

Britta Menzel, Antonia Scholz

Early childhood education and social inequality

An international comparison of the local steering of access –
Findings from the Equal Access Study

Researching children, youth and families at the intersection of science, policy, and professional practice

The German Youth Institute (DJI) is one of the largest social science research institutes in Europe with an experience of over 50 years. The DJI conducts empirical studies into the life situations of children, young people and families, and provides policy advice to the German national government, the German federal states and local authorities as well as key impulses for professional practice.

Founded in 1963, the governing body of the institute is a non-profit association with members from the fields of politics and science as well as from child, youth and family welfare institutions and organisations. The DJI receives the majority of its funding from the Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth, and the German federal states. The Federal Ministry of Education and Research, the European Commission as well as foundations and other science funding institutions provide additional funding.

Currently, about 470 staff members work and conduct research at the two locations in Munich and Halle (Saale).

Impressum

© 2022 Deutsches Jugendinstitut e.V.

Deutsches Jugendinstitut
Nockherstraße 2
81541 München

Datum der Veröffentlichung April 2022
ISBN: 978-3-86379-427-9

Deutsches Jugendinstitut
Außenstelle Halle
Franckeplatz 1, Haus 12/13
06110 Halle

Ansprechpartner:
Britta Menzel, Antonia Scholz
Telefon +49 89 62306-0
E-Mail icec@dji.de

Inhalt

1	Introduction: Aims, theoretical concept and study design	5
2	Findings of the qualitative case studies in Germany, Canada and Sweden	7
2.1	Local steering of access in Germany	7
2.1.1	Case study DE1	8
2.1.2	Case study DE2	10
2.1.3	Steering of access in DE1 and DE2: an analytical comparison of governance	12
2.2	Local steering of access in Canada	12
2.2.1	Case study KA1	14
2.2.2	Case study KA2	16
2.2.3	Steering of access in KA1 and KA2: an analytical comparison of governance	17
2.3	Local steering of access in Sweden	18
2.3.1	Case study SE1	19
2.3.2	Case study SE2	21
2.3.3	Steering of access in SE1 and SE2: an analytical comparison of governance	22
3	International comparison of access conditions	24
3.1	Availability	24
3.2	Affordability	25
3.3	Accessibility	26
3.4	Adequacy	27
4	Access to ECEC in the context of welfare state traditions	29
5	Summary: the potential of local ECEC governance	31
6	Bibliography	32
	Afterword	34

1 Introduction: Aims, theoretical concept and study design

Early childhood education and care (ECEC) is considered a central factor in the long-term reduction of social inequalities (for example, OECD 2020; McCoy et al. 2017). Within this, not only the participation in ECEC is decisive, though, but also the quality of these services. At the same time, studies conducted in various countries have revealed that not all children enjoy equal access to ECEC however (Autorengruppe Bildungsberichterstattung 2020, p. 87; Jessen/Schmitz/Waights 2020; Blossfeld/Kulic/Skopez 2017). We consider exactly this issue in the Equal Access Study, which was conducted at the International Centre for Early Childhood Education and Care (ICEC) of the German Youth Institute (DJI) between 2017 and 2021.

The following document summarises the empirical findings from the Equal Access Study, which have been published in full in German as a monograph (Menzel/Scholz¹, forthcoming).

The study sought to examine the relationship between the local steering of ECEC services (including both centre-based provision and family day care) and inequalities in access to these services in an international comparison. The starting point for this study was the assumption that in decentralised ECEC systems, local stakeholders (including municipalities, providers²) play a decisive role in shaping access to ECEC services and that this explains local discrepancies in access within a country (cf. Kutsar/Kuronen 2015). At the same time, very few empirical studies have focused on the local stakeholders for the local steering of access to date. The Equal Access Study therefore concentrates on the question of the extent to which local stakeholders help to reduce or reinforce barriers to ECEC. The access conditions for children from socioeconomically disadvantaged and cultural minority backgrounds are of particular interest here.

The study focuses on constellations for steering access locally and takes a governance theory approach in its analyses. The concept of local governance (cf. Holtkamp 2007) forms the basis for characterisation of the different municipalities based on the interaction between the respective local stakeholders in line with the steering logics that prevail locally and thus for a reflection on approaches to the local steering of ECEC services. Based on a classification according to welfare theory (cf. Esping-

1 Sabrina Mannebach and Simon Zentgraf were also involved in preparation of the publication.

2 Non-municipal providers are referred to as independent providers in Germany (*nicht-kommunale Träger* or *freie Träger*) and Sweden (*enskild huvudmän*). In contrast, one speaks more of private providers internationally (and also in Canada). For the sake of comparability, the term ‘private’ providers has been used and, where necessary and appropriate, a distinction also made between the non-profit or for-profit orientation.

Andersen 1990), the local steering of access is also embedded in the national context and the discrepancies between typology and empiricism are presented in an intra- and international comparison. Lastly, the systematisation of access to ECEC as defined by Michel Vandenbroeck and Arianna Lazzari (2014) serve as the heuristic framework to analyse the empirical data according to the leading question of (un)equal access conditions. The dimensions have been adapted for this report and are now the following four dimensions: availability, affordability, accessibility and adequacy.

