for providing childcare, to employ day care staff and to manage the services themselves, while still receiving public funding for such services. The 1991 change of national government led to a further decentralisation of the provision of major personal social services, including childcare. However, the non-socialist government also made it mandatory for municipalities to provide access to childcare for all parents who required such services within six months. A greater diversity of providers followed in the wake of these reforms, and worker co-operative and private for-profit providers appeared in many welfare areas, including childcare. At roughly the same time, however, many municipalities began restricting access to basic social services due to growing budget constraints, and the fees paid by parents for childcare increased, as did the fees for a range of other welfare services. This caused new differences, and increased existing ones, between municipalities across the country in terms of the amount and quality of the provided services.

The Social Democrats were returned to power in 1994, both nationally and in the city of Stockholm, and devoted several years to reforming public finances. They then turned their attention to combating the growing diversity in the provision of childcare at the end of the decade by initiating a ceiling or *maxtaxa* for parent fees. This may be read as a move to re-centralise and re-standardise the provision of childcare. This centralisation and standardisation of childcare services is clearly discernible in our two cities. Childcare services provided for preschool children are quite similar wherever they and their parents live. This includes such major aspects as the goals of the service, the diversity of services provided, their financing, the governance of childcare facilities, the access and equality of services provided, the quality and staffing of day care services for preschool children and the integration, participation and democracy of such services.

However, in spite of the structural similarities in Swedish childcare services, a growing diversity in patterns of provision was also noted. This
diversity clearly reflects major ideological differences in terms of the ideological polemic concerning privatisation of personal social services. As mentioned in the analysis, one suburban area to the north of Stockholm, Täby, has privatised all of its formerly municipal care. The conservative political majority in this well-to-do suburban municipality chose to convert all the municipal providers into limited companies. Studies of the impact and consequences of this kind of total privatisation still remain to be undertaken, however. In Stockholm, day care vouchers were also introduced in the 1990s, severing the geographical link between families and specific local areas, as well as specific (municipally administered and run) childcare establishment forms. In the wake of this reform, parents were no longer obliged to only rely on the care available in the immediate local area, nor to only use municipal services. The options became markedly more varied, both geographically and organisationally. In this sense, the introduction of vouchers may be read as indicative of a certain modal maturation on the part of the Social Democratic welfare policy tradition; a maturation or change of mode that also comes across in other dimensions of childcare. Swedish childcare still appears to some extent homogeneous, but not necessarily, one should bear in mind, if compared to earlier versions of the same system.

Institutional comprehensiveness may thus be seen as a historical condition in the Swedish context for policy diversification, making Sweden something of a paradox in Europe, where diverse and multilayered welfare regimes are often visible in the sector today, though not necessarily in the wake of any previous phase of comprehensive uniformity. In the Swedish experience of care, the current organisational diversity follows on an earlier homogeneity (and the present phase is therefore likely to be tainted by the phase that preceded it in ways that comparable systems of diversity are not).

On the same note: what does it mean to argue that there is a propensity for varied provision patterns, if no major political force takes a pluralist perspective? As has been amply demonstrated by this analysis, the Social Democrats favour public modes of provision and care. Competing forms of care are tolerated, but can hardly be said to be favoured. All things being equal, it is still uncertain if Swedish childcare legislation would have been opened up for non-public provision if (a) a situation of short supply had not arisen and (b) heavy ideological pressure from other political actors had not
been mounted in favour of change. Similarly, it makes little sense to argue that the opposition’s arguments for private care solutions municipally or at the central level of government are in favour of variety as such.

A more precise interpretation is that they try as they might to further the conversion of municipal into private facilities and widen the field available for corporate innovation. This only equals “furthering organisational pluralism” in a context that is already structured by other models. Formally, today’s overall non-socialist position may be seen as more pluralist, but it remains unclear whether this commitment would remain if the dominant mode of provision was instead, as in many other European countries, non-public. In our view, the most convincing conclusion in this regard is that all three different worlds of Swedish childcare provision are primarily interested in promoting and consolidating one particular mode of service. None is working for the promotion of plurality.

