



Privatization and Coercive Isomorphic Pressure in Norwegian Early Childhood Education and Care (1987-2020)

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Abstract

This article analyses the privatization of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) provision in Norway between 1987 and 2020. My analytical framework combines theories of structured organizational fields and gradual institutional change to investigate how the scope and field position of private ECEC providers have evolved during this period. Based on an analysis of official policy documents, I illuminate how ECEC quality enhancement has gradually been institutionalized as the common, legitimizing endeavour of the ECEC provision field by means of coercive isomorphic pressure. Along with increasing regulation of working conditions, this has altered the meaning of private ECEC provision. Both the scope and field position of private provider organizations have evolved accordingly. Currently, small providers and larger provider corporations face different sets of legitimacy challenges, resulting in a conflict of interests. Tensions between these groups are likely to fuel ongoing field dynamics that are capable of yielding institutional stability as well as change. My analysis contributes towards building a more comprehensive theoretical framework for organizational fields by illuminating the interplay between coercive isomorphic pressure and organizational characteristics within a structured field.

Keywords:

Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC);
privatization;
coercive isomorphic pressure;
gradual institutional change;
organizational fields

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Introduction

In this article, I analyse the sustained privatization of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) provision in Norway over a three-decade period marked by evolving policy goals, increasing regulation, and shifts in the composition of the private provider group. Through the theoretical lenses of organizational field structuration (DiMaggio and Powell 1983; Wooten and Hoffman 2017) and gradual institutional change (Mahoney and Thelen 2009), my analysis illuminates how the private ECEC providers' scope to exercise agency has evolved over time within the structures of the organizational field. Employing official Norwegian ECEC policy documents from 1987 to 2020, I investigate the research question:

How has the organizational field of Norwegian ECEC provision evolved over the past three decades in relation to the position of private providers?

From a theoretical perspective, my analysis sheds light on organizational field structuration, and how this affects field-embedded organizations' options for agency. My work supplements that of researchers seeking to develop a comprehensive institutional theory framework that accounts for change as well as stability within organizational fields (Beckert 2010, pp. 152-153; Bouilloud et al. 2020; Scott 2017; Suddaby and Viale 2011; Wooten and Hoffman 2017).

I will first offer an introduction to ECEC in Norway and to the research carried out into private ECEC provision. I will then present my theoretical framework and relate it to my investigation. After describing my data and methods, I will analyse key policy documents in the light of my theoretical framework. The discussion section of the article focuses on the interplay between private ECEC providers' scope for agency and the gradual structuration

of the ECEC provision field. My conclusion addresses the research question and highlights the theoretical implications.

Norwegian ECEC: stable privatization in a policy contraction field

Norwegian preschool children have a statutory right to attend a local ECEC centre, and 93 percent are currently enrolled at the country's 5,600 ECEC centres (kindergartens). Municipalities have a duty to meet local demand for ECEC services, either by operating centres or by funding private provision. Usually, these approaches are combined, and private ECEC providers have not been marginalized as is the case in most other Norwegian welfare sectors (Ellingsæter et al. 2020). The private sector share of ECEC centres has remained at between 40 and 60 percent for several decades (Trætteberg et al. 2021, pp. 31-32), and currently stands at 53 percent, which is the highest level in Scandinavia. Traditionally, ECEC privatization has been broadly accepted, and the Norwegian ECEC sector is regarded as being more private provider friendly than in neighbouring countries (Haug 2014; Rauch 2005; Trætteberg et al. 2021). The 1975 Kindergarten Act ensured that ECEC goals and coverage in municipal as well as private centres became matters of public policy, entrusting municipalities with the supervision of all local centres (The Kindergarten Act 1975). Today, public debate on the issue of for-profit ECEC provision (see for instance Herning 2015; Skrede 2021) indicates that the political salience of ECEC privatization is on the rise.

Previous research into Norwegian ECEC provision has indicated the presence of social structures at field level, including increasing levels of regulation and struggles among involved actors to influence these structures. The ECEC sector thus constitutes a promising case study for shedding light on field structuration, institutional change processes, and the idea of *"recursive interdependence of actors and structures"* (Scott 2017, p. 866) within organizational fields. Informal structures such as a resilient national consensus on appropriate pedagogical content (Børhaug and Moen 2014; Dahle 2020), a hegemonic discourse on children's learning (Børhaug 2016), and norms and perceptions that confine competitive strategies to very limited areas of the ECEC content (Børhaug and Lotsberg 2012) are documented and discussed. ECEC service quality is referred to as a 'master idea' that both initiates and legitimises reforms in organizations within the Norwegian ECEC field (Gotvassli and Vannebo 2016). Moderate differences between public and private ECEC centre practices, even as they relate to macro-level goals, indicate the presence of norms that extend formal regulation (Haugset 2019). Research has identified local network arenas where coercive isomorphic pressure is mediated and adapted through agency (Haugset 2021b; Ljunggren et al. 2017; Østrem et al. 2009).

