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To cite this article: Anne Sigrid Haugset (2022) Negotiating the value of “corporations’ capital” in Norwegian Early Childhood Education and Care provision, Nordic Journal of Studies in Educational Policy, 8:1, 30-41, DOI: [10.1080/20020317.2021.1989204](https://doi.org/10.1080/20020317.2021.1989204)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/20020317.2021.1989204>



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Published online: 15 Oct 2021.



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## Negotiating the value of “corporations’ capital” in Norwegian Early Childhood Education and Care provision

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### ABSTRACT

In this article I investigate how corporate Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) providers negotiate their position by contributing to a national ECEC policy development process. I discuss how their political engagement connects to changes in the institutional arrangements of the ECEC sector. The ECEC provider corporations’ written responses to a policy consulting process are obtained and analyzed in light of Bourdieu-inspired theories of institutionalized organizational fields. The proposed new regulations are both countered and reframed in their responses. Providers with corporate organizational structures in unison call for firmer national guidelines on ECEC centre quality and funding. I interpret their responses as attempts to increase the relevance of ‘corporations’ capital’ over the traditional, local network embedded capital forms in quality ECEC provision. At this juncture, the corporate providers failed to shift competence from municipalities to national ECEC authorities. The following parliamentary debate illuminates how non-profit provision in corporate organizational structures may appeal to left-wing parties rejecting commercial welfare provisions. A subgroup of for-profit corporate providers emphasizes sector cost-efficiency, connecting strongly to right-wing politicians’ ambitions to limit public spending. Corporate providers hence represent an impetus for institutional change, able to build allies across the whole left-right spectre of politics.

### ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 20 May 2021  
Accepted 30 September 2021

### KEYWORDS

Early Childhood Education and Care; organizational field; policy development; corporate provision; welfare market

### Introduction

The corporatization of the Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) sector has altered the terrain of Norwegian ECEC provision significantly, under the guise of a stable welfare mix. The share of private providers of ECEC services has remained stable for decades, amounting to just above 50% of all the centres. However, below this surface of ‘stability’, changes have occurred both in the regulatory framework of the sector and not least in the composition of the private provider group. New, corporate and usually for-profit ECEC providers have increased their share of the Norwegian ECEC market, mainly at the cost of traditional parental cooperatives or local owners of alone-standing centres. Lunder (2019) tracks this change back to the 2003 Kindergarten Reform, aiming at providing full ECEC coverage, high-quality services and increased public funding enabling lower parental fees. Today, about one in three Norwegian children in private ECEC centres attend a centre belonging to large provider corporations. There are few signs of this reconfiguration process ebbing away in the years to come (Lunder, 2019).

The impacts of corporatization, marketization and privatization in the field of ECEC and childcare have been studied with regard to economic and social redistributive efficiency (Hartmann, 2011; Lundahl et al.,

2013; Penn, 2012; Penn et al., 2011), staff education and working conditions (Richardson, 2021), and entrepreneurship (Gallagher, 2014). Researchers have dealt with for-profit childcare provision across a diversity of welfare and educational regimes (Penn, 2014; West & Nikolai, 2013), scrutinizing its impact on ‘good care’, service quality and accessibility (Dýrfjörð & Magnúsdóttir, 2016; Gallagher, 2018; Lloyd & Penn, 2012; Press & Woodrow, 2005; Richardson, 2021; Sumsion, 2006; Trætteberg & Fladmoe, 2020). In many studies, corporatization is attributed to the global mega-trends of neoliberal policy reforms in educational systems (Wasmuth & Nitecki, 2020).

Less attention has been paid to corporate ECEC providers themselves as potential political actors and change agents. Recent research suggests, however, that welfare industries may gradually gain significant political influence on its own. Through the mechanisms of political action, mobilization of power resources and involvement into welfare state politics, the welfare industry often improves their political leverage over time (Pieper, 2018). From an Australian context, Bown et al. (2009) make an argument for investigating the influences on politicians’ policy decisions regarding ECEC, given ‘*the impact of a high concentration of corporate ECEC services*’ (Bown et al., 2009, p. 195). Roberts-Holmes (2019)

illuminates how the interests of global and corporate edu-business actors coincide and interact with political neo-liberal education reform efforts in the UK. In Norway, Børhaug and Moen (2014) argue that Norwegian corporate ECEC providers, from their distinct position in the ECEC field, are both willing and able to contribute to the dynamics of national ECEC policy change.

In this article, I shed light on how Norwegian corporate ECEC providers' efforts to influence policy processes play out in the context of a formal governmental consulting process. I lean on the theories of organizational fields (Emirbayer & Johnson, 2008) and incremental institutional change processes (Mahoney & Thelen, 2009). Empirically, I investigate how seven ECEC provider corporations voice their stances on proposed stricter regulations of private ECEC provision. I rely on textual data produced in a consulting process taking place in 2019, to investigate:

*How does corporate ECEC providers contribute to gradual institutional change through negotiating their own position and legitimacy in the Norwegian ECEC sector?*

By *corporate ECEC provision*, I refer to private ECEC provider organizations where individual ECEC centres are formed into an association endowed by law with the same rights and liabilities as providers of ECEC services in alone-standing centres. This definition hence does not discriminate between non-profit and commercial provision. One of my seven sample organizations is a non-profit foundation with corporate organizational structure.

