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# Enrolling the child in private early childhood education and care in the context of universal service provision

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## ABSTRACT

Finland has traditionally had a universal early childhood education and care (ECEC) system like the other Nordic countries, but in the last 15 years this system has undergone considerable marketisation and privatisation suggested to enable parental choice of ECEC. Much of the existing research on parental ECEC decisions has been conducted in contexts where ECEC systems differ considerably from the welfare and educational regimes of the Nordic countries. Moreover, parents' views of private ECEC have scarcely been studied in the context of universal service provision. This study examined the frames the parents of a four-year-old child use to justify the selection of a private ECEC centre for their child. The data comprised qualitative interviews with eight Finnish parents. By applying discourse analytic tools, four frames were differentiated: accessibility, pedagogy, ECEC facilities and security. The findings demonstrated that while the accessibility of the services in terms of location and opening hours was the basis on which "choice" of ECEC was possible, the parents acted as active agents in the ECEC markets looking for services that would correspond to their values and perceptions of good childhood. The study raises the question of how well public policies and services can meet parents' expectations and adjust to increasingly prevalent ideals of individualisation in society.

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## Introduction

In the Nordic countries, universal early childhood education and care (ECEC) has been an essential part of the welfare policies, and the services have been mostly provided by municipalities (e.g. Béland, Blomqvist, Goul Andersen, Palme, & Waddan, 2014). However, since the turn of the millennium, the Nordic ECEC has undergone considerable marketisation and privatisation (Béland, Blomqvist, Goul Andersen, Palme, & Waddan, 2014, Ruutiainen, Alasuutari, & Karila, 2020, Valkonen & al., 2021). In Finland, the context of this study, this development has occurred rapidly in the last 15 years. While in the year 2000, around 11% of ECEC services were provided by

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private providers, in 2020, the private sector's share was roughly 19% (FifHaW, 2021). Furthermore, Valkonen and colleagues (2021) show that between 2015 and 2019, the share of children enrolled in public ECEC decreased, while the share of children in private ECEC increased.

Through marketisation, ECEC policies have aimed to increase parental choice and competition between service providers, whereas privatisation has entailed that an increased share of ECEC services is provided by private organisations (Anttonen & Meagher, 2013; van der Werf et al., 2021). While the market-oriented reforms have shaped the Nordic ECEC systems (Naumann, 2011, Ruutiainen, 2022, Westberg & Larsson, 2020), how universalism is understood has changed. Instead of approaching universalism as families' equal rights to equal services, the "marketised interpretation" of the concept underlines families' equal opportunities to choose the services they prefer (Ruutiainen, 2022).

Indeed, marketisation and privatisation of ECEC have meant a significant change for parents of young children, as these processes have turned ECEC services into a commodity (Vandenbroeck et al., 2022). The commodification of ECEC positions parents as consumers who purchase services from the market (Brennan, Cass, Himmelweit, & Szebehely, 2012, Yuen & Grieshaber, 2009). According to general market logic, these parent consumers are expected to compare different services and make rational choices for their children based on their needs, values, and other preferences. Thus, parents' position as consumers is tightly related to the language of choice. Parents are also assumed to be responsible for the selection of ECEC and to make choices in the best interest of their child (Vandenbroeck et al., 2022). They are assumed to assess what is good or bad, or right or wrong, for their child. Therefore, even though what is valued varies across cultural-historical contexts, in markets both parents' ability to discern the good and the right and the very act of ECEC choice become moral acts of good parenting (Karlsson, Löfdahl, & Pérez Prieto, 2013).

For Finnish parents – depending on where they live (see Ruutiainen, Paananen, & Fjällström, 2023) – marketisation and privatisation have meant a quick change in their ECEC service options. With the increase in the number of privately provided ECEC places (FifHAW, 2021), municipalities have introduced new demand-side subsidies that are supposed to enable parental choice (Laiho & Pihlaja, 2022, Ruutiainen, Alasuutari, & Karila, 2020). In this article, we are interested in the parents who have taken advantage of the "choice" provided by the marketisation and privatisation of the Finnish ECEC. We consider how those parents who have enrolled their child in a private ECEC centre describe the ECEC decision they have made.

However, in this study, we do not draw on the assumption of "choice", as existing research indicates that parents are not in an equal position in terms of choosing an ECEC provider for their child. Instead, their choices are restricted by, for example, their social, cultural, and financial resources (e.g. Fjellborg & Forsberg, 2021, Drange & Telle, 2020, Grogan, 2012, Kampichler, Dvořáčková, & Jarkovská, 2018, Ruutiainen, Rääkkönen, & Alasuutari, 2023, Vincent et al., 2008) and by contextual conditions such as the geographical availability of services (e.g. Meyers & Jordan, 2006, Vandenbroeck et al., 2008, van der Werf et al., 2021). Although much of the existing research has been conducted in countries and contexts where ECEC systems differ considerably from the welfare and educational regimes of the Nordic countries (see

Esping-Anderssen, 1990; West & Nikolai, 2013), there is some evidence that private services may not be equally available for every child in Finland (Heiskanen et al., 2021, Ruutiainen, 2022, Ruutiainen, Paananen, & Fjällström, 2023, Räsänen & Österbacka, 2023) or in other Nordic countries (Fjellborg & Forsberg, 2021, Drange & Telle, 2020). Research also suggests that Finnish parents in different socioeconomic positions value different aspects of ECEC (Hietamäki et al., 2017, Sulkanen et al., 2020) and use different kinds of capital in their school choices (Kosunen, 2014). However, as far as we know, no qualitative research exists about how parents using private ECEC rationalise their decision to choose a service provider in the context of universal ECEC provision. This is the gap that this study aims to fill.