Researchers have highlighted two significant trends in relation to ECEC governance and private service provision. Firstly, ECEC is described as a policy contraction field subject to increased control by national government. In both private and municipal ECEC centres, the traditional minimum service standards and pre-school teachers' professional local autonomy have gradually been constrained by stringent and more detailed regulation (Børhaug 2018; Børhaug and Moen 2014). Secondly, during the past decade, the rapid increase in for-profit ECEC provision has enabled a few ECEC corporations to become influential actors in national policy development (Børhaug and Moen 2014; Haugset 2021a; Lunder 2019; Trætteberg et al. 2021). According to Børhaug (2018, p. 88), increased government engagement, combined with the consolidation of private providers into large corporations, may be leading to a more rigid, sector-wide institutionalization of ECEC content and organisation, which may in turn also promote tensions and conflicts of interest. Norwegian ECEC embodies articulated conflicts of interest between private providers and the authorities on issues of regulation and centre funding arrangements (Haugset 2021a; Trætteberg et al. 2021, pp. 39-40).

Theory and Analytical Framework

Organizational fields are meso-level social orders comprising a set of heterogenous organizations that share a common understanding of what is at stake in the field in question. In

combination, such organizations make up a '*recognized area of institutional life*', which may gradually become structured or institutionally defined (DiMaggio and Powell 1983, p. 148).

Structures of organizational fields

In an institutionalized field, social relations between actors become more stable as shared meaning is attributed to field-common endeavours and actor stances (Fligstein 2013). A field becomes structured when interaction and information load within the field increases, and when clear inter-organizational structures of domination and coalition emerge in combination with the development of mutual awareness among field members of participation in common endeavours (DiMaggio and Powell 1983, p. 148).

Organizations inhabiting structured organizational fields compete not only for resources and customers, but also for legitimacy (DiMaggio and Powell 1983, p. 150). Field-level social structures such as formal and informal rules and expectations institutionalize, constrain, enable certain actions and distribute power and resources among actors (Mahoney and Thelen 2009, p. 7). Agency thus becomes "*not a choice among unlimited possibilities but rather among a narrowly defined set of legitimate options*" (Wooten and Hoffman 2017, p. 55). Deephouse et al. (2017) point to two types of challenges that organizations may face: *performance legitimacy challenges* related to an organization's capacity and ability to meet its objectives, and *value legitimacy challenges* related to doubts about the organization's mission and legitimacy for existence within the field.

In DiMaggio and Powell's (1983) theory of organizational fields, initially heterogenous organizations gradually become more homogenous or isomorphic as the field becomes structured. Coercive isomorphic pressure by government, in combination with organizations' legitimacy-seeking behaviour, constitutes a field-level mechanism with the potential to cause intra-field homogeneity (DiMaggio and Powell 1983). Top-down "*managed isomorphism*" (Arvidson 2018, p. 183), exercised by means of policy, funding and formal regulation, inevitably confers structure on fields by means of an interplay between legal coercion and resource dependency. Softer governance, involving politically-defined ambitions and informal institutions that entail universal legitimizing goals and practices across organizations, also contributes to field structuration (Lawrence and Suddaby 2006; Scott 2014). Brunsson (1994) claims that in recognizing the significance of securing legitimacy from their environment, private organizations that deliver welfare services on behalf of the state are particularly prone to politicisation processes. Public funding, regulation and commitments create expectations of adherence to core public values, even among private business organizations (Madestam, Sundström, and Bergström 2018).

Dynamics of structured organizational fields

Organizational fields represent environments external to organizations, and structured fields impose rules and expectations even as field inhabitants come and go (Fligstein 2013). Nevertheless, field-level institutions are socially constructed and maintained as part of ongoing dynamic processes by the actors within the field (Lawrence and Suddaby 2006; Fligstein 2013; Mahoney and Thelen 2009). These field-level processes can be perceived as a game in which actors strive to maintain or enhance their own positions in the field in response to other actors' efforts (Fligstein 2013). While field structures and institutions constitute the 'rules of the game', such rules and their interpretation and enforcement can also be challenged by the field inhabitants (Mahoney and Thelen 2009; Fligstein 2013).

Early accounts of organizational fields, such as that by DiMaggio and Powell (1983), tend to downplay these dynamics, as well as actor heterogeneity, power asymmetry and conflicts of interest within fields (Mahoney and Thelen 2009; Fligstein 2013). More recently, several attempts have been made to develop a more comprehensive and dynamic institutional theory framework (Bouilloud et al. 2020; Boxenbaum and Pedersen 2009; Mahoney and Thelen 2009; Powell and Rerup 2017; Scott 2017; Selznick 1996; Wooten and Hoffman 2017). Such studies have conceptualized fields as dynamic entities capable of moving towards both diversification and homogenization (Beckert 2010; Wooten and Hoffman 2017), stability and change, and even change disguised as stability (Fligstein 2013). Theory has also been

developed surrounding the more complex relations between fields and their inhabiting actors, and between actors within the fields (Battilana and D'Aunno 2009; Emirbayer and Johnson 2008; Hallett and Gougherty 2018; Powell and Rerup 2017; Quirke 2013; Wang 2016; Wooten and Hoffman 2017). Tenets about field isomorphy and actors' unitary reactions to institutional pressures have been questioned by Alvesson and Spicer (2019, pp. 211-212). However, more research is needed into how organizational fields evolve and change once they are formed, and how informal structures within fields are maintained or change over time (Arvidson 2018; Beckert 2010; Wooten and Hoffman 2017, p. 65). In this article, I will show how the field creates dissimilar sets of legitimacy challenges for small and corporate private ECEC providers, providing them with different incentives and options in relation to field stability and change.