### **The Norwegian ECEC provision context**

Corporate ECEC provision has to be studied and understood within the context of the welfare- and education regime it is embedded in (Penn, 2014; West & Nikolai, 2013). The Nordic countries share the perception of ECEC coverage, content and quality as a public responsibility (Penn, 2014), the strong emphasis on equality and democracy (Kuusisto & Garvis, 2020) and a social-pedagogical, holistic ECEC tradition distinguishing them from internationally more widespread early education approaches (Einarsdottir et al., 2015; Thoresen, 2017).

The European 'soft privatization' way of embedding private sector involvement within public government institutions blurs the boundaries between public and private responsibilities (Cone & Brøgger, 2020; Cone & Moos, 2021). This approach to ECEC governance is particularly distinct in the Nordic countries, where egalitarian, redistributive and

universal welfare policies (Esping-Andersen, 1990; West & Nikolai, 2013) are combined with private ECEC provision. However, the scope of for- and non-profit private ECEC provision does vary across the Nordic countries (Sivesind, 2017). Norway has a higher share of private ECEC centres than its Nordic neighbours. The private provider group contains both corporations, traditional local organizations, self-employed pre-school teachers, parent cooperatives and parishes (Haug, 2014; Rauch, 2005). Their ECEC centres all adhere to the same regulation, funding, governance and allocation arrangements framing municipal ECEC provisions (The Kindergarten Act, 2005).

The political history and negotiations of the current Norwegian ECEC policy regime are relevant for understanding corporate providers' position in the ECEC field. The Kindergarten Reform that led up to full ECEC coverage in 2009 was the result of a broad political agreement spanning both right and left wing parties (Ellingsæter et al., 2020). Part of this agreement was sustained privatization of the sector, increased public funding, and equal economic operating conditions for municipal and private ECEC centres. Although restricting public funding to non-profit ECEC providers had been discussed a few years earlier, this condition did not become part of the Kindergarten reform agreement in 2003 (Jacobsen & Vollset, 2012). This particular hybrid way of providing ECEC services established the ECEC welfare industry as a new actor in the ECEC provision field, and as an important stakeholder in policy development processes regarding ECEC (Gingrich, 2011; Pieper, 2018).

Policy development processes in Norway are often lengthy affairs, and the final resulting law paragraphs may look quite different from the first drafts. Institutionalized, consensus-seeking and transparent consultancy processes allow stakeholders, including private ECEC providers, to voice their views. Private providers may offer their stances collectively through their national interest organization PBL or through their own organizations. Hence, policies usually evolve through gradual institutional change processes (Mahoney & Thelen, 2009), and usually by adding new layers to existing legislation (Greve et al., 2020). Efforts to alter the legislation may be stopped by 'veto-players' at several points, especially if they challenge actors with central positions in the field (Emirbayer & Johnson, 2008; Mahoney & Thelen, 2009). The right-right wing government in position in 2016 experienced this as it proposed an increased emphasis on individual learning outcomes in ECEC (Ministry of Education and Research, 2016). The pre-school teacher profession's organizations perceived

this as an attack on Nordic ECEC norms and traditions and rallied sufficiently broad support for their protests to stop the proposal.

### ***The ECEC provision field: an agreed-upon game with contested rules***

As recognized by Olsen (2012) and Bown et al. (2009), Bourdieu's theories of cultural fields have a lot to offer in shedding light on the struggles for political influence in the ECEC field. From Bourdieu's rich theoretical universe, I particularly draw upon the related concepts of field and capital. The field concept highlights how public and private organizational actors in the Norwegian ECEC sector are united in collective endeavour, in which they depend on one another (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Emirbayer & Johnson, 2008). A politically defined task is constitutive of this particular field: to provide all pre-school children with universal access to affordable, local ECEC services of high and equal quality (Ministry of Education and Research, 2016, 2017). A Bordieuan organizational field has certain underlying, value-laden goals and premises that cannot legitimately be challenged by the actors within it. Field theory illuminates, however, how heterogeneous ECEC provider organizations continuously struggle to establish their own particular types of assets, or capital, as symbols of the best way to achieve these goals (Emirbayer & Johnson, 2008; Hallett & Gougherty, 2018).

The field itself can only be constructed by revealing the specific logic of the field, and identifying the forms of capital operating in it (Emirbayer & Johnson, 2008). The actors bring into the field a diversity of former experiences, institutional affiliations, and resources. In this article, I depart from an assumption that corporate ECEC providers possess slightly different forms of field capital than municipalities and small, local provider organizations. For instance, large organizations enable ways of organizing, developing and profiting from ECEC provision not available to smaller providers. Norwegian non-corporate private providers, on the other hand, have traditionally formed alliances with the local municipalities where network-based forms of capital compensate for the lack of organizational resources (Haugset, 2021; Korsvold, 2005).

According to organizational field theory, corporate ECEC providers must balance their pursuit of interests with maintaining their legitimacy within the field. In the Norwegian context, they are expected to refrain from behaviour associated with 'welfare rent seeking' (Herning, 2015). A welfare rent seeker is an actor exploiting loopholes in legislation to increase profits while disregarding service quality and

efficiency in the spending of tax-payers' money. To maintain legitimacy, all ECEC providers must demonstrate their commitment to the political goals of the sector, as well as to the wellbeing of children, families, and centre staff. Attempting to influence the sector legislation and its enforcement to enhance one's position is, however, a legitimate part of the game (Emirbayer & Johnson, 2008; Mahoney & Thelen, 2009).