By analysing research interviews with parents of four-year-old children, this study examines the frames the parents use to justify the selection of a private ECEC centre for their child. Based on the findings, we discuss whether enrolling one's child in private ECEC can be seen as a choice in the context of universal ECEC and, if so, what type of choice. The results increase understanding of the position of private ECEC in the Nordic welfare and education regimes, which are characterised by high-quality, affordable, and accessible public service networks regulated by legislation that imposes the same structural quality standards and statutes on both public and private ECEC institutions.

### ***Parents and ECEC: not a free choice, but a decision***

Parents' ECEC choices are shaped by many contextual, child-related, and family factors (Degotardi, Sweller, Fenech, & Beath, 2018). Therefore, it is suggested that, rather than being the exercise of free choice, parents' decisions should be understood as an accommodation of prevailing conditions, including family and employment demands, social and cultural expectations, available information, and financial, social, and other resources (Meyers & Jordan, 2006). This suggestion is supported by a contextual model of childcare use (Sylva et al., 2007) which argues that parental childcare decisions take place in a socio-historical and socio-cultural context, which includes, for example, national ECEC and family policies, availability of ECEC, and employment opportunities. Moreover, the model proposes that parents' ECEC decisions vary based on their demographic characteristics, such as socioeconomic status, age, and ethnicity, and the child's characteristics, such as temperament, age, and gender. Finally, parental beliefs and attitudes are both influenced by the aforementioned factors and associated with the decision parents make (Sylva et al., 2007).

Archambault, Côté, and Raynault (2020), in turn, describe abilities that could be understood as resources that parents need in decision-making and to access ECEC in each context. These resources include an ability to perceive (awareness and confidence), to seek (autonomy and social support), to reach (stable working conditions and planned need for ECEC), and to pay for and engage in (positive experiences and regular attendance) ECEC.

Vandenbroeck and Lazzari's (2014) framework for understanding unequal access to high-quality ECEC is also informative when considering parents' ECEC decisions. According to the framework, parents' decisions are shaped and restricted by issues related to the availability, affordability, accessibility, usefulness, and comprehensibility

of ECEC services. Availability refers to the quantitative and geographical adequacy of services. Previous research suggests that one of the main factors on which parents base their ECEC decision is whether the location of ECEC services is convenient (Jacobsen & Vollset, 2012; Naumann, 2011; Nisskaya, 2018; Sulkanen et al., 2020). For example, they select a service at a short commuting distance from home (Pennerstorfer & Pennerstorfer, 2021). However, existing research indicates that private ECEC, especially for-profit services, tends to be overrepresented in urban areas with thick demand and in areas characterised by high socioeconomic status (e.g. Fjellborg & Forsberg, 2021, Noailly & Visser, 2009, Lee & Jang, 2017). This also seems to be the case in Finland: a recent study suggests that private ECEC services might be less available for families living in rural areas or neighbourhoods with lower socioeconomic status than in urban areas and neighbourhoods with higher socioeconomic status (Ruutiainen, Paananen, & Fjällström, 2023).

Affordability, in Vandenbroeck and Lazzari's (2014) framework, includes the economic and symbolic costs of ECEC. Economic costs refer to families' customer fees but also to other costs caused by, for example, commuting to and from the services. The symbolic costs are related, in particular, to targeted programmes, whose use may label families as, for example, "at risk" or force them to give up part of their privacy to demonstrate their eligibility for the service (Vandenbroeck & Lazzari, 2014). In Finland, private services are heavily subsidised by the public sector. Customer fees in public ECEC centres and in many private centres, in particular those subsidised by vouchers, are income-related and relatively low, ranging from 0 to around 300 euros per month plus possible add-ons in private centres (Ruutiainen, Alasuutari, & Karila, 2020). In some private centres, however, often subsidised through the so-called private home day care allowance, customer fees may be quite high; therefore, low- and middle-income families are less represented than high-income families in the clientele of such services (Ruutiainen, Räikkönen, Alasuutari, & Karila, 2022, Ruutiainen, 2022).

In addition to availability and affordability, the accessibility of ECEC services may restrict parents' decisions. Accessibility may be limited, for example, due to language barriers, parents' lack of knowledge of bureaucratic procedures, and the enrolment policies of service providers (Vandenbroeck & Lazzari, 2014). In Finland, municipalities' ECEC service guidance may not direct certain families, such as immigrant families or those whose child has special educational needs, to private services (Heiskanen et al., 2021; Pihlaja & Neitola, 2017; Ruutiainen, Alasuutari, & Karila, 2021; Vainikainen et al., 2018). Private providers' enrolment policies may also form an obstacle to certain families' access to ECEC. Private providers may, for example, prefer children in need of whole-day care at the expense of those children who need only half-day care (Mäntyjärvi & Puroila, 2019; Ruutiainen, Alasuutari, & Karila, 2021). They may also decide not to offer special educational support (Heiskanen et al., 2021, Pihlaja & Neitola, 2017, Ruutiainen, Alasuutari, & Karila, 2021, Vainikainen et al., 2018). In contrast, private services may offer services in different languages, which may increase their accessibility for certain families (see Kumpulainen, 2018).