But who could assume this general responsibility? The natural answer is, of course, the state. In a system like the Swedish, there is no comparable political or administrative body with the required capacity or legitimacy for legislative reform or institutional design. And given its historical Social Democratic orientation, the Swedish post-war state has never been eager to adopt other than public, state-driven welfare schemes. Alternative provision has been secondary throughout. In this sense, pluralism is no driving force in Swedish childcare. It never has been.

There is an intriguing duality at work here. On the note of universality, it is obvious that the earlier more homogeneous moment of the system is less than logically clear-cut. As we have seen, the childcare institutions and initiatives of a varying public character that dominated the field prior to the (later) 1980s, were, in effect, unable to quantitatively satisfy Swedish families’ demands for childcare. Apparently, at the time this was not a truly comprehensive system. The political reforms and legal changes that were then effected to remedy this situation of scarcity had, it seems, to involve other than public efforts. To make the system comprehensive therefore meant nothing less than making it varied – i.e. decreasing its publicness at the level of provision, correspondingly. This aspect of the story of Swedish childcare needs to be recognised; it makes the picture more complicated than standard accounts generally allow for.

Even bearing in mind that today’s less centralised and unitarian structure owes much of its impetus to the tradition of public comprehensiveness, this
mode of provision was never institutionally closed. The system was really
never comprehensive, it seems, when it was uniform. To be able to evolve
into comprehensiveness, it had to give up on its structural homogeneity.
There is a lesson to be gleaned from this conclusion: that European welfare
policy reform inspired by the Swedish approach, should be clear over this
tension between comprehensiveness and homogeneity. It would therefore
perhaps be a mistake to envisage universalistic social welfare solutions as
both public and total at the same time, as the Swedish tradition purportedly
has tried to be. In childcare, it has never succeeded. We would like to refer
to this moment by making an analytical distinction between a soft (or open)
and hard (or closed) comprehensiveness of social welfare; each subject to
its own political logic.

Municipal day care facilities were strongly encouraged to convert to lim-
ited companies by the non-socialist majority in the city of Stockholm from
1998 to 2002. In the Skärholmen ward of Stockholm this resulted in a case
included in our study where the staff decided to follow these ideological
pressures to privatise. They took over the childcare service and now run it
as a small private for-profit service. How this change of ownership will
affect the social composition of the parents and children using the service is
too soon to say. However, we also noted in Skärholmen that parents in the
included parent co-op indicated the dominance of non-Swedish speaking
children at municipal services as a reason for choosing the local co-
operative alternative. In this case co-operative day care runs counter to the
ambitions of increasing social solidarity and integrating refugee children
and their families into Swedish society, through special language efforts in
childcare centres in this ward. In Maria-Gamla Stan we noted an unusual
prevalence of the parent co-operative alternative. This was explained in
terms of the socio-economic concentration of middle-class and academic
parents in this particular ward. By contrast, in Östersund both municipal
and parent co-operative childcare services were found but no private for-
profit providers, in an overall strongly Social Democratic city.

Thus, we note ideological differences in terms of the legal form chosen
for providing childcare services. These differences alter with different po-
itical majorities and even with changes in political majorities. Legal ex-
perimentation spurred by ideological differences in terms of public or pri-
ivate provision may, we however suggest, be detrimental to the develop-
ment of the childcare sector in Sweden. If development patterns are ideo-
logically driven, rather than motivated by either pedagogic concerns, ambitions to strengthen parental participation, gender equalisation or concern for the social welfare of preschool children, it may erode public support for tax-based collective services and publicly financed childcare. The sector is, in our view, a poor venue for ideological campaigns in this sense. Quality matters and concerns for the social environment and style varieties available in childcare provision are thus more relevant nodes in an ideal childcare discourse.

There are other intriguing differences between municipal and non-municipal day care services, in particular in terms of the quality of the services provided and regarding the possibilities for participation and influence by parents. Parents are markedly more active in parent co-ops and thus able to directly influence the decisions made by the day care centre they use – including matters directly and indirectly affecting care quality. This is quite natural since parents by definition are the day care centre in a parent co-op. They legally own and manage it and employ the staff. Within certain wide limits, parents set the standards for their facility’s activities, determine ambition levels of the service, control opening hours, fees, pedagogical profile etc; all aspects that influence quality levels and local orientation in different ways.