### ***Regulative institutions and institutional change***

Public policy and legislation are at the core of the ECEC societal institution, not least in the well-regulated ECEC systems of the Nordic countries. Change and adjustments related to the cultural and normative institutional pillars (Scott, 2014) matter, but usually become manifest through rules and regulations. Legislation pervades almost all aspects of Norwegian ECEC provision, including service quality, practices of ECEC markets and governance processes. Since the Kindergarten Act was revised in 2005, it has been altered, adjusted and expanded several times. Examples relevant to private ECEC provision include a municipal duty to audit the economy of private centres (added in 2013), a new National Quality Framework plan (2017), and a national standardization of centre staff-children ratios (added in 2018).

The ECEC legislation of the Norwegian ECEC sector provides quite detailed constraints on the structure- and cost-related aspects of private ECEC provision. Mandatory staff- and teacher-to-children ratios, a national cap on parental fees, municipally coordinated allocation of services, and quite detailed regulations regarding the use of public funding (The Kindergarten Act, 2005) all deprive private providers of several liberties usually enjoyed by businesses. When rules are detailed, tangible, and easy to monitor and enforce, promoting change 'bottom up' through local introduction of new ways of adapting is hard. In this situation, private ECEC providers may 'nudge' the legislation or its enforcement in their favoured direction, by wielding their political influence or by seeking to forge powerful external alliances (Mahoney & Thelen, 2009). Contesting the structure- and cost-related aspects regulations can, however, risk posing the change agent as a greedy and inconsiderate welfare rent seeker. Legitimate arguments for altering the rules would have to connect with the core values or symbols of the ECEC field (Emirbayer & Johnson, 2008).

Nevertheless, some of the regulative institutions of the ECEC field provide more scope for local adaptations. The quality of the ECEC centres is regulated in the National Quality Framework Plan (Framework plan, 2017). This document contains broad guidelines that allow each ECEC centre significant scope for

adaption. The scope provided implies that rule enforcement must rely on certain interpretations of the broad concept of 'ECEC quality'. Influencing these interpretations provides another opportunity for changing agents (Mahoney & Thelen, 2009).

### ***New regulation on private ECEC provision***

In 2019, the right-centre government drafted a new reform to the regulation of private ECEC provision (Ministry of Education and Research, 2019). The initiative came from Parliament (Stortinget), following several debates on for-profit ECEC providers' place in the sector (Ministry of Education and Research, 2020, p. 73). In the draft, the government claimed that the current regulation was outdated for several reasons: as full ECEC coverage has now been achieved, private providers entering local ECEC markets must negotiate the building of new centres with the municipalities. When municipalities choose to close the door on new private centres, local ECEC centres already endowed with approval and steady public funding become scarce resources and interesting objects for investment. The value of existing centres rises, thus making market entrance harder for private actors with limited capital.

Facing the rise of non-local and corporate private providers, the regulations needed revision to maintain the politically desired diversity of service providers, ensure efficient use of public funding and parental fees, and adjust the balance between national policy and local adaptations in the municipalities (Ministry of Education and Research, 2019). Among the more invasive law proposals in the draft was a duty to organize each private ECEC centre as an autonomous, legal, and economic unit of its own. This would in fact 'de-corporatize' the ECEC sector. According to the government, this would leave private ECEC provision more transparent and easier to audit and monitor. The draft also contained obligations to provide financial information for auditing authorities, and restrictions on how private providers could finance new investments. Furthermore, the government set out to reduce the existing compensation rates for pensions, due to recent indications of over-compensation of pension expenses in private ECEC centres.

Some of the proposed new rules affected the distribution of resources and power between groups of actors in the ECEC field. These proposed rules related to economic audits of private centres, and to the municipal scope to allow varying types of new private providers into local ECEC markets. A proposed national auditing centre was to take over monitoring of private actors' spending of public funding and parental fees. As the rise of corporate provider

organizations has made this an increasingly complex and specialized task, most municipalities lacked the competence and resources to carry it out in practice. The government's draft also included a break-point private ECEC centre funding model, granting smaller centres a greater per capita sum than larger ones. The drafted changes would redistribute funding from larger to smaller centres. In practice, this would favour local providers rather than corporations, as centre size is strongly related to whether one is part of a larger organization or not (Ministry of Education and Research, 2019, p. 10).

Several of the proposed changes have the potential to hamper corporate ECEC providers' business opportunities. Hence, I would expect these actors to raise their voices against them, in defence of the status quo. However, in my analysis, I am not just going to study their stances, but also the way these are framed by their argumentation. My research question relates to how corporate providers balance their legitimacy as fellow contributors of 'making high quality, equal ECEC services', with efforts to defend and enhance their position and conditions in the ECEC organizational field. The lines of argumentation pursued, the concepts contested or employed in the arguments, and the references to other actors in the field all provide a window into the types of capital these particular actors want to make central to the 'game' of Norwegian ECEC provision (Emirbayer & Johnson, 2008).

### **Data and methods**

The data material consists of a governmental draft for new legislation on private ECEC provision (Ministry of Education and Research, 2019), a sample of responses produced during the following stakeholder consultancy process, the government's final law proposal presented to Parliament (Ministry of Education and Research, 2020), the minutes from the parliamentary debate (Stortinget, 2020b) and the new legislation adopted (Stortinget, 2020a). While the seven stakeholder responses from large, corporate ECEC providers constitute the main base for my analysis, the other documents provide important information about corporate providers' relations to other field actors.