The usefulness of ECEC services is another issue that may shape parents' ECEC decisions (Vandenbroeck & Lazzari, 2014). Usefulness refers to how well the services are attuned and correspond to families' differing situations and needs (Vandenbroeck & Lazzari, 2014), opening hours being one example of such needs. In mixed economies

with split systems, like the UK, parents who work full time may be forced to search for childcare from private providers, which offer more full-time places than the public sector (Chen & Bradbury, 2020). In the Finnish integrated ECEC (see Kumpulainen, 2018), the public sector is obliged to provide ECEC services for all under-school-aged children whose parents have irregular or untypical working hours. The private sector, however, has no such obligation; therefore, children in need of flexibly scheduled ECEC are highly underrepresented in private ECEC centres in Finland (Ruutiainen, Rääkkönen, Alasuutari, & Karila, 2022, Ruutiainen, 2022).

Finally, Vandenbroeck and Lazzari (2014) propose the comprehensibility of ECEC as an issue that impacts parents' use of ECEC services. In other words, they suggest that the values, beliefs, and educational practices of ECEC should match or correspond to the meanings that parents give to the services. Existing research demonstrates that the meanings or values that guide parents' ECEC decisions are often related to their socioeconomic characteristics. In particular, parents with high cultural and social resources are more inclined to engage in an active decision process (e.g. Fjellborg & Forsberg, 2021, Ball & Vincent, 2005, Kampichler, Dvořáčková, & Jarkovská, 2018, Kosunen, 2014, Vincent et al., 2008). Differences in decision processes may originate from parents' differing socioeconomic statuses or ethnicity-related rationalities (Kampichler, 2021). While some parents, perhaps more typically but not exclusively from the working class or ethnic minorities, perceive ECEC participation as supporting their child's adaptation to society, other parents, especially middle-class or elite ones, underline ECEC's capability to meet the individuality of the child or enforce the child's competitiveness (Kampichler, 2021).

A survey study suggests that Finnish parents may differ in how they consider the comprehensibility (see Vandenbroeck & Lazzari, 2014) of private and public ECEC (Sulkanen et al., 2020). Those parents – more often highly educated than low-educated – whose child is in private ECEC are more likely to report that the specialisation and values of ECEC, diverse pedagogical activities, a home-like ECEC setting, and the number of children in the group are important criteria for their ECEC decision than those parents whose child is in public ECEC. Customers of public ECEC, in turn, more often value flexible opening hours and the fact that the ECEC centre is conveniently located (Sulkanen et al., 2020). Moreover, recent research suggests that parents using private ECEC in Finland assume that their child's individual needs are better attended to in a private setting than they would be in public services (Ruutiainen, 2022). These attitudes or beliefs do not, however, relate to parents' socioeconomic status.

### **Public and private ECEC in Finland**

As mentioned earlier, the Finnish ECEC system, first enforced in the legislation in 1973, is based on the idea of universalism (Kildal & Kuhnle, 2005, Ruutiainen, 2022), which refers, for example, to parents' – and, since 1996, children's – universal entitlement to ECEC, affordable and accessible services, and municipalities' responsibility for service provision. For decades, Finnish municipalities have provided most ECEC services themselves in ECEC centres and family day care. Alongside public services, some private services have been provided by non-profit organisations and small for-profit providers (Kumpulainen, 2018). However, following the development seen in other



Nordic countries (Dovemark et al., 2018, Trættemberg et al., 2021, Westberg & Larsson, 2020), since the late 1990s and during the 2010s, in particular, larger, growth-oriented, for-profit chains have also started to provide ECEC services. As a result, the private sector's share as an ECEC provider has grown considerably, standing at around 19% in 2020 (FifHaW, 2021). In the year 2022, around 77% of private ECEC centres were for-profit, and 23% were non-profit organisations.<sup>1</sup> In contrast to some other Nordic countries, parents' cooperatives are very rare.

The private sector's growth has been supported by national and municipal policies. At the national level, the profit-seeking allowed within the ECEC sector and the introduction of new demand-side subsidies (vouchers and a private day care allowance) to support families' ECEC choices have particularly paved the way for the increase of private provision (Laiho & Pihlaja, 2022, Ruutiainen, Alasuutari, & Karila, 2020). Municipalities, in turn, can decide whether they provide ECEC services themselves or purchase them from the private sector through purchase contracts or by adopting demand-side subsidies enabled by legislation (Act on ECEC, 2018). Municipalities can also support private provision, for example through zoning policies or "starting grants" (Ruutiainen, Alasuutari, & Karila, 2020). In the late 2010s around half of municipalities, especially bigger ones, had private services available (Finnish Education Evaluation Centre, 2019; Lahtinen & Svatsjö, 2022).