Possibilities for direct influence are not readily available to parents with children in municipal or private for-profit childcare, nor is it clear if these parents desire a greater degree of involvement.\(^{146}\) It seems that Swedish parents have different aspirations for their children’s day care services and

\(^{146}\) To reflect on what approaches are most reasonable for the state to take on this varied behaviour on the part of Swedish parents, it could perhaps be argued that it is far quieter on the matter of participation and individual user influence than is to be expected. A recent study concludes that the view of parenthood and parenting characteristic of the contemporary Swedish welfare state is to regard citizen-parents as very resourceful and capable indeed in terms of participatory life choices and independency-augmenting ways to organise family living conditions. The main problem is not (as during the half century from the 1930s to the 1980s) primarily considered to be social and adaptive incompetence, but rather that many parents and families fail to acknowledge and take advantage of the actual abilities they possess. Gleichmann 2004, p 247. On this view, it could be argued that the state ought to be more supportive of parents choosing co-operative childcare, since this care format generates unsurpassed levels of parental participation and autonomy. If the policy object is empowerment (as is concluded for the Swedish welfare state of the later 1990s), then this strategy arguably lacks rivals. *Ibid.*, p 255f. Cf Möller 1996, p 399.
these aspirations influence, at least partly, their choice of service: municipal or non-municipal, co-operative or private for-profit (large-scale corporate or small-scale local, converted). Having made this basic choice their satisfaction with the services provided is determined both by the availability of the service and by more general matters, such as staff/child ratio and the size of children’s pedagogical groups.

The differences between the main available modes of childcare provision in Sweden are quite visible when it comes to the participatory patterns mentioned above. On the basis of the research undertaken here, it is possible to grade the contemporary performance of the different sectors in certain respects. It is thus clear that parent co-ops provide the socially most ambitious form of childcare. Here, both service quality and parental and social involvement standards appear to be substantially higher than elsewhere. But the municipal sector also seems to perform reasonably (indeed often very) well, although it partly caters to different socio-economic segments of the population. The relative low-performer by comparison is corporate for-profit childcare. Here, many of the aspects of childcare that are considered central in the other modes of provision seem to be absent or less clearly pursued or prioritised. In this sense, it is difficult to see how corporate care has any strong pedagogical or social advantages compared to the municipal and co-operative sectors. The advantages that may be attributed to it are essentially of a kind unrelated to childcare as such, and rather pertain to specifically corporate general interests and agendas. To be able to argue for this kind of solution in the field of childcare, one has to approach the field in a straightforward ideological manner, and argue that the corporate structure is superior for other than pedagogical or social reasons. But even arguing normatively, the ideology of corporate childcare is peculiar. Different studies indicate quite clearly the anti-participatory corporate perspective. This ethical and normative approach provides critics with effective tools for opposition, and creates a difficult situation indeed for proponents of corporate welfare. The problems are potentially severe, and could perhaps be partly overcome if the corporate welfare sector were to reconsider its anti-participatory orientation. The cost, it seems, for retaining it is high.

This is odd, in a greater European perspective, and reflects, again, the peculiar history of the Swedish welfare sector, with its public logic and universalist ethos. Given that both large- and small-scale for-profit solu-
tions exist elsewhere in the European context of care, it cannot be ruled out that childcare that matches the other two modes of provision is possible to provide in a corporate format. This begs the question why it is such a relative low-performer in Sweden. Here, different answers are possible. First, it could hinge on the general political environment in Sweden being less inviting than the environment in other countries. Second, an explanation may be sought in the outstanding historical and institutional record of the public childcare sector itself, making serious competition difficult. Third, it could somehow connect to inexpert and inefficient performance on the part of corporate actors in the field. (We will not consider the logical possibility that corporate childcare in other countries is an equal relative low-performer, as this is clearly not considered to be the case.)

Of these possible explanations, then, it would be somewhat brazen to opt for the latter, and the second is not extremely convincing either, considering (a) that the public sector of childcare has had very little recent historical competition against which to prove its mettle in Sweden and (b) that it does not make too much sense to call its performance fantastic until (perhaps) the 1990s. The first suggestion then carries most explanatory power: that the Swedish public welfare sector is less benevolent to the corporate style of management and administration. But the argument can be expanded; it can be argued that the Swedish state, community, and general political culture, favour other modes and means of welfare production. This is an interesting hypothesis, partly supported by the extreme levels of satisfaction with provided welfare that are visible in this and other studies that emphasise the citizen-user point of view.