Consultancy processes are standard procedure for all major law reforms in Norway and involve all interested parties. A broad range of public and private organizations was invited to voice their opinions. The government's draft presented the stakeholders with a discussion of ECEC policy aims as well as challenges facing the sector, along with the proposed new regulations. In total, 217 municipalities, unions, employer organizations, governmental bodies, parental associations, and private stakeholders responded

to the proposal (Ministry of Education and Research, 2020). According to the procedure, the responses were made publicly available on the governmental consulting process website.<sup>1</sup> In total, 89 private stakeholders were among the respondents, most of them representing alone-standing private ECEC centres. A few represented private providers with two or more ECEC centres, and from this subgroup I have drawn all corporations with more than 15 centres. To identify them, I used their own descriptions of themselves in the responses, sometimes in combination with their websites. The providers I have studied have between 17 and 230 ECEC centres in their portfolios. Although there are differences in their internal and formal organization, the seven actors do have in common a hierarchical, corporate structure through which administrative and professional capacity for all centres is provided by a central administration. Together, they own 22% of the private ECEC centres in Norway, and 12% of all centres.

The retrieved responses contained between 4 and 14 pages of Norwegian text. Hence, I have myself translated the quotations provided for use in this article. I assessed the texts through an iterative analytical process, inspired by extractive qualitative content analyses (Gläser & Laudel, 2019). First, I read through all the responses, making extensive notes and extracting text pieces regarding a) the introductory framing of the response, b) the respondents' stances towards the regulative proposals, c) suggestions made beyond responding to the proposed changes, and d) the ECEC policy concepts invoked in the argumentation. The resulting database of text extracts was then carefully investigated, looking for frequently invoked concepts and lines of argumentation. After identifying these, I re-read the whole material, making interpretations about the explicit and implicit meaning the respondents attributed to the concepts. I also assessed the concepts in the light of suggestions made by the actors themselves, which went beyond the proposed legislative changes in question.

### Stances, suggestions, and concept reconstruction work

The corporate ECEC providers' stances towards the drafted regulations show limited variation. Most of the proposed restrictions on provider internal organizing issues are rejected. The proposal to mandate organizing each centre as a legally independent unit is forcefully refuted. The providers also in unison reject reduction in pension compensations.

The non-profit corporate provider stands alone in welcoming restricted financing opportunities for private providers and municipal scope to refrain from funding new centres and discriminate between for-profit and non-profit new providers. Unlike the other

providers, the non-profit provider accept redistribution of funding from larger to smaller centres and agree that municipalities should be allowed to disregard their especially expensive ECEC centres when calculating local funding for private centres. The for-profit corporate providers argue vigorously against all these proposals. As a group, the corporate providers mainly act as defenders of the status quo (Mahoney & Thelen, 2009), with one exception: they all applaud the establishment of a new, national economy audit centre to ensure efficient use of public funding in private centres.

### Introductory framing

Five of the corporate providers start out by presenting themselves and their own perceived role in the ECEC sector. They underscore the size of their corporations, both in terms of centres, staff, enrolled children, and geographical coverage. The largest provider, with 230 centres in its portfolio, describes in detail both the size, history, distribution pattern and ways of organizing. This provider then emphasizes that this makes the corporation a particularly relevant consultancy participant: *'Hence, we have long and significant experience with many of the moments issued in the consultancy proposal'* (Læringsverkstedet). Others point to several other aspects: having been founded by pre-school teacher professionals, large investments in ECEC quality and societal tasks, and their decent staff working conditions and high staff-to-children ratios. Long-term horizons for investments are underlined as being important by several actors. Two organizations, however, stand out a bit from the rest. One presents itself as an entrepreneurial company. The other is organized as a non-profit foundation, emphasizing that there are *'no owners who collect revenue, and all our financial means are directed towards improving children's upbringing conditions and developing the ECEC sector'* (Kanvas).

Besides presenting themselves, most of the providers also express general appreciation of the governments' goals for the ECEC sector. They support the policy aims of transparency and diversity and recognize the importance of efficiency and control in the spending of public money. The government's emphasis on diversity of ECEC centre providers is, however, challenged by most of them. Instead, an alternative interpretation of the 'diversity' concept is offered, summed up by this provider: *'We note that diversity, to the government, seems to refer to diversity of center owners. This is, in our opinion, wrong. Diversity is variation in content and the service offered'* (Trygge barnehager/FUS).

The providers invoke ECEC quality and the principle of equal economical treatment of municipal and

private centres in framing their contributions to the consulting process. ECEC quality is, although referred to in the consultancy document as an overall aim of the sector, only indirectly an issue in the drafted new regulation. The corporate private providers, though, want to discuss quality along with the regulation of structural and cost-related aspects. They ask for ‘*a discussion on how the sector can maintain its strong commitment to quality*’ (Læringsverkstedet) and point to the significance of ‘softer’ components of the ECEC quality concept: ‘*We miss the process quality perspective, both in the consultancy draft and in the general debate concerning quality in ECEC centers*’ (Espira).