The international comparative study is based on a two-step design. In the first step, three reports have been prepared by experts for each of the countries (Germany, Canada and Sweden) comprising information on the different ECEC systems each situated within its welfare state (Garvis/Lunneblad 2018; Japel/Friendly 2018; Scholz et al. 2018). In the second step, two municipalities were selected in each country according to the principle of the (most) different cases to be researched empirically (cf. Blatter/Janning/Wagemann 2007; Leuffen 2007) in order to identify (possible) local variances in the comparison. Lastly, guideline-based expert interviews (cf. Meuser/Nagel 2009) were conducted in the municipalities with decision-makers (n = 62) from local administration (for example, needs planning, admission procedure) as well as representatives from public, private non-profit and private for-profit providers as part of a qualitative, explorative process. The data of the interviews were then assessed based on qualitative content analysis (cf. Kuckartz 2018) and organised into six case studies (cf. Muno 2009). The case studies and their intra- and international comparison form the core of the present summary.

The findings are subsequently presented according to the key analytical areas that emerged from the empirical data of the respective case studies in Chapter 2. They are then followed by an international comparison of the extent to which the respective (local) ECEC system impedes or improves access for children from socioeconomically disadvantaged and cultural minority backgrounds in Chapter 3. A comparison is subsequently made in Chapter 4 of if and how this can be attributed to the respective welfare state traditions accordingly. Chapter 5 summarises the findings in an overarching conclusion.

2 Findings of the qualitative case studies in Germany, Canada and Sweden

2.1 Local steering of access in Germany

In Germany, children are legally entitled to an ECEC place (centre-based provision or family day care) from the age of one. Thereby centre-based provision and family day care are on equal legal footing. In 2018, the ECEC enrolment rate for children aged under 3 was 28.3% in centre-based provision and 5.3% in family day care (cf. Autorengruppe Bildungsberichterstattung 2020). Of the children aged over 3, 92.2% were enrolled in centre-based provision and 0.7% in family day care (ibid.). Responsibility for ECEC is shared. At municipal level local authorities are mainly responsible to organise and provide ECEC. On one hand this is guided by the principle of subsidiarity³, which means that ECEC services are increasingly provided by private, mainly non-profit providers. On the other hand, municipalities are also able to act as public providers of ECEC and therefore assume a dual role of steering body and provider. Expressed in figures, this means that public facilities account for 32.9% of the facilities in Germany, while more than half (56.8%) are run by private non-profit providers. Parent initiatives make up 7.8% of the ECEC services and private for-profit facilities just 2.5% (cf. Bertelsmann Stiftung 2020). By law, the responsibility for financing ECEC services lies with the federal states and municipalities, whereby the latter must provide most of the financing. In the federal states chosen for the study, namely Bavaria and North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW), a sliding scale applies for parental fees; additional relief measures have since been introduced for parents in both federal states.

3 In Germany, the principle of subsidiarity regulates the cooperation between the public sector and recognised independent providers of child and youth welfare services. The municipalities are only meant to provide their own services if the private providers are unable to adequately meet the ECEC needs.

Fig. 1: Overview⁴ of the German municipal case studies

Case study	Location	Provider structure	Total interviews
DE1	Small town in Bavaria	About 25% of children enrolled in centre based care are cared for in a public facility and about 75% in a private facility (most of which are non-profit confessional providers).	10 interviews with: municipal employees, representatives from ECEC providers, representatives from family day care
DE2	Large city in North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW)	About 40% of children enrolled in centre based care are cared for in a public facility and about 60% in a private facility (most of which are non-profit providers).	12 interviews with: municipal employees, representatives from ECEC providers, representatives from family day care, state youth welfare office

Source: own illustration

2.1.1 Case study DE1

Shortage of places (also) due to planning and expansion shortcomings

A shortage of ECEC places prevailed at the time of the survey despite the fact that the municipality had expanded its ECEC services. As mainly the places in the nursery (Krippe) were increased to date, places were now also lacking in the kindergarten for children aged over 3. Some of the representatives of private (especially confessional) providers perceived this shortage as less acute than the representatives from the municipality, whereby only the latter is subject to the legal entitlement to provide an ECEC place. According to the municipality, it has changed places originally reserved for older children into nursery spots to ensure more places for children aged under 3 in municipal facilities, but at the same time has refrained from expanding its own ECEC services for children aged under 3 to date due to the high operating costs. Therefore and in line with the logic of subsidiarity, the number of nursery places has primarily been increased at the private non-profit providers,

⁴ The data provided here is based on municipal reporting and in part on the statements made by the interviewees. Due to the pseudonymisation, no sources are given for the information on the structure of providers in the municipalities, as direct conclusions could be drawn otherwise. Moreover, only approximate values have been given for the data in order to preserve the interviewees' anonymity as best possible.

though in part also through new for-profit providers. The municipality has expanded family day care and especially child minder cooperatives (Großtagespflege) in order to meet the demand, however. This approach seems to be less about providing an alternative educational offer, though, and more about creating places flexibly and at short notice. In terms of the organisation of local services, the local youth welfare office (Jugendamt) is well aware that this expansion strategy risks leading to an imbalance in the diversity of providers, since there are hardly any public services for children aged under 3 at the current time. Furthermore, the ECEC landscape, which was already dominated by confessional providers, has mainly expanded to include for-profit services, but not purely public ones. Expansion of the ECEC services for children aged over 3 is stagnating due to the municipality's lack of resources. The awarding of ECEC service contracts does not appear to be particularly transparent either and seems to also be poorly managed; administrative staff would definitely like to see more political commitment and resources for municipal services. It is also evident that comprehensive needs planning based on data that is as up to date as possible represents a structural challenge. Up-to-date needs indicators with more of a socio-spatial orientation appear to be lacking in this municipality, though improved social planning procedures are currently being introduced.