Public and private ECEC are likewise regulated by central and municipal governments in Finland. For example, private providers are obliged to comply with the national core curriculum of ECEC (FNAFE, 2022) and national statutes regarding staff qualifications and child – adult ratios (Act on ECEC, 2018). The legislation also emphasises parents' right to influence and participate in the planning and evaluation of ECEC and the recognition of children's individuality. Even though the regulatory framework aims for uniformity in terms of the quality and content of ECEC in private and public services in Finland, private ECEC providers often strive to differentiate themselves from the bulk of ECEC services. Some private services represent a specific pedagogical approach (e.g. Montessori or Steiner) or religious ideology, and some offer ECEC in a foreign language or emphasise a particular educational content area (e.g. sports, nature, arts, science). In addition, many private ECEC centres are smaller than public ones (Kumpulainen, 2018; Ruutiainen, Alasuutari, & Karila, 2021). However, larger ECEC chains, in particular, may represent their services as quite similar to those offered by public ones (Ruutiainen, Alasuutari, & Karila, 2021).

To date, research findings on parents' views on private ECEC in Finland seem to be contradictory. One study indicates that, in parents' perceptions, quality and staff competence are higher in public ECEC than in private ECEC (Pihlaja & Warinowski, 2018). In contrast, parents with children in private ECEC appear to be more satisfied with the service they receive than those whose children are in public ECEC (Saranko, Räikkönen, Makkonen, & Alasuutari, 2021). Moreover, it appears that even though parents in general estimate public and private ECEC to be of the same quality, some parents using private services appear to be critical of public ECEC and the quality of ECEC in general (Ruutiainen, Räikkönen, & Alasuutari, 2023). In other Nordic countries, research on parent's views on private and public ECEC is scarce. However, Swedish research suggests that parents using private preschool are more satisfied with the services than parents using public preschool (Hanspers & Mörk, 2011, pp. 55–56)



and that the service users of preschools run by parents' cooperatives perceive the quality of the services higher than the service users of other ECEC facilities (Vamstad, 2007).

## Data and methodology

The data comprise qualitative interviews with the parents of eight children four and five years old. The interviews were conducted in 2019 in the CHILDCARE Project, funded by the [Funding Agency #1], and they comprise part of a bigger data corpus including interviews with the parents of 53 children. The interviews with all the parents who had enrolled their child in a private ECEC centre were included in the data of this study. Thus, this study analyses interviews with seven mothers and one father living in different parts of Finland, mainly in cities with over 150,000 inhabitants. The interviewees were well educated, as recent research suggests of the users of private ECEC in Finland (Ruutiainen, Rääkkönen, & Alasuutari, 2023). One of the parents was a university student; others had a degree from a university or polytechnic and worked, for example, in education and nursing. Two were single parents, while others were part of dual-parent families (see the [Appendix](#)). All the families can be considered as belonging to the middle or upper-middle class. The focus children attended a private ECEC centre. Six had been enrolled in ECEC at the age of 12–20 months and two when they turned three. One child had moved from a private ECEC centre to another private centre due to the family moving home, but the other children had attended the same private ECEC centre since enrolment. Seven of the children had a sibling or siblings.

The research protocol was pre-reviewed and accepted by the Human Sciences Ethics Committee of the University of [anonymised]. The interviewed parents had participated in a survey carried out by the research project. In the survey, they had given permission to be contacted in relation to interviews. The invitations to participate in the present interviews were sent by email with a privacy notice for the research as an attachment. Before the interview, the interviewees gave informed consent to the research.

The interviews concerned the care and education arrangements of the focus child, work – family reconciliation, division of parenting responsibilities, and the organisation of the family's daily life. They lasted between 49 minutes and 1 hour 57 minutes. Typically, at the beginning of the interview the interviewees were asked about the child's "care and ECEC history" and how/why they had made the decisions regarding the child's care arrangements. More detailed questions were asked based on parents' responses, for example, if they had considered some other care options. In particular, the discussions following these questions in the interview comprise the data of this article, although the same topics frequently recurred later in the interview.

The interviews were transcribed verbatim, and the transcriptions were pseudonymised. The analysis started with a careful reading of the interviews, and all talk related to private ECEC was differentiated. Drawing on the starting points of discourse analytic thinking in social psychology (Wood and Kroger, 2000), we focused on differentiating patterns of talk in the interview data. We applied discursive tools presented by Tannen (1993), which she suggests as means to examine frames; thus, we paid attention, for example, to negatives, modals, evaluative language, omissions, the order in which explanations of the ECEC decision were presented, and the use of metaphors and other vivid descriptions of the selection process.

We used the frame as the analytical concept. The concept of the frame has been applied for a long in different disciplines. In sociology, Goffman (1974, p. 11) has defined the concept as “principles of organization which govern events – at least social ones – and our subjective involvement in them”. In short, he links the concept with the organisation of experience. In psychology, Tversky and Kahneman (1981, p. 453) have introduced the concept of decision-frame, which refers to “the decision-maker’s conception of the acts, outcomes, and contingencies associated with a particular choice”. In linguistics, Tannen (1993) associates frames with structures of expectations that, based on one’s experiences in a particular culture or cultures, make the interpretation of the world possible, organise one’s knowledge, and orientate interpretations of new events, information, and experiences.