Analytical framework

My analytical framework implies that the structuration and re-structuration of politicised organizational fields such as Norwegian ECEC provision may be the result of the dynamics and mechanisms of gradual institutional change as described by Mahoney and Thelen (2009). The concept of 'gradual institutional change' refers to processes by which, over time, field endogenous actors engender incremental transformations to the purposes, meanings, and natures of institutions in pursuit of their interests (Mahoney and Thelen 2009). The theory of gradual institutional change highlights path dependency, actor scope for goal-oriented agency within ambiguous norms and regulatory frameworks, and political arguments about the interpretation and enforcement of rules (Mahoney and Thelen 2009). By applying this theory within a structured organizational field context, I assume that the interests and goals of actors in a given field may be influenced or shaped by the field's institutional forces. However, actor behaviour also shapes the institutional environment. Depending on how their interests are served by prevailing institutions, actors emerge either as change agents or defenders of the *status quo* (Mahoney and Thelen 2009). Tensions and battles for resources and position may serve to reproduce as well as incrementally change the field's structure. Organizations may enhance their positions at the cost of others, and both the rules and perceptions of the field's common endeavour may shift (Fligstein 2013).

Options to exert agency depend on an actor's capacity and resources, the scope available within prevailing institutions, and the opportunities available effectively to block change proposals. Ambiguity among institutions opens the door to local agency aimed at conversion and drift. However, the introduction of detailed regulation and clear-cut tasks makes political actions to displace or supplement the old with new layers of regulation more beneficial than local adaptation. The passive sanctioning of drift implies that the impact of the old rules changes as the environment shifts (Mahoney and Thelen 2009).

My empirical analysis illuminates the policy-led structuration that took place in Norwegian ECEC provision between 1987 and 2020, and emphasizes how this structuration has shaped the position of, and opportunities available to, private ECEC providers. Some workers perceive current failures to conceptualize the coexistence of institutional processes yielding change, stability, isomorphy and diversity as "*theoretically unsatisfactory*" (Wooten and Hoffman 2017, p. 152). The analytical framework employed in my analysis combines sociological organizational field theories of isomorphism with theories encompassing path dependency, stability and change towards heterogeneity. It aims to shed light on the conditions under which each of these processes may be expected to occur (Beckert 2010, p. 153).

Data and Methodology

Coercive isomorphic pressure is operationalized in the form of attempts by government to use policy design and implementation to introduce structures such as field-internal information load, patterns of interaction, domination and coalition, and awareness of ECEC field-common endeavours (DiMaggio and Powell 1983). The empirical material for my analysis is a sample of ECEC policy documents issued by the Norwegian government between 1987 and 2020. Document analysis is well suited for tracking change and development over time, and

government documents represent a readily available, rich and reliable source of data not prone to biased selectivity or the influence of the research process (Bowen 2009). The Norwegian government issues detailed white papers and investigation reports as part of its legislative processes. Although these may be inadequate for describing processes in organizational fields, such documents are useful for data extraction as a basis for policy content analysis (Bowen 2009; Dalglish, Khalid, and McMahon 2020, p. 1427).

Identifying and sampling documents

Documents were identified during digital archive searches in the Norwegian government internet portal *regjeringen.no*, and downloaded in full text form, although some of the older documents had to be obtained from the National Library. Two strategies were employed for the identification of relevant documents. The first involved searches for the term ‘*barnehage*’ (kindergarten), and the second a systematic review of all white papers and investigation reports issued by the various ministries responsible for ECEC during the period of interest.

This yielded a total of 60 ECEC-related documents, which is consistent with overviews published in previous ECEC research papers (Gotvassli 2020; Korsvold 2005; Skjæveland 2016). All the documents were skimmed through in order to assess their relevance (Bowen 2009) and organised chronologically in a timeline database (Gläser and Laudel 2019) into which I plotted identified dates and brief descriptions of events relevant to Norwegian ECEC policy. I then sampled a total of 31 documents from the database, selected to provide a broad overview of Norwegian ECEC policy and its implementation, and to reveal in detail how private ECEC provision and the role of private providers had been addressed. All ECEC policy white papers and kindergarten-related Acts from the period are included, as well as reports from five of seven investigations into ECEC issues. I have sampled three legislative proposals related to private ECEC provision with associated investigations and minutes, and five white papers issued with the aim of coordinating ECEC with other policy fields, which emerged as important contributions to my analysis. These documents are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1. An overview of the policy documents analysed as part of this study.