Admission procedure: decentralised organisation a challenge for stakeholders

In DE1, the ECEC admission procedure has been entirely decentral to date. Both the municipality and private providers have their own waiting lists for each facility and allocate ECEC places themselves. Parents must register their need for a place at each individual provider to be added to their waiting lists. Despite attempts by the local authorities, it has not yet been possible to centralise processing of the registrations across all facilities or even providers. The municipality has also set up a family office with a place exchange to aid in the allocation of places. No uniform criteria exist across all providers for admission to ECEC services or to family day care though. Depending on the statutes, primarily a child's age and whether they have siblings already at a centre are decisive for the municipal provider, though single parent status, special educational needs and parents' occupations are also taken into account. According to the interviews, due to the high demand for places the private providers also pay particular attention to the date that parents register. A picture emerges from the interviews of a high degree of decision-making autonomy on the part of the providers – and above all the facility managers – in the allocation of places. Hence their own weightings, such as religious confession or the extent of parents' employment (can) also play a role at their discretion – and indeed do (as individual interviews confirm). The municipal representatives moreover reported that the proportion of children with a migration background was significantly higher in the municipal facilities than it was in those run by private, mainly confessional providers, at least at times.

Information services and different stakeholders' needs: advertising versus awareness raising

The decentralised admission procedure implies that parents requiring an ECEC place must go to extensive lengths to obtain information, as they must approach each ECEC facility and family day care provider individually to obtain this. Most providers mainly offer information in German. This is also the case for the family office that the municipality has set up as a contact point. According to the representative from the family office, especially newly arrived migrant families and those with needs at short notice struggle to find ECEC places, as this not only requires linguistic skills but also time and personal resources. There also appears to be little knowledge among the local authorities of families, who have not yet taken advantage of a place; they are not being specifically addressed for the time being. Due to the high demand for places, the interviewees from the private providers also see little need to provide additional information services. Overall, the high demand is likely to have an influence here and this leads both the municipal providers and other providers to be rather restrained in their provision of information. That being said, the responsible independent providers do provide more comprehensive multilingual information on family day care. It can as a consequence perhaps be assumed that mainly families with less time and fewer language resources might be affected by the shortage of place in DE1, as the legal route to an ECEC place has not been pursued to date.

2.1.2 Case study DE2

Municipal services in DE2: pressure to expand and a lack of resources

According to the interviewees, a significant number of places are lacking in DE2, especially for children under three, both in centre-based provision and in family day care. This is not least reflected in the large number of legal charges from parents claiming their children's right for ECEC. The shortage of places is described as a central challenge to local access, whereby differences by all means exist between the availability of ECEC places across the urban area.

The local authorities in DE2 takes numerous approaches to expand the quantity and quality of places as a consequence. Expansion of the municipal facilities has been suspended for the time being. This is justified by the principle of subsidiarity on the one hand and the costs associated with expansion on the other: facilities run by private non-profit providers are less of a burden on the municipal budget.⁵ According to the municipal representatives, the burden on local administration must remain manageable. In light of the shortage of places, the municipality therefore is reliant on private providers and also family day care expanding the offers. Albeit the municipality generally fosters the non-profit segment, for-profit providers (implicitly) take on a greater significance when expanding ECEC for children under three.

5 While this is also the case for private for-profit providers, the latter are not explicitly named by local administration as part of the expansion strategy.

Overall, private providers of ECEC facilities and family day care enjoy relative freedom in the structuring of their services. Local administration refrains from any specific control of whom to award ECEC service contracts to, for instance. With the establishment of a private non-profit provider some time ago representing the interests of local authorities, a different approach was nonetheless taken in DE2 to retain the municipality's influence on the provider landscape and lend further weight to municipal interests. While the municipality finances this provider, the provider is at the same time required to contribute to child care expansion and additionally to meet certain expectations (like taking over facilities that are unattractive (from the providers' perspective)).

The admission procedure as a balancing act: allocating a scarce resource

An online tool has been introduced to enable parents to join the central waiting list for a place at a maximum of five ECEC facilities run by public and private non-profit providers. Different filters (child's age, care start date, distance to the facility) enable targeted searches for suitable facilities. Private for-profit providers are also able to use the online tool, but have not yet done so to date. At the time of the interviews, the online tool had just been introduced, hence the municipality noted various needs for improvement (including availability in numerous languages in the future). The representatives from private non-profit providers shared this view: in their opinion, extensive knowledge was required of parents for them to be able to use the online tool. To date, it has not been possible to use the online tool to register for family day care; an allocation office for family day care manages this waiting list instead. Some interviewees were critical of this parallel structure, as it complicates access to ECEC.

In DE2, the allocation of places is still decentralised. For municipal facilities, the date of joining the waiting list and whether siblings already have a place form the predefined criteria. Children eligible for child-raising assistance (Hilfe zur Erziehung) are allocated a place independently of the aforementioned criteria.

Managing the allocation process efficiently and maintaining free places throughout the year is challenging for the local authorities. Local authorities highlight one particular dilemma resulting from the discrepancies between ECEC needs and the local availability of places, namely that the shortage of places means that places cannot be allocated fairly. The local authorities therefore feel the least they can do is to follow the legal guidelines so that they allocate places in compliance with the legislation.