In this study, we define frame as the lens the interviewees use to make sense of their ECEC decision and thus, organise their perceptions and experiences related to it in the context of the research interview. However, our use and understanding of the concept draw on constructionist thinking (e.g. Burr, 2015). Thus, we do not assume that the frames reflect the interviewees’ mental structures. Neither do we presume that they demonstrate the “factual” reasons explaining parents’ ECEC decisions, which were made years ago. Ultimately, the frames are our own constructions, which aim to capture the essential aspects of how the parents made sense of their ECEC decisions in the research interviews that took place retrospectively. While we assume that the frames may reflect the orientations the parents had in the past, when they decided about their child’s ECEC enrolment, we first and foremost understand the frames as lenses that may orient the parents if they (need to) reconsider their decision in the future. As a result of the analysis, we differentiated four frames: the frame of accessibility, the frame of ECEC facilities, the frame of pedagogy, and the frame of security.

## Results

### Accessibility

The frame of accessibility refers to parents’ talk about the location of the ECEC centre but also includes considerations of the fees and opening hours of ECEC services. These three issues were talked about in relation to the location of the family home and parents’ means of commuting, family finances, and work. The ECEC centre’s location was given particular relevance, as all parents talked about or mentioned it. There were fewer mentions of the fees or opening hours in the interviews.

Commonly, the parents described the location of an ECEC centre as relevant to their decision to apply for a place for their child there. Usually, it was important for the parents that the centre was near the family’s home or the parents’ workplace or that commuting to the centre did not take too much time. For example, three parents said that they had applied for a place for their child at a nearby public ECEC centre, but the child had been granted a place in another, more distant, public centre. This situation led the parents to look for other nearby or otherwise easily accessible ECEC services and, ultimately, to apply for a place in a private ECEC centre. This was the case in the following example:

1

Parent: It wasn't a decision that would have been mulled over. We didn't get into the nearby centre, and then someone suggested the [private ECEC] centre and we got a place there, and everything has been perfect. (Int5)

In the above example, the private ECEC centre was closer to the family's home than the public one where the child was first given an ECEC place. However, it was not initially among the options the parents considered. Still, the parent's description suggests that the selection of the private centre was not a difficult one. It did not require "mulling over", since it was close to the family home.

While the interviewed parents shared the view that the ECEC centre's location was important, more divergent opinions were expressed on ECEC fees. As described earlier, parents using a private service commonly need to pay higher fees than those charged by public ECEC. However, for many of the interviewees the costs were not an issue.

2

Parent: We were prepared to pay extra for the things [offered by the ECEC service] we wanted, indeed, the location and the timing when our child started [at the centre] and that it was a foreign language centre. (Int2)

3

Parent: In the private day care centre the fee is 10% higher, and you also need to pay 30 euros for the organic food they serve. But we are so pleased with it [the ECEC centre] and thankful, the extra fees are no problem, [the centre provides] indeed what we hoped for. (Int 4)

When parents in the interviews expressed that the ECEC fee was not an issue for the family, they considered ECEC as a commodity: it consisted of characteristics and/or provided services they were ready to pay for, as expressed by the speakers in examples 2 and 3. These characteristics and services were also implied or said to be not easily available (in public services) or were special features of the centre, such as organic food. Some interviewees also talked about the challenges related to the fees. Still, none of them had planned to give up on using a private centre due to fees.

The opening hours were addressed in only a few interviews. Some parents mentioned the opening hours of the centre and/or the flexibility related to the hours as important for them due to occasional variation in their working hours. However, none of the private centres provided services in the late evenings or nights.

The frame of accessibility intertwines with the concrete conditions of the interviewees' family life, that is, where they live, their financial resources, and their working hours and schedule. Indeed, the accessibility of the services, especially in terms of location, was presented as an important reason for enrolling the child in a private ECEC centre. However, commonly parents drew only briefly on the frame of accessibility, and when they did so it was only after a detailed explanation of the ECEC decision from other viewpoints. This observation of how the frame of accessibility was applied in the interviewees' talk can be related to Tannen's (1993) propositions concerning omissions in narration. She suggests that omissions can reflect the frames that are "natural" in

a specific context or culture and therefore, not verbalised. Thus, the frame of accessibility can also illuminate what is considered as an evident viewpoint in parental ECEC decisions.

### **Pedagogy**

The frame of pedagogy was also drawn on in all interviews. The following quote exemplifies one type of explanation that we included in this frame.

4

Interviewer: How did you end up choosing this particular day care centre? Did you think about any other options? (...) <sup>2</sup>

Parent: Well, we actually didn't consider any others, it was the Christian thinking that we want to preserve at home and also in ECEC. (Int8)

Here, the parent bases the selection of the child's ECEC centre on the centre's pedagogical values. We have interpreted descriptions of such value-based pedagogy, as well as talk about a particular pedagogical approach (e.g. Montessori; see also example 2), as belonging to the frame of pedagogy. In four of the interviews, such approaches were described as the key reasons the parents had applied for a place for their child in a private ECEC centre. However, not all private ECEC centres followed a special pedagogical approach in the data, and parents also talked about other pedagogy-related issues, as in the following example:

5

Parent: Also otherwise (...) we share quite a lot of the same values as there [in the ECEC centre], like respecting nature and a home-like atmosphere (...), and organic food is also quite important for us (...) And then regarding toys, that they don't have too many toys and plastic toys, I also fell for the thinking that the number of stimuli is decreased for children. It is perhaps more stimulating for children's imagination. (Int4)

In the above case, the ECEC centre does not follow a particular pedagogy, but the parent describes it as emphasising ecological and environmental values, which the parents share. A little later in her talk, the parent gives an approving account of the thinking of the ECEC centre regarding decreasing stimuli available for children. The parent seems to associate this thinking with the number of toys available for children in the ECEC centre. In the analysis, this type of parental talk was also categorised as belonging to the frame of pedagogy.