Key ECEC policy documents	Year of dissemination
8 white papers outlining ECEC policy, including the 2017 governmental strategy regarding competence enhancement	1987, 1999, 2003, 2005, 2009, 2013, 2016, 2017 and 2019
5 official investigations regarding ECEC	2007, 2010, 2011, 2018 and 2020
2 kindergarten-related Acts, including appurtenant statutory regulations	1995, 2005 and 2017 (new Framework plan)
3 law proposals regarding private ECEC provision, including investigation reports and minutes	1994, 2008 and 2020
5 policy documents coordinating ECEC with other policy areas	2010, 2016, 2016, 2017 and 2019

Data extraction and analyses

My approach to data extraction and organization is inspired by extractive qualitative content analysis, which emphasizes the significance of the temporal context of a given document while tracking processes over time (Gläser and Laudel 2019). The timeline database allowed me to corroborate, validate, and interpret excerpts from each document in the light of concurrent events and documents entered in the timeline (Bowen 2009; Gläser and Laudel 2019). Most of the documents sampled deal with the development of ECEC policy in general, whereas discussion of private ECEC provision occurs more sporadically and is commonly treated only as a sub-theme.

The documents and text excerpts discussing general ECEC policy data were analysed in accordance with the approach of Dalglish, Khalid, and McMahon (2020, p. 1429). The documents were read through to extract overall meaning, and selected text sections were extracted for further analysis. Operationalizations of theoretically informed concepts related to DiMaggio and Powell's (1983) field structuration processes were employed, and the data were

assigned to one of the categories; *policy goals and ambitions* (field-common endeavour), *implementation strategies* (information load and interaction patterns), and *distribution of roles, hierarchies, and responsibilities* among actors (structures of domination). An inductive approach was used to code, describe, and analyse trends, stability and change in the policy content of each category. I have focused on extracting and categorizing the main proposals and outcomes related to ECEC policy contained in the documents. The far less extensive volume of text material related to private ECEC provision has been extracted and categorized at a greater level of detail, emphasising private provider's scope (Mahoney and Thelen 2009) within the formal and informal field structures emerging from the analyses described above.

Findings relevant to the research question were extracted with a focus on policies and events that emerged during the analyses as particularly important to private ECEC provision. These findings are summarised in Table 2, which illustrates field structuration and re-structuration during different periods between 1987 and 2020. These periods were defined during the analyses and represent the years (1987-2001) leading up to the Kindergarten Reform aimed at achieving full ECEC coverage, the period of reform implementation (2002-2012), and the period after the reform goal was achieved (2012-2020).

Development of the Norwegian ECEC Sector

In this section, I present my empirical findings and relate them to my theoretical framework.

Service expansion in public and private ECEC centres (1987-2001)

In 1987, increases in state funding for ECEC centres were greeted as a key to achieving the primary policy target of full ECEC coverage by the year 2000 (Ministry of Consumer and Administrative Affairs, 1987, pp. 4-5). Both municipal and private centres were awarded generous state grants (p. 15). However, considerable variation was observed in the municipal funding of private centres. The scope enjoyed by exclusively state-funded private providers in terms of enrolment practices and fee setting was sustained in spite of emerging challenges to municipal coordination measures. The establishment of centres by private organizations without municipal funding was encouraged:

If businesses and other employers participate in the funding of ECEC centres with sums equal to municipal funding, this would provide more children with ECEC services (Ministry of Consumer and Administrative Affairs, 1987, p. 17).

By 1994, one in four ECEC centres was operating outside the sphere of municipal coordination. The emergence of a socially stratified service market led to increases in parental fees for private centres and severe service shortages. A proposal to link state ECEC funding to local municipal coordination requirements (Ministry of Children and Families, 1994) was fiercely opposed by the private sector. A few years later, the incumbent centre-right government proposed to remove state funding from profit-motivated private providers (Ministry of Children and Families, 1999, p. 51).

A 1987 white paper put ECEC content and quality on the political agenda for the first time, and promoted a broader societal perspective on ECEC as ‘the hand that rocks the cradle’: “*ECEC shall contribute to strengthening the child’s identity, both as an individual and a citizen, convey basic knowledge and prepare the children for future tasks and challenges*” (Ministry of Consumer and Administrative Affairs, 1987, p. 20, my translation). Hence, although the efforts of preschool teachers were still acknowledged as essential to ECEC quality, a policy stake in centre content was established, linking ECEC to broader societal goals. As a result, there arose an imperative to control ECEC content, leading to a recognition of a lack of nationwide plans, and the need for further education of staff and local quality development at ECEC centres. This in turn raised the question of the capacities of both private and municipal ECEC providers (Ministry of Children and Families, 1999, p. 53; Ministry of Consumer and Administrative Affairs, 1987, p. 26).

In 1993, private ECEC providers founded the PBL, a national employer and lobbying organization, with the two-fold goal of supporting “quality and economic growth in the associated centres”.¹

A revision of the Kindergarten Act entrusted the Ministry of Children and Family Affairs with the regulation of content and quality in Norwegian kindergartens (The Kindergarten Act 1995). The resulting Framework Plan targeted ECEC preschool teachers in particular, but also emphasized the responsibility of providers to ensure that centres complied with the plan (Framework Plan 1995, p. 2). Collaboration across local centres on content and quality development were perceived as a readily available means of enhancing municipal coordination and the integration of private centres (Ministry of Children and Families 1999, p. 53).