In contrast, the private providers are able to set their own criteria for allocating places. The same applies for family day care, whereby the childminders are ultimately responsible for allocating their places. According to some interviewees, this potentially increases the risk of an unequal allocation of places for children from socioeconomically disadvantaged and cultural minority backgrounds. This contrasts with a number of the statements made by representatives of private non-profit providers, who particularly emphasise their social focus – also in the allocation of places.

Information policy: from restrained to versatile strategies

In DE2, the information policy of both the municipality and the private non-profit providers is strongly influenced by the prevailing shortage of places. Interviewees describe the active promotion of ECEC services as an area of tension due to the fact that the number of places is currently insufficient. From the perspective of the various stakeholders, the information policies can be referred to as rather restrained accordingly. At the same time, however, a variety of information channels are mentioned in the interviews. In addition to firmly anchored structures such as a family office and the website, the municipality is also involved in other information services in conjunction with private non-profit providers, such as the “Kita-Einstieg” programme of the German federal government that helps to facilitate access to ECEC services. The private non-profit providers also mention various channels for informing parents. The allocation office for family day care takes a similar approach, whereby a family office serves as the point of contact and parents are approached in a targeted manner.

2.1.3 Steering of access in DE1 and DE2: an analytical comparison of governance

The legal entitlement to an ECEC place means that both German municipalities are under pressure to meet the (growing) demand. This is the case in both municipalities for children aged under 3 and, in DE1, also for children aged over 3. The situation is more problematic for the local administration in DE2, though, due to ongoing lawsuits from parents against the municipality. Both DE1 and DE2 rely on private (usually non-profit) providers to increase the number of places based on the principle of subsidiarity, giving private providers precedence by law, and lower public spending. In contrast, both municipalities had stopped expanding the municipal facilities – and thus the public services – at the time of the data gathering process. In addition to the established non-profit providers, private for-profit providers have also grown in importance when it comes to increasing the number of ECEC places for children aged under 3. Therefore, both municipalities are dependent on a good relationship with the private providers to cater to demand. This in turn means that the private providers are granted extensive freedom to structure their expansion and access to ECEC (for example, the place allocation procedure). The local administration in DE1 and DE2 is accordingly restrained and more reactive than proactive in their relations with private providers. They refrain from using some of their own scope for manoeuvre, for example to achieve a more targeted assessment of needs or in the awarding of ECEC service contracts, though DE2 retains influence by outsourcing services to a provider representing the interests of local authorities. Overall, however, indications exist in both municipalities of a hierarchical governance structure that favours private providers in the local cooperation.

2.2 Local steering of access in Canada

In Canada, there are no statutory regulations for access to ECEC services. In light of the market-based approach, the proportion of private for-profit providers is relatively high (28 percent) compared to the German and Swedish ECEC systems (cf.

Childcare Resource and Research Unit 2021). The ECEC system is divided into centre-based provision (0–12 years) and family day care (0–12 years)⁶ in addition to kindergartens (usually one year before children start school⁷). In Canada, about 51,9 percent of children aged under 5 attended an ECEC facility and 20,4 percent were in family day care (Statistics Canada 2021)⁸. The remaining children are cared for in unlicensed arrangements (by relatives, for example). No statistics are available for these unlicensed arrangements, though, hence this area essentially remains a black box. Responsibility for the ECEC system is assigned to different levels, whereby the municipalities are mainly responsible for planning ECEC and for managing the financial budget in the province of Ontario where the case studies were conducted.

Fig. 2: Overview of the Canadian municipal case studies

Case study	Location	Provider structure	Total interviews
KA1	Small town in Ontario	No data available.	12 interviews with: municipal employees, representatives from ECEC providers, representatives from family day care
KA2	Large city in Ontario	Approx. 2 percent public, 60 percent private non-profit and 35 percent private for-profit facilities in addition to an unknown number of unlicensed arrangements.	10 interviews with: municipal employees, representatives from ECEC providers, representatives from family day care, ECEC researcher

Source: own illustration

6 For school-age children, these are so-called before and after school programmes, which entail care outside of school hours.
 7 Depending on the regulations in the province or territory, the age of school entry is between 5 and 6 years.
 8 As no data is available on the differentiation by age groups, the enrolment rate reported may also include children who already attend the free kindergarten (full-day kindergarten, FDK) offered in some provinces from the age of 4 years. These form part of the school system however and therefore do not count as ECEC offers. The figures are only conclusive to a limited extent accordingly.

2.2.1 Case study KA1

Availability of places and the central waiting list procedure in KA1

In KA1, there was a shortage of ECEC places at the time of the study, especially for children under 18 months, although some children are never offered a place before they start school. Places were only available at licensed facilities for about 20 percent of the pre-school children living in KA1, while the number of children added to the waiting list at the same time continued to grow. In the opinion of the local authorities, many parents resorted to unlicensed arrangements as the waiting times for a place in such a facility were shorter and the facilities were also often cheaper. The local authorities also believe that the same consequently also applies for licensed private for-profit facilities, which keep their costs low by employing staff who aren't as qualified as those who work for the public and private non-profit providers, for example. The province specifically encourages further development of the private for-profit segment by issuing licences – an approach that the municipality struggles to counteract due to its limited scope for manoeuvre. The municipality's opportunities for expansion are moreover hampered by the limited financial resources made available by the province.