Besides the values and pedagogical approach of the centre, descriptions of child-centred thinking and practices were included in the frame of pedagogy. Parents might mention in an appreciative tone how the ECEC centre underlined the child's natural ways of learning, supported the child's own interests in learning, or considered children's viewpoints when planning the education.

Usually, the interviewed parents did not give lengthy explanations regarding the pedagogy of the ECEC centre (and neither did the interviewers try to inquire about it in detail) but talked about it briefly or only mentioned it (e.g. example 2). However, some parents mentioned the pedagogical approach as the primary reason to select a private ECEC centre.

## **ECEC facilities**

The frame of ECEC facilities refers to talk about the ECEC centre's physical and social characteristics, including the environment, size (in terms of number of children), and composition of the group of children. The physical characteristics were talked about in all but one interview and the size in six of the eight interviews. Half of the interviewees said something about the composition of the group of children. Besides the location and pedagogy of the centre, these aspects were most often given relevance in the interviews. They could also be the first issues parents mentioned when describing an ECEC centre.

The talk in this frame was often more detailed and vivid than the talk applying other frames. The interviewees used the frame both when presenting negative characterisations of a public ECEC centre where the child would have been placed if the parents had used public services and positive characteristics of the private ECEC centre in which the child had been enrolled. As an example of the former, in the following quote a mother describes the environment of a public ECEC centre where her child would have been placed by ECEC officials.

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Parent: And then she got placed in a day care centre near the mall (...) I think that the mall is really dreary, awful (...) Well, then I thought that I'll go and see the place when they have an open day before I'll say anything (...) And I decided (...) Bye, I cannot have my child in there (...) The surroundings of the mall look so sad, there are so many [people] clearly with mental health issues and alcohol abuse and everything else (...) And the centre itself has been built on two levels. Old concrete buildings from the 60s and 70s, high like in [names a suburb], and the yard covered only by sand. (Int1)

The mother's description of the characteristics of the public ECEC centre is multifaceted, including talk about the physical and social environment of the centre and its architecture. She gives a negative evaluation of the physical characteristics of the public ECEC centre and uses various rhetorical tools to convince about this characterisation. For example, she replays or "animates" her feelings (see Cantarutti, 2022), uses the word "so" to underline her evaluations, and makes a reference to a well-known suburb, which is often considered ugly in public discussion. Overall, the mother seems to consider the centre's environment too urban. Indeed, when parents paid attention to the external environment of an ECEC centre, they usually considered its nature-related aspects. For example, being close to a forest or having fields around were presented as positive characteristics of an ECEC centre as they made it possible for children and staff to hike in the environment and experience natural surroundings. As regards the internal characteristics, the parents might consider how the centre was built, like the mother in the above example and in example 7, which demonstrates how the ecological aspects of a building could be given as reasons for ECEC decision. Moreover, some parents talked about how much room there was in the centre for children and their activities and whether the centre had its own kitchen and, thus, did not receive meals from a centralised meal service.

The next example illustrates the positive evaluation of both the private ECEC centre's physical characteristics and its size. The family has two children who were first granted places in a new public ECEC centre that would house over 200 children.

Interviewer: Was there a particular [reason] why you decided to use the private [ECEC centre], or did you think about any other option? You earlier talked about this, but did you consider family day care or public [services] or any such options?

Parent: Well yeah, we thought about all the options. And we applied for places in public services. And they were given places in the new [anonymised] day care centre. But a friend of ours just asked if we had applied for a private [centre]. And then we started to think about it, that we somehow really hadn't considered it earlier, but then we went to see it and fell for it. The smallness of it, there are under 30 children, and overall, it is a small, very home-like day care centre, we would be a little concerned if we had to enrol them in some big day care centre, in particular, since [name anonymised] is still so young (...) And also it is a green building, it is good to breathe in there, you could tell immediately that the air in there was good, it is well built, it has ecological thermal insulation, and they have avoided plastics [when building the centre]. (Int4)

As mentioned earlier, a few parents had first applied for a place in a public ECEC centre. If not the location of the centre, then the size of the public setting, measured by the number of children, was commonly given as a key reason to look for private options or select a private centre, as in the above example. Furthermore, the composition of the group of children could be ascribed relevance in the decision to abandon a public centre or select a private one. Parents mentioned the linguistic background of children and the number of children in the group as reasons for their decision.

Some aspects of the frame of ECEC facilities were given relevance in all interviews in our data. In particular, the size of the centre, in terms of the number of children, seemed to be an important criterion for parents in their ECEC selection, but the physical characteristics were also commonly given relevance. What the parents seemed to look for in the ECEC market was a small ECEC centre in a natural environment which had a well-designed space for children's activities.