Reform, decentralization, and full ECEC coverage (2002-2011)

The pre-2000 policy aimed at full ECEC coverage had failed, especially with regard to toddlers. However, in 2002 a broad coalition of parties on the left and right succeeded in achieving amendments to ECEC policy. The centre-right government was instructed to ensure full ECEC coverage within a few years, more affordable and high-quality services, increased national and local government responsibility for ECEC, and equitable public funding arrangements for both private and public sector providers. The subsequent white paper prepared the way for the Kindergarten Reform (Ministry of Children and Families 2003).

Privatization and parental free choice of ECEC centres were sustained, and the Kindergarten Reform raised levels of public funding, placed caps on fees, and enabled municipalities to coordinate enrolment at all local ECEC centres. In 2009, children between 1 and 5 were granted the statutory right to attend an ECEC centre, and the municipalities were delegated a duty to provide ECEC services. In 2011, the state funding of ECEC centres was added to the annual lump sum transfer of funds from the state to the municipalities, and this was followed by regulations guaranteeing equal funding for municipal and private local centres. Full coverage led to the saturation of local ECEC markets, and the municipal funding of new private centres was made optional although already established centres retained their rights to funding (Section 19 of the Kindergarten Act, 2005).

The Kindergarten Reform made no distinction between non-profit and for-profit private ECEC provision. The municipalities were now responsible for the funding and coordination of enrolment to local ECEC centres across all provider organizations. The existing two-tier private provision arrangement was removed, and all private providers could rely on increased levels of public funding. However, variation in the scope of funding among municipalities caused significant inter-municipal differences in operating conditions among private providers.

As full ECEC coverage gradually became a reality, government attention was diverted towards service quality development, and ECEC became subject to an array of quality development programmes. A state-appointed expert group investigated the complexities of ECEC quality, and recommended that subjective experience, local adaptation, and demands from the ECEC authorities should be taken into account (Ministry of Children and Families 2005, p. 18). The concept of ECEC quality was ultimately defined by the Framework Plan, whose guidelines were broad and even ambiguous. A new Kindergarten Act and Framework Plan were followed by guidelines that supported the roles of ECEC providers, preschool teaching professionals and the local authorities as set out in the new legislation (The Kindergarten Act, 2005). Private provider organizations made efforts to be more hands-on with regard to ECEC quality, while at the same time referring to municipal ECEC authorities for supervision and guidance. In 2008, a set of broad, societal aims addressing ECEC were drawn up and approved, making the contributions of ECEC to both individual and societal development more explicit (Ministry of Education and Research, 2007, 2008; The Kindergarten Act, 2005). As a result, information load within the field continued to increase and the prevailing structures of interaction and domination became subject to adjustment and elaboration.

Governing ECEC quality in diverse provider organizations (2012-2020)

Inconsistencies in levels of ECEC quality were acknowledged by the Norwegian government as early as in 2009 (Ministry of Education and Research 2009, p. 6), and proposals for incremental initiatives aimed at improving quality have become an increasingly important

topic in key policy documents issued during the past decade (Ministry of Education and Research, 2013, 2016, 2017a). However, decentralized governance structures have severely limited the ability of government to control and coordinate ECEC quality.

Quality enhancement through skills development

A range of more indirect governance tools and strategies for enhancing and levelling up ECEC quality has increased information load within the ECEC field. In 2018, a government-appointed expert committee investigated the status of preschool teaching professionals in the context of Norwegian ECEC (Ministry of Education and Research, 2018). The committee recommended the mandating of preschool teacher competence within private provider organizations as a means of guaranteeing the providers' capacity to support quality enhancement at ECEC centres. For small private providers, closer integration with the municipalities was proposed as an alternative (Ministry of Education and Research, 2018, p. 270). The national framework for preschool teacher education has been evaluated and reformed both to harmonise with the Framework Plan (Framework Plan, 2006, 2017) and to integrate ECEC's societal goals as part of preschool teaching principles (Ministry of Education and Research, 2013, p. 70). State-coordinated leadership courses have been shaping head teacher practice at ECEC centres since 2011, and a comprehensive ECEC staff skills enhancement system was introduced in 2017 (Ministry of Education and Research, 2017a). Meanwhile, regulations governing ECEC centre practices have become more stringent, for instance through the imposition of minimum staff-children ratios and internal control procedures (Sections 18 and 9, respectively, of the The Kindergarten Act, 2005).

Field actor roles, positions, and scope for adaptation

'High-quality' ECEC services are currently perceived as an important policy tool in a number of fields, including early intervention and social inclusion (Ministry of Education and Research, 2017b, 2019b), the safeguarding of Sàmi culture and language (Ministry of Local Government and Regional Development, 2016), public health promotion (Ministry of Health and Care Services, 2019) and the integration of minority language groups (Ministry of Justice and Public Security, 2016).