If Swedes normally take pride (i.e. if to be Swedish means/presupposes to take pride) in their universalist welfare system, and this system by and large must (as it obviously has been and still is) be considered a public affair, it is reasonable to assume that this is discouraging and detrimental to alternate welfare providers. To some extent, our results speak in favour of this conclusion. The issue of social cohesion in the Swedish social welfare nexus thus comes through as singular. Some theorists indicate that it is possible to regard the universalist matrix as a base and node for social solidarity and community building. Following this line of reasoning, the erosion in Sweden of the earlier logic of familialism has not resulted in a lack of social strength and purpose, but created and channelled the sense of community in new and unforeseen ways. What started out as ideologically
and practically motivated policy reforms has turned into a community building experience.

Some modifications of the above remarks should be made, however. The first is that the for-profit form of care we have in mind above is corporate, and the Swedish corporate world of childcare tends to be structured along different lines than the rest of the company sector. The one area where it possibly outperforms other forms is in terms of maximising revenue. The small one-facility day care centres taken over from earlier municipal management by the staff in the course of the 1990s tell a different story. These appear to be rather similar to the municipal world of childcare in terms of pedagogic ambitions, quality levels and visionary patterns. The second point is that as the corporate alternative is quite small in Stockholm (and non-existent in Östersund), the impact of for-profit childcare on the whole sector is bound to be extremely modest. It certainly serves an ideological purpose that corporate childcare structures are present in the field, but as a real alternative the role of this solution is marginal indeed. It does, however, increase the fragmentation of providers along an additional dimension. To be a serious contender in this field, the question of magnitude is essential. To be able to assess if corporate care could compete in other areas than revenue, it would have to be present on an altogether different scale than it is today. As very few cases of corporate care are included in this study, and as the presence of the sector itself is limited, the basis for robust evaluation in this sense is equally small.

As pointed out at the outset of the text, the Swedish childcare system today covers the country virtually comprehensively, and childcare is readily and equally provided for all children 1-5 years old whose families want it. It is thus not necessarily possible to consider the very introduction of comprehensive childcare services of this kind as a potential means, say, to strengthen social cohesion in a heterogeneous society. It should instead, we feel, be read as an aspect of a greater process of individualisation and changing family patterns that has been going on for some time. More explorative and open-ended solutions, which were still possible when childcare had not yet been expanded to this comprehensive degree, are difficult to apply in discussions of the sector’s prospects today. But there is also a counterargument to this view. As shown in the empirical section of the study, the position of the Skärholmen ward is that unemployed families, and families with little or no footing in society, for whatever reasons,
should use municipal care for their children. The idea is to identify and if possible intervene in various ways in processes of social alienation. In a way, this may be construed as a counterfactual exception to the argument that today’s system cannot counter social disintegration simply by being introduced, since it is already there in a comprehensive way. If (a) the Skärholmen case was instead indicative of the societal norm, and (b) the system of childcare was neither comprehensive nor consolidated, where does that leave us? It is conceivable that a system could be built up exactly along those lines, effective in today’s Skärholmen ward. Counterfactually, a social welfare institution of this kind could then be used precisely to integrate people into society and foster patterns of social solidarity, autonomy and trust.

In these final paragraphs, we thus conclude that the prevailing form of childcare in Sweden is difficult to read as symbolic of any weakening of virtues like social responsibility, solidarity and/or democratic behaviour. The values and aspirations built into the system largely seem to point in the direction of non-segregating social practices and an egalitarian political ideal. Does this mean that the sector actually promotes virtues such as these, i.e. is there any correspondence between ideals and rhetoric? Our findings at this point at least seem to make it possible to disregard overly simplistic criticisms of the notion that ideals and rhetoric differ markedly from each other. Progressive aspirations evidently guide the development and formats of the childcare sector in the local cases investigated here. In this sense, it is possible to state that the investigated system at least does not come across as detrimental to issues related to social cohesion and community building. In particular co-operative, but to a substantial extent also municipal, childcare practices and perspectives could surely be read as important bases for ongoing processes of reproducing and strengthening civicity and social virtues.