## Security

The frame of security includes talk that relates to children's relationships with both staff and peers and can thus be linked with ideas about children's emotional security. In other words, the frame includes descriptions of the long-term presence of the same staff and the stability of the group of children, these being implicitly or explicitly linked with the child's development or wellbeing. Furthermore, the frame includes references to the child's enjoyment when they are in the ECEC centre. One or several aspects of the frame of security were talked about in every interview.

Parent: Well, he started in the ECEC centre when he was a little under a year and a half old (...) Naturally, he has moved to another group (...) an older children's group, but they have had quite a good system so that part of the staff moves with the children (...), and then there is a bigger group of children who move from the younger children's group to the

older group [at the same time], so it feels like there has been steady support for development, like the same (...) group of children and same adults, so there's been a positive, trusting feeling (...) that our child enjoys when he's there. (Int2)

In the example, the parent refers to the long-term presence of both staff and peers despite the changes of group the child has experienced during his years in ECEC. Changing a group in ECEC is implicitly presented as negative from the viewpoint of the child (use of the conjunction “but”; see Tannen (1993)). Instead, it is expected that the same people will remain in the child's environment, as this is seen as supporting the child's development. The same assumption is reflected in parents' descriptions during interviews of their observations about staff remaining in or leaving their nearby public or private ECEC centre. Change of staff is seen as a negative characteristic of the centre, while the long-term presence of staff is linked with a secure educational environment.

In example 8 above, the parent mentions the enjoyment the child derives from the ECEC centre and expresses it as more a presumption about, than an observation of, the child's behaviour. The following example illustrates a situation when the child's enjoyment is presented as a “fact”. The example is taken from the only interview in the data where the parent is not all pleased with the private ECEC centre their child is attending. However, the parent justifies not making any changes in the child's care arrangement by the fact that the child enjoys it – and by implying that the situation could be the same in public ECEC.

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Parent: There has been a lot of staff turnover (...) In a way, there hasn't been any stability in terms of having the same day care workers. But then, we can't compare it to how it would be, for example, in a public day care centre (...) We wouldn't change it, though (...) Right now, our child enjoys being there. (Int3)

The long-term presence of staff – or their turnover, as in the example – and the child's enjoyment of ECEC were the issues most often talked about in the interviews in relation to the frame of security. While the long-term presence or turnover of staff could be linked with parental concern about (a potential risk to) the child's wellbeing, the child's enjoyment was used as an explanation that counteracted the concern. The child's enjoyment functioned as an (ultimate) criterion to justify the selection of the private ECEC centre.

## Conclusion

This article has examined the frames Finnish parents with a child in a private ECEC centre use to account for their ECEC decision. More broadly, the aim has been to discuss whether enrolling one's child in a private centre could be considered a “choice” in the Finnish context, as the policies arguing for marketisation and privatisation suggest (Ruutiainen, Alasuutari, & Karila, 2020, Vandenbroeck et al., 2022). The study demonstrated that all parents drew on several frames to explain and justify their ECEC decision in the research interviewees, which corresponds with previous research (e.g. Degotardi, Sweller, Fenech, & Beath, 2018). While in all cases, the parental decisions included elements of choice, their decisions were conditioned



by issues that, in the analysis, were categorised as representing the frame of accessibility. In particular, the frame pointed out the relevance of the location of the services, which is in line with previous research (Chen & Bradbury, 2020, Pennerstorfer & Pennerstorfer, 2021). Furthermore, suitable opening hours were an important aspect of accessibility for some parents whose working hours varied (see also Vandebroek & Lazzari, 2014). As the location and opening hours were pragmatic issues that had to correspond to the parents and family's overall situation, they comprised the basis on which "choice" of ECEC was possible. If the services were not accessible in terms of location and opening hours, choosing them would have been unrealistic. However, the costs of private ECEC were not described as decisive in selecting private ECEC for a child. On the one hand, this finding can be related to the interviewed parents' socioeconomic background, as they were middle- or upper-middle-class and had a steady income. On the other hand, it is noticeable that Finnish municipalities commonly compensate the costs of private ECEC through considerable demand-side subsidies (see Ruutiainen, Alasuutari, & Karila, 2020).

The "choice" of ECEC was most salient in a few interviews where parents presented a particular pedagogical approach or specific pedagogical values as the first criterion/criteria for their ECEC decision. Still, the decision of these parents was conditioned by accessibility: the parents had chosen a specific type of ECEC centre, but the service had also been accessible to them. Even when the frame of pedagogy was not used as the main justification for the parental decision, it was presented as one dimension of parental reasoning. This frame can be related to what Vandebroek and Lazzari (2014) characterise as the comprehensibility of ECEC or, in other words, the similarity between the values, beliefs, and educational practices of ECEC and the meanings that parents give to the services. This similarity was shown in the present data to be one of the commodities the parents looked for in the ECEC market.

In comparison to the pragmatic aspects of parental ECEC decisions described in the frame of accessibility, the frame of pedagogy turned the gaze onto the child. Even more explicitly, the child was addressed in the frames of ECEC facilities and security. The frame of ECEC facilities illuminated what parents appreciated in the physical (e.g. environment, architecture) and social environment that ECEC centres provided for children. A good ECEC centre was near a natural environment, had well-designed premises, was well built, and, finally, was small. In this frame, parents commonly made distinctions between the characteristics of public and private facilities and based on those evaluations, assessed what made a good environment for their child (see Karlsson, Löfdahl, & Pérez Prieto, 2013) or what corresponded to their worldviews or way of living (Vandebroek & Lazzari, 2014).