While government ambitions to determine and enhance ECEC quality have rarely been disputed, arguments over issues such as the content and meaning of ECEC quality continue unabated. The most recent Framework Plan (2017) provides an illuminating example. The then right-leaning government's proposal to define the outcomes that parents could expect on enrolling their children at an ECEC centre (Ministry of Education and Research 2016) was fiercely resisted by preschool teachers, who perceived it as a breach of the holistic, social-pedagogical Nordic ECEC tradition (Ministry of Education and Research 2018, p. 77).

In 2017, the legislated roles of field actor groups involved in ECEC staff skills development were elaborated on, with a strong emphasis on provider accountability (Framework Plan 2017, p. 15; Ministry of Education and Research, 2017a, p. 13). Private ECEC providers were included in regional governance networks that controlled funding allocation to local skills development projects. However, funded projects also had to comply with a set of very detailed national guidelines (Ministry of Education and Research, 2017a, p. 10). Moreover, private providers' accountability and scope to make local adaptations within existing legislation were counteracted by the issuance of greater volumes of nationwide programmes and non-regulatory guidelines. While these indirect efforts to assert control can be disregarded, political debate indicated that maintaining field legitimacy beyond meeting formal requirements had become a key issue for private ECEC providers.

Political debate over private ECEC funding arrangements and profitability

In the period 2007 to 2016, the six largest ECEC provider corporations increased their share of the private market from 11 to 32 percent (Trætteberg et al., 2021). In 2013, regulations governing the profitability of private ECEC provision were appended to the Kindergarten Act by the incumbent centre-left government. However, in 2020, the new centre-right government enacted a new auditing system with the aim of ensuring the efficient use of both public

funding and the parental fees paid to private ECEC centres. Private providers were now allowed to run profitable businesses while at the same time complying with the regulations (*Stortinget* 2020a, p. 5; Section 23 of the Kindergarten Act, 2005).

The funding of local private ECEC centres is very much linked to the mean expenditure levels in municipal centres (Section 19 of the Kindergarten Act, 2005). The current system generates significant funding inequalities among the municipalities. National standards for private centre funding were examined and debated in 2015, and brought up again in 2019, at which time the PBL acted as an enthusiastic agent of change (Ministry of Education and Research, 2019a; PBL, 2019). So far, the municipalities have retained their indirect control over expenditure related to private ECEC provision. More recently, however, it has been suggested that the regulations governing private centre funding, including an established centre's entitlement to sustained funding, should be abandoned (Ministry of Trade Industry and Fisheries, 2020, Chapter 24).

The arrangements that frame for-profit private ECEC provision are currently closely monitored by the Norwegian parliament (*Storting*) with the declared aims of safeguarding efficiency and protecting the position of the traditional locally established, non-profit private ECEC centres in the face of provider corporations. Between 2017 and 2019, opposition parties made eight formal requests to successive right-wing and centre-right governments, respectively, to examine a number of issues, including private provision funding arrangements, the scope enjoyed by private providers to establish new, and expand their existing, centres, and municipal freedom to discriminate between non-profit and for-profit private providers (Ministry of Education and Research, 2019a). However, a subsequent parliamentary proposal (Ministry of Education and Research, 2020) resulted in only minor changes (*Stortinget* 2020a, 2020b).

Stability, change and field structuration (1987-2020)

Table 2 provides a summary of the evolution of the politically defined institutional landscape of Norwegian private ECEC provision in the period 1987 to 2020 in terms of both change and stability. The table is organized in accordance with the field structuration processes described by DiMaggio and Powell (1983) and shows that field-common endeavour has shifted with time. As saturation of coverage was achieved, policymakers gradually refocused their attention on the governance of ECEC content and quality. Field-internal interaction and information load have increased steadily, and inter-organizational structures of domination have been defined, maintained, contested, and re-defined. The Kindergarten Reform and its aftermath (2002-2011) represent key events in terms of field restructuring in the framing of private ECEC provision.

Table 2. An overview of Norwegian ECEC provision field structuration between 1987 and 2020.