One further aspect that can be stressed in this context is connected to the gendering of the childcare world. We have touched briefly in the analysis on the fact that the vast majority of the workforce in childcare is female. It is a commonplace to point out that this part of the labour market is strongly segregated. Even as this is unsatisfactory for its own good reasons, we would like to point to a less often noted implication of this state of things. In a gender-segregated sector of the work life such as childcare, it is inevitably the case that an overwhelming majority of Swedish preschool chil-
dren for an overwhelming majority of the time they spend in day care during their early childhood years primarily are attended to by and interact with (groups of) women. This is a very simple observation to make. To our minds, however, this creates dissatisfaction of a whole different kind. If we want to teach children from an early age that men and women can be active at different places in society regardless of sex, then the current situation in the childcare workplace needs to change radically. If we would like children to become accustomed to the idea that where and how people work, act and interact has less to do with their sex than with their aptitudes and interests for different social tasks and environments (and thus indirectly conveying to them that their own range of social choices later in life does not have to be unnecessarily restrained), then something has to change.

In the light of this investigation, one ready conclusion at this juncture is that there is one existing mode of childcare that in a way performs radically better on this score than others. In co-operative care, even in cases where the staff exhibits the same gender pattern as in other forms of care, the children also spend time on a day-to-day basis with custodian, role model men – i.e. the co-op’s fathers on duty. As co-ops organise their schedules in a variety of ways, this male presence may have many different shapes, but the basic fact should not be overlooked that children enrolled at least in parent co-operatives (which seems to be the dominant form) routinely interact with and learn to relate to adults of both sexes. To attend co-operative care as a child thus implies – among many other things – having an awareness that both men and women naturally belong to the social world of childcare. As this is generally the first personal encounter with the idea of a “workplace” in the first place for many (even most) children, it is reasonable to assume the value of this particular piece of socialisation to be rather great in the long term. To turn the argument around: if a given state or other policy maker would consider gender neutrality in preschool or school systems – even in society broadly speaking – as a good that ought be pursued (which of course is the normal expectation today), then one simple notion of how change could be wrought in this respect is to radically support and expand the weight and presence of co-operative welfare in society. This seems like the most effective de facto means available today to further this purpose.

In terms of interaction, involvement and engagement between childcare and other local interests, it is furthermore clear that the world of childcare
is horizontally set apart from its local or neighbourhood context. Vertically, there is some interaction (as there also is within the individual structures or spheres of municipal, co-operative and for-profit childcare, respectively), but that is all. Drawing on the argument above, however, it seems fair to conclude that the different modes of care investigated here perform differently in this regard. Again, co-operative care seems ahead of the other forms, and municipal (and individually-run small size for-profit) care has a substantial edge over corporate care. The smaller size and scale of most co-ops make for a more direct, controllable and participatory environment. As we have seen, this mode of care is associated more closely with middle-class values and career choices (where social cohesion at least within the group possibly already is stronger) than with social values and geographical areas that would stand to benefit more from this kind of childcare solution. The remaining question is whether or not childcare policy should thus be seen as a tool for change or a function of social cohesion patterns. To be able to offer more complex interpretations in this regard, we would have to return to the issue in another context.
Gramenidis, Despina. 9/1 2004. Unit/area manager of childcare, Skärholmen ward.
Hedberg, Maria. 3/7 2003. Manager of parent co-operative childcare facility, Östersund municipality.
Hedberg, Ulla. 8/1 2004. Manager and ceo of for-profit childcare facility, Skärholmen ward.
Keuter, Anita. 16/5 2003. Head of childcare provision, Maria-Gamla Stan ward.
Kraft, Anna-Bella. 2/10 2003. Head of childcare provision, Skärholmen ward.
Steen, Bodil. 9/1 2004. Senior employee, parent co-operative childcare facility, Skärholmen ward.
Ullvede, Monica. 23/5 2003. Head of childcare provision, Bromma ward.
Glossary of Swedish terms

alternativ drift  
non-public provision/distribution

barnbidrag  
support to all parents with children of 0-18 years (95 €/month and child)