Equal treatment of municipal and private ECEC centres emerges as a policy principle in which the consulted organizations are keen to anchor their responses. One provider claims that ‘*in an industry entailing both public and private providers, equal treatment stands out as a decisive principle both regarding funding, demands and audits*’ (Gnist). The public–private partnership in the Norwegian ECEC sector is referred to as a success built on equal treatment, which may now be jeopardized by the reform proposed:

*ECEC is one of the welfare areas that yields the most satisfied users. The public-private cooperation has been built on an equal treatment principle, that has brought about a 50/50 distribution of municipal and private ECEC centers. [...] When reforming regulations and conditions, it is vital that this success story is maintained. [...] Several of the proposed changes will reduce the equal treatment, either by introducing arrangements directed only at private centers, or by prohibiting arrangements in private centers that are allowed in municipalities* (Læringsverkstedet).

### **Suggestions beyond responding to the proposal**

Most of the corporate providers also take the opportunity to make their own suggestions in their consultancy responses. Indeed, one of them claims that ‘*we should use the government’s initiative to reform The Kindergarten Act, to create conditions that improve and make the whole sector more efficient*’ (Trygge barnehager/FUS). The providers take on a role as change agents (Mahoney & Thelen, 2009) as they quite unanimously suggest a full revision of the current private centre funding arrangements. They back this up with references to prevailing large differences in funding levels between municipalities and to severe complexities and numerous errors in municipal calculation of funding. The funding system reform suggestions are often brought up in response to the proposed redistributive funding arrangements with a centre-sized breakpoint, as well as the decrease in pension compensation. The providers ‘*find it very unfortunate to pull out only one element (such as*

*pensions) without also looking at the whole funding system. It is obvious that (for instance) capital grants are significantly underfinanced*’ (Espira). Most of the corporate providers want to untie the funding of private ECEC centres from the costs in local municipal centres or suggest stricter national guidelines governing the municipal calculation of funding.

Moreover, the tasks and competences of the proposed national audit centre are suggested expanded to also include overlooking the economy of municipal centres, as well as municipal funding basis and calculations:

*We question whether the funding calculations performed in the municipalities are correct, as we have experienced municipal cutbacks in substitute personnel, management resources, maintenance work and staff competence enhancement. A national economical audit center must therefore also monitor whether the basis for calculating funding is correct in each municipality* (Norlandia).

Another suggestion is endowing the national audit centre with the competence to audit compliance with the whole Kindergarten Act, in municipal as well as private centres. This suggestion implies nationalizing the monitoring of ECEC centre quality and content, and hence relieving the municipalities of all their ECEC audit responsibilities. The providers claim that it is ‘*random how municipal audits are done, and which criteria of quality are emphasized*’ (Kanvas). Nationalizing the audit task will, according to the providers, ‘*assure high quality in all ECEC centers, in a more equivalent way than when a large number of municipalities carry out this important task*’ (Espira). The suggested arrangements would disentangle the municipal double role as ECEC provider and authority, by which ‘*municipalities may overlook things in their own centers, which they impose on private centers*’ (Trygge barnehager/FUS). Alternatively, this can also be accomplished through a national quality system, stretching beyond quantifiable quality factors like staff- and preschool teacher-to-child ratios:

*Is there, for instance, a need for requiring certain provider competences, or quality systems? Læringsverkstedet wants a quality system encompassing all the dimensions of ECEC quality, including process quality.*

One of the providers explicitly suggests a national standardization of quality in ECEC centres, brought about in a process where private ECEC providers can influence

*Quality of the content in ECEC centers first must be defined, and then it must be worked out how quality should be monitored and measured. This is so important that we recommend the government to start a*

*process to establish it, in cooperation with the industry (Norlandia).*

### **Argumentation invoking policy concepts**

The principle of equal treatment of public and private ECEC centres is frequently invoked in refuting the proposed de-corporatization of private ECEC centres. Most of the corporate providers' responses contain some version of the following excerpt: *'We note that the municipalities in line with the proposed regulations, will still be able to act as a corporation, and enjoy the economies of scale this entails'* (Norlandia).

The essence of this line of argumentation seems to be that rules, limitations and obligations should not be imposed on private ECEC providers exclusively. As private and municipal centres compete in the same market, they should be treated and regulated equally. The providers also describe their own experiences with corporative ECEC provision, arguing that the proposed de-corporatization would in fact not yield the intended transparency advantages. They show how their administrative costs would skyrocket, requiring resources that *'should rather have been used for quality and innovation work'* (Læringsverkstedet) or *'should have benefitted the children'* (Kanvas). The consultancy proposal is perceived as being both unfair, a threat to long-term investments and development and a severe regulative intervention into private organizations at odds with the principles of free enterprise. One respondent quite harshly accuses the government of being *'biased by newspaper headlines about large sums of money when selling centers, and owners extracting high salaries and profits'* (Norlandia). Another respondent assumes that the government proposal is founded on theories of *'economic man and rationality'* and argues that *'modern economics has a more nuanced view of this'*. The issue is also deemed irrelevant by the same provider since The Kindergarten Act already *'limits the provider's possibilities for investments'* (Læringsverkstedet). The non-profit ECEC provider's response, on the other hand, eagerly supports all proposals yielding more insight into potential *'camouflaged streams of money'* and preventing ECEC centres from becoming *'objects of speculation'* (Kanvas). This provider points out that national regulations on important cost-related aspects limit both unreasonable profit-seeking and contribute to better quality.