Policy-led field structuration	1987-2001	2002-2011	2012-2020
Field-common endeavour defined by policy	<p>Change: Provision of ECEC services serving societal goals outside the family (layering).</p> <p>Stability: Achievement of full ECEC coverage</p>	<p>Change: Provision of high-quality local services (displacement as full ECEC coverage is achieved).</p> <p>Stability: Achievement of full ECEC coverage; fulfilment of ECEC's broader societal goals.</p>	<p>Change: Minimisation of variation in, and levelling up, of ECEC service quality (layering).</p> <p>Stability: Fulfilment of ECEC's broader societal goals; provision of high-quality local services.</p>
Field-internal information load and interaction	<p>Change: Politicisation of ECEC societal goals, service content and quality (layering).</p> <p>Stability: For-profit and non-profit private ECEC provision. Leadership monopoly of preschool teachers in local centres. Free parental choice of local ECEC centres.</p>	<p>Change: Evolution of broader policy stakes. National guidelines and support programmes to drive local quality enhancement processes. Equality in local operating conditions for private and public centres (layering).</p>	<p>Change: Cross-sectoral policy coordination, indirect governance and stricter regulation of centre practices (layering). For-profit ECEC provision becomes politically contested.</p>
Emerging structures of domination and coalitions	<p>Change: Municipal planning roles linked to ECEC local coverage, centre supervision, and support for provider quality enhancement processes are defined, distributed, and elaborated on (layering).</p> <p>Stability: Entitlement to ear-marked state funding for all private ECEC centres. A two-tier private market where exclusively state-funded private providers maintain scope to determine pricing and enrolment.</p>	<p>Change: Public funding is increased and decentralized. Increased municipal scope for public-private centre coordination (layering). New private centres lose entitlement to public funding (layering).</p> <p>Stability: Entitlement to continued municipal funding for existing private centres. Roles in supporting ECEC centre quality enhancement.</p>	<p>Change: Extended regulation of private ECEC provision (layering). Increasing expectations of provider organizations' engagement in quality enhancement and governance (layering).</p> <p>Stability: Entitlement to continued municipal funding for existing private centres. Roles in supporting ECEC centre quality enhancement. Decentralized private ECEC centre funding arrangements.</p>

Discussion

In this section I discuss how policy-led structuration of the Norwegian ECEC field has altered the position of private provider organizations and brought about inter-organisational tension. I also discuss the implications of this for field level dynamics.

From entrepreneurs to ECEC quality managers

The position of private ECEC providers has changed in the past three decades as part of a process resembling Mahoney and Thelen's (2009, p. 16) concept of drift: the *meaning* of being a private provider has gradually altered in response to the evolution of the providers' institutional environment. During the 1980s and 1990s, private providers enjoyed a strong position in an organizational field that had ambitions to achieve full ECEC coverage. Even in the face of social stratification and challenges related to local municipal coordination and allocation issues, Norwegian policy makers continued to support private providers' freedom to

determine ECEC enrolment policies and service pricing. The Kindergarten Reform, however, standardized parental fees and gave the municipalities greater coercive powers. The ultimate achievement of full coverage simply served to boost the Norwegian government's ambitions regarding service quality enhancement and coordination.

As a result, private ECEC providers gradually found themselves operating in a decentralized, saturated, and strongly regulated, customer-controlled welfare market (Gingrich, 2011), characterised by a major emphasis on service quality enhancement. As the need for high and equitable service quality gradually became the focus of ECEC policy, the role of private providers shifted towards that of public policy implementors. They were now expected to promote societal as well as individual values, pursue multi-level political goals, and internalize the complexity of the policy ambitions set out in the ECEC Framework Plan. This 'politicisation' process (Brunsson 1994; Madestam, Sundström, and Bergström 2018) has caused private providers gradually to drift away from their role as provision entrepreneurs and towards that of ECEC quality managers on behalf of the welfare state.

As private providers' scope to apply universal strategies for business development diminished, they may have been left with improvement of efficiency and the exploitation of economies of scale through standardization as their only options in the pursuit of developing profitable businesses. The gradual increase in involvement by government in ECEC content and service quality has resulted in ambiguous regulations that leave ample scope for local adaptation of the core of the ECEC provision field. However, non-regulatory, coercive isomorphic pressure imposed by the state makes the maintenance of legitimacy beyond adherence to formal regulations more salient to private ECEC providers. At the same time, a decentralization of regulatory enforcement has challenged attempts to achieve universal provider standardization across the municipalities.

Private provider legitimacy challenges

My findings indicate the emergence of two different types of private provider legitimacy challenges (Deephouse et al. 2017, p. 31). In the 1980s and 1990s, performance legitimacy challenges manifested themselves in government concerns regarding providers' capacity and competence, and their ability to operate high-quality ECEC centres. More recently, value legitimacy challenges, associated with suspicions of 'welfare rent-seeking' (Herning 2015), have emerged and have exerted a marked effect on for-profit private providers. However, these effects have been different for small, local ECEC providers compared with the larger corporations.

Corporate providers have the resources to develop their own ECEC quality systems and standards (Børhaug 2018, p. 78; Dahle 2020), as well as the political means to monitor and influence the development of national ECEC policy (Haugset 2021a). However, they must also front up in the face of doubts about their mission and existential legitimacy, thus requiring them to provide continuous reassurances about their commitment to enhancing and levelling up ECEC quality. Recent research indicates that in their attempts to achieve more robust quality standards, nationwide norms for private ECEC centre funding, and sustained or enhanced scope for private providers, the provider corporations continue to focus their arguments on the enhancement and levelling up of ECEC quality (Haugset 2021a).

In contrast, the smaller private providers operating single centres must address doubts about their ability to fulfil the objectives for which they are claiming public funding. They are continually required to showcase the efforts they are making to enhance organizational performance. Research indicates that municipally-led networking structures for policy implementation (Haugset 2021b; Ljunggren et al. 2017; Østrem et al. 2009) are important arenas in this respect. In such networks, the capacity and efficacy of private providers are boosted by resource pooling and cooperation. Participation in networks offers reassurance to local ECEC authorities in their supervisory roles on issues related to provider values, commitment and capacity (Haugset, 2021b).