barnkrubba  
early form of nursery home

barnträdgårdar  
early form of kindergarten

barnomsorg  
childcare

barnpeng  
state funded, municipal voucher system for day care for children 1-5 years old

barnstugeutredningen  
oficial 1972 childcare study (SOU 1972:26, 27)

betänkande  
comment by standing parliamentary committee on law proposal

Centerpartiet  
non-socialist Centre party (formerly agrarian)

daghem  
day-care facility for 1-5 year olds (all different providers)

dagmamma  
child minder caring for 1-5 preschool children in private home

Ds  
minor departmental series of Swedish official studies (DepartementsSerien)

Electrolux  
Swedish manufacturer of home appliances that pioneered for-profit day care

enskild drift  
non-public provision/distribution

familjestödsutredningen  
oficial 1981 family policy study (SOU 1981:25)

fritidsledare  
staff at fritidshem without tertiary education

fritidshem  
after- and preschool-day facility for 6-12 year olds

fritidspedagog  
pedagogue at fritidshem with tertiary education

folkrörelse  
popular movement (workers’, temperance, liberal, religious etc)

Folkpartiet  
liberal party

förskola  
general term for the system of preschool facilities

förskolelärare, förskolepedagog  
pedagogue at förskola with tertiary education
föraldrarförsäkring comprehensive insurance system for parents with new-born children
garantidagar 90 days of the föräldraförsäkring at lower compensation levels
IOGT/NTO international organisation of good templars/national temperance organisation
Kristdemokraterna Christian Democratic party
lex Pysslingen 1982 law prohibiting commercial day care, revoked 1986
LO Swedish trade union confederation
maxtaxa 2001 law setting upper limit for families’ total expenditure on childcare
Miljöpartiet non-socialist environmental party
Moderaterna non-socialist, conservative party (formerly the Right party)
proposition law proposal to parliament from the cabinet
Pysslingen AB Electrolux subsidiary company pioneering for-profit day care
Riksdag the Swedish parliament
riksdagsskrivelse parliamentary promulgation of law
SAF Swedish confederation of employers -2000
Saltsjöbadsavtalet central 1938 Swedish corporatist agreement between capital and labour
Skolverket National agency for education
Socialdemokraterna Social Democratic party
Socialstyrelsen National authority for health and welfare
SOU major series of Swedish official studies (Statens Offentliga Utredningar)
stadsdel local municipal administrative level or ward
stadsdelsnämnd local municipal administrative board
Svenskt Näringsliv successor of SAF 2000-
tillfällig föräldrapenning insurance system covering temporary leave to care for sick children
TCO Swedish confederation of professional employees
vårdnadbidrag support for care-givers (non-socialist policy briefly in effect in 1994)
Vänsterpartiet Socialist party (formerly Communist)
Appendix: data on Swedish childcare\textsuperscript{147}