Three of the large private providers stress the superior cost-efficiency of corporate ECEC provision, and tie ECEC quality to sector cost-efficiency in their argumentation. The providers counter the proposed regulations by pointing to the risk of *'tearing down an increase in productivity, without providing a clear and prioritized definition of ECEC quality beyond staff-children ratios'* (Gnist). They argue that the freedom

to organize and act like any other business organization has brought about efficient and innovative practices in ECEC provision. One of them claims that *'consolidation of the sector over the past few years is a natural consequence'* (Norlandia) and that more efficient private provision can save large sums of public money while providing the same quality services. These efficiency-oriented providers also raise their concerns as to whether national norms on staff-to-children ratios really have been the optimal way to bring about high-quality services. They claim that *'ECEC quality is not necessarily synonymous with the number of staff, preschool teachers, funding levels, and the number of square meters available'* (Trygge barnehager/FUS). Investments in welfare technology, modern and practical buildings, staff competence enhancement, corporate support functions and quality systems streamline work processes, making more staff time available for the children. A national minimum level of centre funding could, in combination with public and private centre transparency, *'lay the ground for reduced public transfers and, in a longer perspective, also for decreased parental fees'* (Trygge barnehager/FUS). The non-profit ECEC provider does not dwell on sector efficiency to the same degree, but nevertheless states that *'cancelling out corporate economies of scale represent a significant social economical loss'* (Kanvas).

### **Legislative outcomes and parliamentary debate**

In their final law proposal on regulating private ECEC provision presented to Parliament in June 2020, the right-centre government decided to leave out several of the more controversial drafted proposals that I have investigated (Ministry of Education and Research, 2020). The parties on the political left strongly voiced their dissatisfaction with this decision (Stortinget, 2020b, p. 4137). The minister, however, argued that the drafts which had been subject to consulting processes, especially those regarding ECEC provision organizing and private centre funding arrangements, had met strong resistance from several stakeholders. The research reports making up the basis for the draft had also been contested. Hence, the government decided to spend more time investigating and discussing these issues. The law proposals put forward in this round were therefore the ones upon which the consulted actors had largely agreed. Among these was the new national audit centre, monitoring compliance with economic regulations in private ECEC centres (Ministry of Education and Research, 2020; Stortinget, 2020b). Following a debate in Parliament, the audit centre was adopted in the government's initially drafted version (Stortinget, 2020a, § 53–56). The right-wing party put forward a proposal resembling the sum of



audit centre expansion suggestions from the corporate private providers (described above). This proposal was, however, defeated in Parliament by 70 to 15 votes (Stortinget, 2020b, p. 4167).

Most of the parliamentary debate, however, came to centre on rephrasing the principle that public funding should benefit the children in ECEC centres. The draft proposed rewording and moving this statement within the law text, framing it as a legislative goal rather than part of a paragraph. In the consultancy process, this had been quite an uncontroversial issue (Ministry of Education and Research, 2020). In Parliament, however, it spurred a heated ideological debate on private ECEC centre profits. The left-wing parties accused the government of *'pushing the door wide open to welfare rent seekers'* (Stortinget, 2020b, p. 4140), allowing private actors to *'become rich from providing ECEC services'* (p. 4139). Representatives from the right-wing parties, on the contrary, stated that *'it should be acceptable to make money in this country'* (p. 4138) and that *'perhaps we should rather consider how we can facilitate things even better for the private ECEC centers'* (p. 4146).

## Discussion

My analysis shows that the corporate ECEC providers, in line with Pieper's theory (Pieper, 2018) and the predictions of Haug (2014), eagerly grasp and exploit the opportunity to voice their opinions on ECEC policy. They also possess both the capacity and resources necessary to exercise political influence, producing quite elaborate and lengthy political argumentation in favour of their stances. The corporate providers' stances yield few surprises, given the restrictions the proposed regulations would impose on their particular provision mode. Their attitude towards the national audit centre improving rule enforcement may perhaps though be perceived as somewhat puzzling: why is more effective and accurate supervision of rule compliance so eagerly and unanimously welcomed? This may be interpreted as maintenance work to strengthen the corporate providers' field legitimacy. Moreover, it also renders possible an attempt to redefine and expand the same audit centre, to enhance the corporate providers' field position (Emirbayer & Johnson, 2008). Nationalizing ECEC authority, also regarding centre quality, would contribute to reducing municipal diversity in private ECEC provision operating conditions. If municipalities are confined to a role more like corporate centre owners, corporate provision of equivalent and high-quality ECEC services becomes easier. Hence, the corporate providers act collectively as political change agents (Mahoney & Thelen, 2009; Pieper, 2018) by outlining their own version of the national audit centre.

## Negotiating the value of 'corporations' capital' in the field

The consultancy responses illuminate how the corporate ECEC providers take pride in presenting themselves as large, efficient, professional, and accountable co-producers of public services. They highly value autonomy in organizing and managing their internal affairs and defend their organizational boundaries against government invasion. This distinguishes the corporate providers from small, local private providers of ECEC services. When it comes to centre quality development, local providers usually rely on their head teacher to carve out centre practices and priorities. Often, their development strategies hinges on local public-private head teachers' networks, led by municipal ECEC advisors. The small private providers deliberately blur their organizational borders, adapt willingly to local policy initiatives, pool their scarce economical and professional resources, and build social capital in informal networks of diverse ECEC centres and organizations. This practice allows for local cooperation and coordination of ECEC quality, levels out differences in providers' financial and professional assets, and allows for efficient local equalization of services across the schism of public and private provision (Haugset, 2021). It supports sector diversity, by accommodating high-quality ECEC provision even by traditional parental cooperatives. Cooperatives are usually providers with limited professional resources, allowing parents to influence and monitor the centre as co-owners while also contributing to their local community (Haugset et al., 2019, p. 95).