The municipality has successfully tapped into one possibility for governing access, though, namely the introduction of a central register procedure for licensed centre-based provision and family day care. An online tool has been set up to enable families to join the waiting list for up to ten licensed facilities. They are additionally able to apply for financial assistance to cover the high parental fees. The aim was to combine numerous steps to make it easier to access the admission procedure. Families face significant difficulties in accessing ECEC nonetheless, as the market-based structure is still upheld. ECEC places can only be allocated if they are also paid for immediately, for instance. So if a family does not need the place they have been allocated until a later date, many cannot afford to begin paying for it any sooner. According to some interviewees, parallel enrolment structures do still exist, too, as families continue to approach facilities directly, for example.

Places continue to be allocated decentrally on the facility level. For municipal facilities, the date of registration is taken as the criterion for the allocation of places. This is criticised by the local authorities in the interviews however, as this requires parents to have knowledge of the ECEC system to be able to register sufficiently early. Other (implicit) criteria become apparent in addition to this, such as the scope of care needed. For cost reasons, facilities prefer to allocate full-time places, as these are more sense financially. This can mean that families who do not (and/or cannot) afford a full-time place are at a disadvantage. The empirical data additionally shows that at the time of the study, parents also appear to continue to apply for places by approaching facilities in person. The private providers sometimes stipulate further criteria in addition to the date of registration. The in part non-transparent criteria for place allocation as well as the parallel registration procedures may therefore mean that a certain risk of discrimination remains despite the centralised registration process.

Financial assistance for all? Funding in KA1

According to the municipal representatives, too few financial resources are available in KA1 for structuring the ECEC system. This is due to two factors. On the one hand, the provincial government's funding structures are geared towards a market-based approach to ECEC. On the other hand, restructuring of the ECEC system in Ontario led to changes in the age ranges. This in turn meant that a portion of the funding previously earmarked for the ECEC sector was instead allocated to the school sector and fewer resources were then available for ECEC accordingly. The resulting funding deficit limits local authorities' opportunities to provide affordable ECEC services locally.

Parents are able to apply via the online tool for a fee subsidy to pay the comparatively high parental fees. The funding for this is provided by the province and calculated for each municipality based on a variety of factors (including population size and child poverty). According to one municipal representative, many parents do not know that they are eligible for support. The eligibility and calculation basis for the amount of financial assistance is based on the province's income assessment as well as on other criteria that the municipalities are free to set. In KA1, these mainly include a child's support needs in addition to the type and extent of the parents' occupations (gainful employment, studies or similar). Parents who work part-time or families where one parent is at home are not eligible for support, for example. The eligibility for financial assistance is reviewed annually. The process to apply for a fee subsidy can become something of a stress test for families who have to justify their (financial) situation every single year. It can thus be deduced from all of the interviews that the high parental fees in KA1 represent the biggest barrier to access for families.

Diverse information channels: advertising campaigns and multilingual offers

The majority of interviewees believe that a high level of knowledge about the admission procedure (including how to apply for financial assistance) as well as an ability to correctly assess the quality of services are required to access the ECEC system in KA1. The local authorities see themselves as responsible for informing parents and thus indirectly for ensuring more equal access. They use various approaches to achieve this. Two major media campaigns have been launched, for instance, to raise awareness about financial assistance and the quality of ECEC, with information provided on public transport, social media and the radio. In addition, the municipality also relies on the usual information channels such as multilingual flyers and the municipal website, which is available in numerous languages thanks to a translation tool. In contrast, the private non-profit providers appear to provide varying quantities of information. One provider is heavily involved in the provision of education and information services for parents in the according facilities through its cooperation with the municipality on family centres. Others, however, offer only limited information on their website.

2.2.2 Case study KA2

Admission procedure: parental freedom of choice or limited offers?

In KA2, the initial situation is comparable to that in KA1, though to a different extent due to the city's size. Here, too, the shortage of places is considerable and some providers refer to a three-year-long waiting list, which especially affects infants. According to the local authorities in KA2, the development of affordable offers of a high quality is above all thwarted by the province's political orientation.

A decentralised admission procedure applies in KA2. Parents are able to register for a place in a public facility on the municipality's website. The various private providers all have a similar procedure: parents can contact them by telephone or email. Several interviewees describe the existing waiting list procedure as highly fragmented and less accessible overall as a consequence.

The municipality specifies the date of registration as a criterion for the allocation of places at facilities that receive public funding. Further criteria emerge from the interviews that are also taken into account implicitly: while these are a socially disadvantaged background or municipal employment for the public facilities, the representatives from private providers mention siblings and group composition, for example. Some interviewees also concede that parents who are more insistent in their request for an ECEC place have a better chance of being considered in the allocation of places. The consequences of the shortage of places on the adequacy of ECEC are touched upon, too: according to the representative from one private non-profit provider, many parents decide on a place out of necessity despite the fact that it does not meet their needs at all.

Between parental fees and financial assistance

The province regulates the amount of financial assistance that is available. While the municipalities as a whole have very little scope for manoeuvre, they can at least set their own priorities for allocation of the budget for financial assistance. As such, providers in KA2 that wish to allocate places to families receiving a fee subsidy in order to secure a reliable source of income must fulfil certain criteria (share the details of all expenditure with the municipality, for example). Furthermore, in order to indirectly give private non-profit providers a competitive edge and to counteract the growth in the for-profit sector, the municipality does not enter into (new) contracts for financial assistance with private for-profit providers. In the long term, parental fees should also be reduced in this way overall and the quality of local services improved.