Table 7. Number of children enrolled in preschool childcare 1974-1999 (x1000)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Day-care centre</th>
<th>Child minder</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Number</td>
<td>Per cent</td>
<td>Number</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1974</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>17 (1975)</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>129</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>125</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1985</td>
<td>184</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>162</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>268</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>156</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1994</td>
<td>338</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>129</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td>361</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>123</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>366</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>110</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>363</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>338</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>318</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 8. *Number of children enrolled in non-municipal preschool childcare 1986-1999 (x1000)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Day-care centre</th>
<th>Child minder</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1986</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1988</td>
<td>8.5</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td>43.1</td>
<td>2.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>47.2</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 9. *Proportion of age cohorts enrolled in childcare 1990 and 1999 (x1000)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age cohort</th>
<th>1990</th>
<th>1999</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Number</td>
<td>Per cent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1-2</td>
<td>103</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3-6</td>
<td>263</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7-9</td>
<td>143</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10-12</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 10. *Proportion of preschool children enrolled in childcare by parents’ occupation 1999 (x1000)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Per cent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Employed/studying</td>
<td>331</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployed</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parental leave</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At home</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>464</td>
<td><strong>76</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 11. *Age of youngest child by mother’s participation on the labour market 1997 (per cent)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Full-time</th>
<th>Part-time</th>
<th>Other</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>-1</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1-2</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-7</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7-13</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13-16</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 12. *Proportion of father’s use of parental leave insurance system 1974-1996*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Share of all father’s using the system (%)</th>
<th>Father’s share of used days (%)</th>
<th>Average of used days</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1974</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1977</td>
<td>7.0</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1987</td>
<td>24.5</td>
<td>7.3</td>
<td>27.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>26.1</td>
<td>7.7</td>
<td>32.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1993</td>
<td>27.0</td>
<td>10.1</td>
<td>39.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1994</td>
<td>28.1</td>
<td>11.4</td>
<td>39.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td>27.9</td>
<td>9.6</td>
<td>34.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>31.1</td>
<td>10.6</td>
<td>30.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 13. *Reasons for choosing type of day care, early 1990s (per cent, multiple replies possible)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>Pysslingen</th>
<th>Public</th>
<th>For-profit</th>
<th>Coop.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Close to home</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First-visit positive impression</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive hearsay</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Offered place</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knew parents of enrolled children</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Siblings enrolled earlier/presently</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pedagogic approach</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of children’s groups</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Close to workplace</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>External environment</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Desired co-operative alternative</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Desired public alternative</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Desired for-profit alternative</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 14. *Costs for parental insurance and child allowance 1996-2000 (million €)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parental insurance</td>
<td>1579</td>
<td>1476</td>
<td>1272</td>
<td>1403</td>
<td>1516</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child allowance</td>
<td>1310</td>
<td>1298</td>
<td>1515</td>
<td>1509</td>
<td>1699</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total expenditure</td>
<td>3979</td>
<td>3683</td>
<td>3950</td>
<td>4315</td>
<td>4600</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

148 Again, a flat conversion rate from SEK to € of 9:1 is used here.
149 The total includes all sorts of family-related benefits, such as pension rights, housing allowances etc.
Table 15. *Age cohort in the Swedish labour force by sex, age and children 2000 (per cent)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>16-19</th>
<th>20-24</th>
<th>25-34</th>
<th>35-44</th>
<th>45-54</th>
<th>55-64</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Married/cohabiting men</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>80.5</td>
<td>91.9</td>
<td>94.1</td>
<td>93.2</td>
<td>74.9</td>
<td>885</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single men</td>
<td>28.8</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>81.1</td>
<td>82.5</td>
<td>79.9</td>
<td>61.9</td>
<td>66.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women with children –7&lt;sup&gt;150&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>78.9</td>
<td>85.1</td>
<td>82.1</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>79.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women without children –7</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>83.2</td>
<td>88.0</td>
<td>86.6</td>
<td>65.5</td>
<td>74.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women with children 7-16 only</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>83.9</td>
<td>90.1</td>
<td>88.5</td>
<td>78.5</td>
<td>88.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women with children –17</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>84.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married/cohabiting women</td>
<td>62.5</td>
<td>69.1</td>
<td>82.7</td>
<td>88.9</td>
<td>88.3</td>
<td>66.3</td>
<td>81.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single women</td>
<td>32.6</td>
<td>54.7</td>
<td>76.8</td>
<td>80.9</td>
<td>80.3</td>
<td>63.3</td>
<td>63.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 16. *0-9 year old children’s family relations and social conditions 2000 (per cent)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Family type</th>
<th>Sees absent parent</th>
<th>Lives with other parent</th>
<th>Geographical distance to absent parent</th>
<th>Parents spend time with child together</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Each week</td>
<td>Never</td>
<td>Shared living</td>
<td>Never</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Both parents present</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Absent father</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Absent mother</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Absent father/mother</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<sup>150</sup> The public statistics lacks distinctions of labour force activity by men in terms of parenthood.
Table 17. *Separations yearly for married/cohabiting couples 1991-92 by woman’s age (per 1000)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>23 y/o</th>
<th>28</th>
<th>33</th>
<th>38</th>
<th>43</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Married without children</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married with children</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cohabiting without children</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cohabiting with children</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 18. *Attitudes on divorce/separation 1995 (per cent).*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Can’t say</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Men</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>43 y/o</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33 y/o</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28 y/o</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>All men</em></td>
<td>55</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Women</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>43 y/o</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>38 y/o</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33 y/o</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28 y/o</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23 y/o</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>All women</em></td>
<td>64</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Respondents were asked to agree or disagree with different formulations of the following proposition: “it is too easy to divorce/separate in today’s Sweden”.*
References

Aftonbladet, August 25, 2002


Björnberg, Ulla & Sass, Jürgen (eds), 1997; Families with small children in Eastern and Western Europe, Aldershot, Ashgate.