I argue that in the corporate providers' consultancy responses, we see an organizational or corporation-related type of capital pitched against this cooperative and locally embedded network or social capital (Emirbayer & Johnson, 2008). The ECEC provider corporations take pride in developing quality ECEC services drawing on assets within their own organization, and in delivering equal services across municipal borders. They recognize neither diversity in providers nor differences in local ECEC policies as legitimate cues of ECEC quality. Instead, the corporate providers emphasize organizational autonomy, display their internal quality systems, refer to municipal ECEC centres as competitors, and suggest firmer national quality guidelines curbing what they perceive as 'random' municipal quality criteria. Hence, their argumentation indicates a preference for standardization through well-defined, bounded tasks and uniform operating conditions.

The consultation responses illuminate how the providers struggle to alter the 'rules of the game' (Emirbayer & Johnson, 2008) in Norwegian private ECEC provision, to accommodate resources and

assets strongly associated with corporate organizations: Autonomy within legislation, professional management, internal hierarchies, and economies of scale allowing quality assurance through elaborate internal systems. ‘Corporation’s capital’ hence refers to this set of organizational capacities, as well as significant economic resources and a culture geared towards self-reliance and competition. Framing the increasing ‘*consolidation*’ (corporatization) of the ECEC sector as a ‘*natural consequence*’ is quite a strong attempt to place the corporation way of providing ECEC services in a superior or dominant position, establishing it as symbolic capital in the field (Emirbayer & Johnson, 2008, p. 12).

My analysis illuminates slightly different field distinction and positions (Emirbayer & Johnson, 2008) than the traditional for-profit vs. non-profit dimension also present in my data. The non-profit provider with corporate structure seems to join forces with the other corporate providers on issues related to ECEC quality. In the parliamentary discussion, however, a ‘large for-profit vs. small non-profit’ dichotomy prevailed. The representatives from the opposition bringing up the corporate dimension did so by attending to the challenges facing ‘*small, stand-alone and non-profit centers*’ (Stortinget, 2020b, p. 4147). Parliament’s ambitions to differentiate the regulations relating to for-profit and non-profit ECEC centres were set out, as well as the need to balance the tightening of regulations related to private provision with supporting the small and non-profit centres (pp. 4147–4148).

### **Reframing municipalities as corporations**

In the consulting process, the corporate ECEC providers bring the distribution of competence between local and national ECEC authorities into question. In sum, their suggestions reconstruct the proposed national audit centre ensuring efficient use of public money in private ECEC centres into a national audit authority spanning most aspects of ECEC provision and funding. This reconstruction is then supported by using arguments of providing better quality and equal treatment. The reframing seems to rest upon a perception of municipalities and private provider corporations as essentially equal and equivalent actors. Because municipalities ‘act as corporations’ by running several centres, private providers should be allowed to do so as well. The corporate providers push for reforms reframing municipalities as largely provider organizations (Brunsson & Sahlin-Andersen, 2000) rather than multifunctional agents for the welfare state and a local polity (Christensen et al., 2009). The government is urged to provide firmer national guidelines for ECEC quality, limit municipal control of the local welfare provider mix, untie

private centre funding levels from municipal centre costs, and take over auditing and monitoring functions currently handled by the municipalities. Though well aligned in several of these issues, the non-profit provider explicitly refers to the importance of local democracy when it comes to governing the local welfare provider mix. However, this provider requests a national policy for increasing the share of non-profit private ECEC centres.

The ‘reconstruction work’ regarding the municipal role by the corporate providers was, however, countered by the right-centre government. Although supported by the right-wing party, the attempt to redefine the national audit centre failed. The government retained their view of municipalities as local democracies as well as providers of welfare services, which should not automatically be compared to private actors. Supervising the quality and content of ECEC centres requires knowledge of local context and priorities and should remain at municipal level (Ministry of Education and Research, 2020, p. 89).

In adhering to the quality of local ECEC services, the municipalities strive to coordinate, integrate and develop the quality of local centres across diverse providers (Haugset, 2021; Ljunggren et al., 2017). Recognizing their limited hierarchical authority in private centres, they offer the head teachers of both public and private centres attractive professional network arenas for quality development processes. The municipalities’ ECEC advisors seek to enhance the ECEC centres as professional arenas as well as agents implementing local policy (Brunsson & Sahlin-Andersen, 2000; Haugset, 2021). This practice, however, contributes to the inter-municipal differences in operating conditions that challenge the corporate providers’ internal coordination and development processes (Haugset, 2021). Firmer national ECEC quality guidelines, perhaps including even measurable standards, would presumably constrain municipal diversity. At the same time, coordinating local ECEC with other municipal upbringing, health, and social responsibilities could be hampered and local democratic influence on ECEC reduced.

### **Pushing institutional configurations towards a state-managed welfare market?**

The current institutional configurations of the Norwegian ECEC market resemble Gingrich’s (2011) consumer-controlled welfare market: Responsibilities for service allocation and access are public matters; parents choose freely among local private and public centres; and centre funding is linked to parents’ choices. These settings, at least in theory, make centre quality, as parents perceive it, a core competitive issue. Assuming well-developed user choices, consumer-controlled welfare markets drive

innovation and ongoing quality enhancement processes. Politicians on the left usually prefer these welfare markets, as they grant citizens of all social strata the freedom of choice between centres continuously striving to develop and deliver high-quality services (Gingrich, 2011). In Norwegian ECEC provision, however, the local nature of markets, local network cooperation, and pliable national quality guidelines also accommodate diverse and localized perceptions of ECEC quality (Haugset, 2021; Haugset et al., 2019).