Despite these measures, the limited budget means that not all families can be guaranteed financial assistance, hence there is also a waiting list for this. Similarly, it cannot be assumed that an ECEC place will be allocated and a fee subsidy granted at the same time, meaning that families may have to turn down a place under certain circumstances as they are not yet able to pay the high parental fees. So despite financial assistance theoretically being available, access is once again made more difficult. The criteria for eligibility for financial assistance are the same as in KA1. In

addition, parents can lose their entitlement due to changes in their circumstances, for example if another child (sibling) has to be cared for at home.

Access to digital and multilingual information

The interviews show that there are very different perceptions about the extent to which parents can inform themselves about the local offers. While some interviewees state that parents have extensive knowledge of the system, others report that parents are not sufficiently informed. In some cases, parents are believed to be assigned a high degree of responsibility for informing themselves independently. The information strategies in KA2 are similar to those in KA1, though the amount of information offered (such as advertising in public transport) was not mentioned in the interviews to the same extent. In KA2, the municipality above all relies on its website, which is offered in several languages thanks to a translation tool. Parents can also find further information there on each of the licensed facilities that the municipality has a contract with (their quality rating, for instance). The private providers thus also state in the interviews that they consider the municipal website to also be a source of information among parents about them. The municipality also relies on services such as family centres to inform parents about the licensed ECEC services, in cooperation with private non-profit providers.

2.2.3 Steering of access in KA1 and KA2: an analytical comparison of governance

The starting situations are similar in the two municipalities. A significant shortage of ECEC places exists in both KA1 and KA2 and – in contrast to the German and Swedish case studies – the municipalities have less scope for manoeuvre to respond to this. The major city of KA2 appeared to be facing greater challenges than KA1 at the time of the study due to the decentralised admission procedure and the long waiting lists for financial assistance. What both municipalities do have in common is that they position their activities to counteract the provincial government's market-based approach despite their limited overall scope for action. Based on the assumption that private for-profit facilities are of a lower quality on the whole, they attempt to facilitate access to high-quality services on the local level accordingly through (in part targeted) cooperation with selected providers from the private non-profit segment as part of their network-based governance approach. This can for example be seen in the central admission procedure in KA1 or the fact that the local authorities only enters into agreements for financial assistance with private non-profit providers (as is the case in KA2). At the same time, hierarchical aspects can also be discerned in the coordination processes between local authorities and private non-profit providers, such as when local authorities set certain requirements for cooperation (like the reduction of parental fees). The approach taken by both municipalities should always be viewed in the overall Canadian context, whereby the scope for action and areas of responsibility of the local steering level can be seen as specific to Ontario, which has been granted greater freedom than other provinces/territories. It can moreover by all means be assumed that the market-based structure is more deeply entrenched in other municipalities (also within Ontario) than is the case in KA1 and KA2.

2.3 Local steering of access in Sweden

In Sweden, children from the age of one are able to access the ECEC system (förskola). Municipalities must offer an ECEC place within four months to children over the age of one whose parents work, are in education or on parental leave, or if a specific need exists. From the age of three, all children have the right to at least 525 hours of free ECEC per year (approx. 15 hours per week) in an ECEC centre (general pre-school). The förskola system was established in the 1960s and has since been expanded. It is publicly funded for the most part. The majority of the facilities are run by municipal providers, whereby the share of private providers has grown to about 30% of private facilities in recent years (Skolverket 2020). Of the children aged 1–5, just over 85% attended preschool in 2019 compared to 95% of children aged 4–5 (ibid). Family day care (pedagogisk omsorg) is declining, with 1.7% of all children aged 1–5 in Sweden being cared for in such an educational setting in 2018 (Skolverket 2019). Parental fees are staggered, and are also capped with a maximum contribution (maxtaxa).

Fig. 3: Overview of the Swedish municipal case studies

Case study	Location	Provider structure	Total interviews
SE1	Large city in southern Sweden	Approx. 85% municipal facilities and 15% private facilities.	11 interviews with: municipal employees, representatives from ECEC providers, ECEC researcher
SE2	Amalgamated municipality in central Sweden comprising a small town	Approx. 67% municipal facilities and 33% private facilities.	7 interviews with: municipal employees, representatives from ECEC providers, facility manager, association of Swedish municipalities

Source: own illustration

2.3.1 Case study SE1

Place situation and admission procedure: shortages despite structural reforms

In the Swedish city SE1, the municipality is actively steering local ECEC provision in the wake of criticism of the local provision from the Schools Inspectorate and other experts. With the aim of enabling greater scope for shaping local ECEC, its steering was reformed: a few years ago, an independent municipal committee was set up for the preschool sector – as distinct from the school sector, which is also administered by the municipalities – and administration of the municipal facilities was centralised. Following a period of intensive expansion, a comprehensive ECEC infrastructure now exists, which the local authorities believe is adequate. This belief is based on the fact that the municipality is now able to meet the deadline of four months for offering a place once parents registered. Local shortages exist nonetheless, especially among children aged 1–2, both in certain parts of the city (particularly the centre) and periodically in spring, not least because of the (national) shortage of qualified workers. The municipality is withdrawing from family day care in favour of centre-based provision, for example by not filling positions when family day care workers retire. Private providers are increasingly represented here as a consequence.