Finally, in line with earlier research, this study indicates that parents who have selected private ECEC consider issues related to children's emotional security (Chen & Bradbury, 2020, Degotardi, Sweller, Fenech, & Beath, 2018, Sylva et al., 2007). In the frame of security, parents paid attention to the turnover and stability of staff, which have also been publicly debated in Finland in recent years. Children's enjoyment was presented as a criterion or indication of their feeling secure in ECEC, even when there had been a turnover of staff in the centre.

This study demonstrates how the interviewed parents adopted their role as active market agents, that is, consumers (Vandebroek et al., 2022; Yuen & Grieshaber, 2009). The active decisions of parents paid off, enabling them to differentiate from

the bulk of ECEC and find more satisfying services. In some cases, active decision-making meant giving up a place in a public ECEC centre, which the parents had first applied for. However, it is noticeable that this position is only possible for parents when there are service options available, and this is not case in all parts of Finland.

Overall, the parents in this study expressed satisfaction with the services their child received in private ECEC centres. Survey studies conducted among Finnish parents demonstrate that those parents who have enrolled their child in private ECEC are more satisfied with the services they obtain (Saranko, Rääkkönen, Makkonen, & Alasuutari, 2021) and more critical of the quality of ECEC, in general, than parents with a child in public ECEC (Ruutiainen, Rääkkönen, & Alasuutari, 2023). However, research also suggests that parents for whom the childcare decision is pressing due to the end of parental leave period consider the quality of public services to be slightly higher than that of private services (Pihlaja & Warinowski, 2018). However, some scholars have questioned parents' abilities to evaluate the quality of ECEC (e.g. Peyton, Jacobs, O'Brien, & Roy, 2001). Still, it is undeniable that parents' encounters and involvement with ECEC and their children's descriptions and behaviour related to ECEC give parents grounds to evaluate the services. While this article has not aimed at studying the quality of private ECEC, it has demonstrated that parents' evaluations of ECEC may have relevance for their ECEC decisions.

During recent decades, marketisation and privatisation have shaped the Nordic ECEC systems; while the form and extent of the market-oriented reforms vary between countries, the discourses justifying the reforms are congruent in highlighting economic efficiency and parents' freedom of choice (see Anttonen, Häikiö, Stefánsson, & Sipilä, 2012; Dýrfjörð & Magnúsdóttir, 2016; Laiho & Pihlaja, 2022). This study has demonstrated that the private sector has the potential to offer ECEC solutions that answer parents' differing tastes, values, and views of what makes a good childhood; thus, private ECEC can respond to families' individualised preferences and decrease welfare state fatigue (Vamstad, 2016). This result raises the question how well public policies and services meet people's expectations and adjust to increasingly prevalent ideals of individualisation in society. For example, in Finland, new public ECEC facilities are often larger than they used to be, and the biggest can house over 300 children. This study suggests that this development may not be acceptable to all families. While the discrepancy between parents' expectations and perceptions of the ECEC system can drive some resourced parents to seek alternatives, it may also undermine the legitimation of a universal system. In other words, parents with high cultural, social, and financial resources can benefit from the market conditions (see Ruutiainen, 2022). Consequently, the commodification of education can reproduce existing inequalities by hiding them behind the mask of "free choice" (e.g. Kampichler, 2021; Vandenbroeck et al., 2022; Wilson & Bridge, 2019).

Moreover, in the market an ECEC decision becomes increasingly an individual issue and the ECEC decision itself a moral act of good parenthood (Karlsson, Löfdahl, & Pérez Prieto, 2013). This individualised view of ECEC decision-making, whether it reflects adaptation or free choice, differs remarkably from the traditional Nordic perception (Ruutiainen, 2022). While the Nordic universalist model, based on collective responsibility, emphasises social cohesion, equality, and uniformity of services, the individualised ECEC decisions may increase the diversification of the services, competition between the service providers, and (re)produce hierarchies and inequalities between families.

This article is based on a case study in the context of a national ECEC system. As described above, the frames presented in the study are, in many respects, supported by or in line with previous research. Thus, they may have relevance in other contexts (see Goodman, 2008). Still, one must be careful in transferring the findings to other contexts, particularly regarding the more detailed aspects of the results.

## Notes

1. The calculation is based on information available in the national VARDA dataset maintained by the Finnish National Agency for Education.
2. The symbol (...) indicates that part of the talk has been cut from the quote. Commonly, these are repetitions or talk that digresses from the main topic of the turn of talk.

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## Appendix

**Table A1.** Background information of the interviewees.

Interview Number	Interviewee	Educational Level	Family Form	Number of Children
1	Mother	University	Single parent	2
2	Mother	University	Dual parent	2
3	Father	University	Dual parent	1
4	Mother	University	Dual parent	2
5	Mother	University	Dual parent	2
6	Mother	University student	Dual parent	2
7	Mother	Polytechnic	Dual parent	2
8	Mother	Polytechnic	Single parent	4