Björnberg, Ulla, 1997; “Swedish dual breadwinner families: Gender, class and policy”, in Björnberg & Sass (eds), 1997.


Dagens Nyheter, August 4, 2002

Eme, Bernard, Laville, Jean-Louis, Perguilhem, Isabelle, Golsorkhi, Damon, 2000; L’acceuil de la petite enfance dans la cité, enjeu de cohésion sociale. Le cas de la Suède, manuscript.


Esping-Andersen, Gösta, 1990; The three worlds of welfare capitalism, Cambridge. Cambridge U.P.


Gleichmann, Lee, 2004; Föräldraskap mellan styrning och samhällsomvandling. En studie av syn på föräldrar och relation mellan familj och samhälle under perioden 1957-1997 [Parenthood between governance and social transforma-
tion. How parents were viewed, and relations between the family and society between 1957 and 1997]. Studies in educational sciences 72, HLS förlag, The Stockholm Institute of Education.


Hirdman, Yvonne, 2001; Genus – om det stabilas föränderliga former [Gender – on the changing forms of the stable]. Malmö, Liber.


Jansson, Maria, 2001; Livets dubbla vedermödor [Life’s double work efforts], Stockholm, Stockholm U.P.

Jonsson, Jan O., 2001a; ”Barns sociala demografi, familjeförhållandena och sociala resurser” [Children’s social demography, family relationships and social resources], in SOU 2001:55.

Jonsson, Jan O., 2001b; ”Ekonomiska och materiella resurser” [Economic and material resources], in SOU 2001:55.


Rodger, John, 2000; *From a welfare state to a welfare society. The changing context of social policy in a postmodern era*, London: Macmillan.


Rothstein, Bo, 2002; *Vad bör staten göra? Om välfärdsstatens moraliska och politiska logik* [On the moral and political logic of the welfare state], 2nd ed., Stockholm, SNS.


SCB 2002, *Statistisk Årsbok* [Statistical yearbook of Sweden], vol. 88, Statistiska centralbyrån [Statistics Sweden]

SFS 1976:381, *Lag om barnomsorg* [Law on childcare]

Skolverket; *Förskolan är till för ditt barn. En broschyr om förskolans läroplan* [The preschool is for your child. A brochure on the preschool’s educational plan]

SOU 1990:44; *Demokrati och makt i Sverige* [Democracy and power in Sweden], Stockholm, The Prime Minister’s Office.


SOU 1998:6; *Ty makten är din... Myten om det rationella arbetslivet och det jämställda Sverige* [For thine is the power… The myth of rational work life and Swedish equality], Stockholm: The Ministry of Labour.


Svallfors, Stefan, 1996; *Välfärdsstatens moraliska ekonomi*, [The moral economy of the welfare state], Umeå, Boréa.

Svedberg, Lars, 2001; ”Spelas ideella och informella insatser någon roll för svensk välfärd?” [Do idealist and informal efforts play any role for Swedish welfare?], in SOU 2001:52.

Taylor, Charles, 1989; *Sources of the self. The making of the modern identity*, Cambridge, Cambridge U.P.


Östberg, Viveca, 2001; ”Föräldrars tid och arbete” [Parents’ time and work], in SOU 2001:55.
Small-scale Welfare on a Large Scale
Social cohesion and the politics of Swedish childcare

Contemporary European life seems to require new ways for people to combine family life and career. There is a fear among European governments and the European Union, however, that such changes will alter received patterns of child rearing and may, in the long run, threaten social cohesion, integration and solidarity between generations. In current discussions how to make childcare generally available, as a social service, without posing a threat to social cohesion, the Swedish post-war experience may serve as a point of reference. This study traces and analyses the development of Swedish childcare which, in order to cater to two-career families, has changed from rudimentary and scarce to sophisticated and comprehensive.