In SE1, the admission procedure has been centralised as much as possible, with parents registering centrally and places also being allocated centrally by the municipality. The key place allocation criteria are the child's age and sibling status. No other social criteria have been set. The municipality resorts to two strategies to meet the deadline for place allocation despite the shortage of places: the lack of concrete legal requirements regarding the proximity of the ECEC place to the place of residence on the one hand means that places are allocated across the entire city area. On the other hand, when shortages do arise due to the structure of the school year (most places are allocated in the autumn), temporary groups or centres are opened in spring, mainly for children aged under 3. Private providers can – and in part do – participate in the central place allocation procedure. As they are not required to offer places within four months, these tend to be allocated more according to the school rhythm and with more advance notice.

Access to (un)equal quality: more “equal quality” for greater “equality”?

An uneven distribution of staff qualifications was observed during the state quality monitoring in SE1 depending on the social environment throughout the city. A strong focus can thus be seen on services of equivalent quality (equality), as is emphasised by the local authorities. In SE1, the local administration and public providers have therefore taken up the national goal of educational equality many times and formulated this in concrete terms. This is reflected in the systematic quality development that the municipal provider is pursuing in its facilities as well as in its needs-based financing approach that takes the socioeconomic composition in facilities into account across all providers. However, the achievement of equal quality mainly applies for the public services (not the private ones), which are a particular focus in this municipality. The municipality additionally has a legally prescribed supervisory and monitoring duty vis-à-vis the private providers. It stated that it meets this duty comprehensively and explicitly distances itself from the private for-profit providers. In contrast, according to their representative, the private providers would in this competitive setting like to be involved more, given the strong position of the municipal provider.

Municipal information policy

The municipal authorities demonstrate a high level of awareness of the problem that information is a prerequisite for access to ECEC, also in response to the earlier criticism from the Schools Inspectorate. There is a public information service, for example, offering detailed information in numerous languages, both digitally and via the family office where it is also possible to register. The local administration is committed to reaching the very heterogeneous population; within this, a distinction is made between general information on ECEC on the one hand and information on the admission procedure on the other. Beside targeting disadvantaged families who do not yet participate in ECEC services, the focus is increasingly on expanding the family centres and establishing accessible ‘open preschools’ (öppna förskola) for children aged over 3. In view of the divergences in services and the specific needs identified, the municipality actively takes responsibility for providing information and also seeks to cooperate with other local stakeholders, sometimes across differ-

ent work fields. In contrast, the high demand for places means that the private providers in the sample do not have to make much effort to provide information and instead rely on parents taking the initiative.

2.3.2 Case study SE2

Place situation and admission procedure: shortages and short-term planning as challenge

Unlike in SE1, in the second Swedish municipality, which is a rural amalgamated municipality with a small town as its centre, the ECEC services are managed together with school and adult education as components of the education sector. The large catchment area has the greatest impact on the place situation. While the local administration can meet the deadline for offering an ECEC place, the corresponding infrastructure is challenging due to both the large area and the insufficient financial resources. Places are lacking on the city outskirts in particular. Family day care is an important alternative to centre-based provision, whereby private providers dominate.

In SE2, the minimum ECEC service is pooled on three (instead of five) days a week due to the fact that the travel times are sometimes longer for families living in rural areas. Similar to in SE1, fluctuations in capacity in spring present a challenge in addition to the distance. In the municipal representatives' perspective, the focus is more on quantity rather than quality overall. The dependence of local political decisions on the financial resources available and the competition with the school sector is emphasised. In light of the shortage of places, short-term expansion of the capacities appears to take precedence over longer-term planning strategies for needs-based services. As in SE1, the municipality has chosen to create places in temporary facilities or groups in case of increased demand, especially in spring.

While a centralised admission procedure exists in SE2 for the municipal facilities, the private providers have their own separate procedures. Due to high demand, the registration date is a key criterion for the private providers here, too. The municipality exchanges with a number of private providers on the allocation of places, though each actually has its own separate allocation procedure. It cooperates with private providers and neighbouring municipalities to allocate the scarce places to meet the needs of commuter families and reduce the need to change facilities. Following some initial scepticism on the part of local politicians, private providers have now become established in the municipality, not least because the municipality depends on them to meet their place provision deadlines.

The admission procedure in the municipality was also being reorganised at the time of the study. The procedure is being optimised in light of personnel savings and lacking digitalisation; this is expected to lead to a reduction in the time that is available to support parents however.

Access to equal quality: structural challenges

An awareness of the discrepancy between families' situations and a corresponding need for access conditions to be as equal as possible also exists in SE2. The fundamental perception of local authorities that families affording extensive resources tend to benefit more from free places contrasts with the shortage of places. With regard to the situation of disadvantaged families, there appears to be a kind of "blind spot" about the potentially unequal access for the children of mothers who do not work, as this status is uncommon among Swedish women but more common among migrant families.

The question of quantity over quality appears to prevail overall (at least at the current time), even though the local authorities stated that the quality is being enhanced throughout the municipality. Significantly fewer resources are available for this compared to in the large city of SE1. Despite this, the municipality has also introduced a needs-based funding model.