A sub-group of for-profit corporate providers distinguishes themselves by suggesting clear national ECEC quality definitions and measurable standards. They highlight the cost-effectiveness of their own solutions and disapprove of national regulations regarding input-factors like centre staffing. Their preferred regulative settings seem to imply extensive organizational autonomy in meeting nationally standardized outputs. The suggestions presented by these more cost-efficiency oriented corporate ECEC providers can be interpreted as pushing the institutional ECEC market configurations towards a state-managed welfare market. According to Gingrich, these arrangements emphasize sector cost-efficiency, and accordingly play down local responsiveness and ongoing quality enhancement processes compared to the consumer-controlled market. The main difference between the two configurations relates to the ECEC quality concept. The state-managed market implies *a legalistic structure with clear standards and tight control* (Gingrich, 2011, p. 14).

In settings where extensive deregulations would challenge important electoral groups, politicians to the right, according to Gingrich, often prefer cost-efficient state-managed markets. This distinction is indicated in the parliamentary discussion: a proposal from the right-wing party attributed financial management monitoring, in both municipal and private centres, to the proposed national audit centre (Stortinget, 2020b, p. 4138). The proposal gathered limited support on this occasion, but this suggests that the cost-efficiency oriented corporate providers do have potential allies in Norwegian party politics.

## Conclusions

In this article, I set out to shed light on how corporate ECEC providers contribute to gradual institutional change through the negotiation of their own position and legitimacy in the Norwegian ECEC field. My analysis of a recent legislative process illuminates how the corporate ECEC providers negotiate the value of 'corporations' capital' in the ECEC field. This creates new distinctions and dimensions of conflict, regarding which types of capital should be more

central to the fields' collective endeavour (Emirbayer & Johnson, 2008).

The corporate providers' position in the ECEC field was severely challenged by the Norwegian government's legislative draft. The proposition implied a devaluation of the corporative way of providing high-quality ECEC services, in this article referred to as corporations' capital. In the following consultancy process, the corporate providers hence fiercely defied the drafted proposal, as well as the suggested adjustments to the funding system and the municipal authority scope. In this regard, their efforts may have contributed to open the private centre funding system to further, more comprehensive reforms. Furthermore, neither the centre de-corporatization proposal nor the alterations in municipal scope in regulating the local markets were presented to Parliament at this juncture. Thus, we may expect further tug-of-war over these issues in the years to come. The corporate ECEC providers failed in their efforts to expand and reconstruct the proposed national audit centre, although they seem to have political allies to the political right of the current right-centre government.

A central corporate advantage is the capacity to autonomously handle the provider's responsibility for ECEC centre quality development assigned by the National Quality Framework Plan (Framework plan, 2017, p. 15). In the local ECEC provision fields, however, the ECEC centre quality development arrangements are dealt with in cooperative network arrangements (Haugset, 2021). Regarding centre quality development, the municipal authorities attribute value to cooperative and locally embedded network types of capital (Haugset, 2021). Hence, even large amounts of corporation's capital do not immediately translate into the dominant field positions the corporate actors aspire to. Local ECEC provision fields are not homologous (Wang, 2016) to the national field. In the studied consultancy process, the corporate providers seek to enhance their field position vis-à-vis the municipalities. They suggest national reforms in rule enforcement that would shift power from local to national authorities and reframe and restrict the municipal role of attending to the content of their own ECEC centres. The suggested reforms would hence allow corporation-related types of field capital to gain leverage, at the cost of types of capital related to local community and networks (Emirbayer & Johnson, 2008).

The distinction between the corporate and the local network cooperation ways of developing high-quality, private ECEC services seems to be related but not convergent to the for-profit vs. non-profit provider dimension. The consultancy process demonstrates how corporate ECEC providers can form different political alliances. The non-profit corporate

provider's argumentation and stances connect to the for-profit vs. non-profit dimension displayed in the parliamentary debate on welfare rent-seeking. Non-profit corporate ECEC provision seems to allow even politicians on the left to reap sector efficiency advantages associated with corporatization.

Nevertheless, the ECEC providers overtly striving to establish sector cost-efficiency closer to the core of national ECEC policy are all for-profit businesses. By suggesting national quality standards and highlighting cost-efficiency and saved public money, they push towards the state-managed welfare market associated with political parties to the right (Gingrich, 2011). They challenge the current welfare market institutional configuration, where ECEC quality is co-created and coordinated locally within broad national guidelines. Corporate provision is very cost-efficient within the frames of bounded, standardized tasks and limited local variations. A relevant policy question to be asked is whether ECEC quality is, or should be, standardized and detached from the local polity. Gradual institutional change towards the state-managed welfare market may also lessen the survival chances for local and alone-standing private ECEC centres unable to achieve economies of scale.

## Note

1. Available at <https://www.regjeringen.no/no/dokumenter/horing-av-forslag-til-endoringer-i-barnehage-loven-med-forskrifter-ny-regulering-av-private-barnehager2/id2641852/?expand=horingssvar>

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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