It is interesting to note that the field legitimacy maintenance strategies employed by smaller private ECEC providers appear to lean heavily on the freedom exercised by municipalities to guide, supervise and adapt the local ECEC quality enhancement initiatives (Haugset 2021b)

that the corporate providers are striving to diminish (Haugset 2021a). The tensions that this situation brings about are likely to fuel more gradual institutional change processes, stimulating the mobilisation of both change agents and defenders of the *status quo* with their differing stances and resources (Mahoney and Thelen 2009).

In this regard, my findings indicate that restoration of the two-tiered private ECEC provision arrangement that characterized the 1980s and 1990s is back on the political agenda. The two-tiered arrangement is an institutional legacy that enables and facilitates change agents' '*institutional assembly, rehabilitation, or revival*' (Schneiberg 2007, p. 48). However, as ECEC provision field structures have shifted and evolved, so too has the categorization of private providers. Proposals have been put forward to allow municipalities to discriminate between for-profit and non-profit ECEC providers, and to mandate cooperation with the municipalities for those provider organizations with limited resources. Such proposals clearly resonate with the private provider values and capacity field legitimacy challenges discussed above. The principle of equal treatment for all public and private providers is, however, keenly defended by the corporate ECEC providers (Haugset 2021a).

Field dynamics, stability, and change

The social structures of institutionalized fields may imply an ongoing '*jockeying for position*' among field actors, even when the field itself appears to be stable (Fligstein 2013, p. 42). Current field structures offer the various groups of private providers different interests when it comes to field stability or change over time. Provider organizations differ in size, geographical coverage, and access to resources and allies. The traditional private ECEC centres held by small, local providers still outnumber those run by larger corporations. Local providers usually run a single centre and have limited professional, financial, and administrative capacity. Nevertheless, they have continued to hold a key position in ECEC provision for decades and enjoy political support in the Norwegian parliament. Local cooperation among public and private providers has long been regarded as an important instrument promoting quality improvement. This places the smaller providers in an incumbents' field position, where they benefit more from the *status quo* than from changes to decentralized governance arrangements (Fligstein 2013; Mahoney and Thelen 2009).

In order to address their value legitimacy challenges (Deephouse et al. 2017), corporate providers must continuously demonstrate their commitment to the field-common endeavour of levelling and enhancing ECEC quality. The development of intra-organizational quality enhancement across municipal borders within national guidelines is complicated by decentralized adaptation and supervision practices. The for-profit welfare provision debates in the Norwegian parliament indicate the presence of significant veto opportunities, where politicians can legislate against for-profit ECEC providers in response to efforts to displace or convert central field structures. However, gradual institutional change through layering or drift is still an option for corporate change agents (Mahoney and Thelen 2009). Layering onto national quality enhancement guidelines, standards, and enforcement practices may simply serve to gradually decrease municipal scope while maintaining the decentralized formal structures.

Conclusion

This article illustrates the interplay among institutional processes yielding change, stability, isomorphy and diversity in a structured organizational field. In the period 1987 to 2020, the Norwegian ECEC provision field has displayed stability with regards to privatization, and the presence of private service provision *per se* has not been subject to debate. However, significant and gradual institutional change processes have taken place. Private ECEC providers have been subject to increasing regulation, but have also obtained significant scope for local adaptation within broad, formal guidelines. Non-regulatory coercive isomorphic pressure has intensified and the maintenance of field legitimacy has become more salient to all ECEC providers. This has impacted on how organizations exercise scope within the formal rules, and private ECEC providers in Norway have to demonstrate their commitment to the

field's common endeavour: to level up quality. However, the structures constructed to interpret and enforce the agreed-upon rules regarding ECEC quality still offer legitimate opportunities for both change agents and defenders of the *status quo*.

Private ECEC providers, regardless of size, are forced to address differing sets of legitimacy challenges induced by the organizational field. The interplay between field-level coercive isomorphic pressure and organizational characteristics can thus be expected to yield heterogeneity in terms of private providers' interests and strategies. The current, decentralized ECEC centre quality supervision and guidance arrangements make the municipalities valuable allies of small private providers in the latter's pursuit of field legitimacy. On the other hand, corporate ECEC providers, running multiple centres in many municipalities, are finding that decentralized governance structures are hampering their legitimacy-enhancing strategies within their organizational borders. Resourceful corporate providers thus stand to gain from undermining the decentralized ECEC structures that the smaller providers rely on. This tension is likely to fuel ongoing field-internal jockeying for position as inhabitants struggle to reconfigure field structures to their advantage. The outcome will depend on the resources to which the various actor groups and their allies have access, as well as their respective positions within the field. Field institutional legacies of two-tiered arrangements for private ECEC provision have been brought up in political discussions and reassembled in ways that offer benefits to the smaller providers.

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Notes

¹PBL: Private barnehagers landsforbund. Source: <https://www.pbl.no/om-pbl/fakta-om-pbl/>, 17. August 2020, my translation.