In terms of the equivalence of services, the tension between municipal and private providers is confirmed, for example in the question of access to the municipality's further training offers for other providers' staff. Notwithstanding the competitive atmosphere, the municipality's activities are geared towards cooperation and a co-existence alongside private providers – not least because of the place situation, but also because of the changing municipal political majorities and priorities. Due to resource constraints, the local administration in SE2 also seems to exercise its steering function less comprehensively than the local administration in SE1.

Municipal information policy in the face of financial savings

In SE2, information is also provided in a digital format, but less detailed information is given about the procedures of admission and individual facilities on the municipality's website. The municipality is aware of the need to inform, especially among families affording limited language skills or little digital affinity, albeit on a rather abstract level. No further information offers are currently being developed. Personnel cuts have moreover been made at the municipal family office, which makes the expansion of information services unlikely at the current time and will, in all likelihood, instead lead to reduced access to relevant contact persons.

2.3.3 Steering of access in SE1 and SE2: an analytical comparison of governance

In both Swedish municipalities, explicit steering efforts are perceptible, whereby the scope for action (responsibility for implementation, but also accountability to the national level) is actively used, though with different emphases. In order to overcome the place shortages discernible in both locations, SE1 is pursuing a special path involving a reform of the municipal decision-making structures and quality development. In contrast, SE2 is primarily focusing on expansion of the infrastructure. In both cases, the dependence of the local administrations' scope for action on the local policy orientation and associated resources is clear. Structural tension exists between the municipal and private providers. This is the result of the dual role assigned to the municipality, which is itself a provider and at the same time also

has a supervisory role vis-à-vis the private providers in the quality monitoring stipulated nationally. Quite a different approach is taken to this relationship of “regulated competition” in the two locations. While the scope for action is used to strengthen the public services in SE1, in SE2 the municipality and private providers work together more closely. Thus, SE1 makes its supervisory role clear and emphasises the hierarchical elements in the governance by comprehensively exercising its monitoring and control function vis-à-vis the private providers (especially compared to SE2), thereby emphasising the competitive relationship. In SE2, a pragmatic, cooperative governance approach is pursued, whereby an interest in networking exists.

3 International comparison of access conditions

The empirical analyses have shown that the local access conditions are the result of a highly complex mix of factors. Of particular importance here are the local stakeholders' steering activities and the respective priorities they set within their scope of action. The conclusions that can be drawn from this for the local access conditions are examined below according to the four dimensions of access based on Vandenbroek and Lazzari's (2014) approach: availability, affordability, accessibility and adequacy of ECEC.

3.1 Availability

With regard to the availability of ECEC places, the case studies reveal that the provision of sufficient places is a central challenge for the local administration in all municipalities. Given the legal obligation in Sweden and Germany for municipalities to create places, the pressure to act is relatively high. For the two German municipalities, a significant shortage of places exists despite the fact that countless new places have already been created over the past ten years as part of the expansion policy. However, place shortages also exist in the Swedish municipalities even though the supply infrastructure is well developed compared to other countries. In Ontario (Canada), municipalities do not have any legal obligation to provide ECEC services. Rather, it is left to the market and to private providers to offer ECEC services, hence the shortage of (affordable) places. This is not least reflected in the long waiting lists for an ECEC place.

In the six case studies, availability also varies according to the location within the municipality, time of admission and child's age group.

Varying distribution of the available capacities can be seen within each of the municipalities investigated. Such variance within the catchment areas demonstrably leads parents to have to travel further due to a lack of centre-based provision or family day care close to their place of residence. This can mean that families who are less mobile and/or lack the additional resources to travel long distances are at a disadvantage.

The time of admission can also affect the services available at the time. While it is usually easier to obtain a place in the autumn due to the structure of the school year, shortages especially exist at other times of the year. The shortage of places thus also means that availability is not only a question of where one lives, but also of the "right" timing. Families require a high degree of flexibility accordingly, which is a challenge for many of them. In the Canadian cases, the families' financial means are also relevant: if they are allocated a place before they actually need it, they may well lose it again if they do not (or cannot) cover the parental fees before this time. Meanwhile, in the two Swedish municipalities, it can depend on the month of admission whether a "normal" place or a place in a temporary group is allocated.

The child's age can also be decisive. Thus, older children (mostly aged over 3) tend to have better chances of being allocated an ECEC place. Only in DE1 is a shortage of places for children aged over 3 also mentioned. In light of the shortage of places, the German and Canadian municipalities as well as SE2 attempt to compensate for capacity issues among the younger children through family day care, whereby the number of places can be increased but the families' wishes (centre-based provision or family day care) then only play a minor role.

In all cases, the shortage of places is due to too few financial resources being made available to the municipalities (which often also depends on the priorities set by the respective political party in power locally) and to the growing shortage of qualified staff. In addition, the data on local demand and its coverage is (in part) insufficient and there is a growing shortage of real estate suitable for ECEC facilities, especially in larger cities. As a result of this situation, it is not always possible to offer places (quickly enough) or for private providers to cater fully to demand. The shortage of place and waiting times mean that families must expect to face difficulties obtaining a place at all.

3.2 Affordability

Differences in the funding structures and the respective distribution of funding burdens can be observed across all municipalities. In terms of the funding structure, the clearest difference is between the underfunded situation in Canadian municipalities and the Swedish approach of largely public funding, supplemented on the local level by funding mechanisms favouring facilities catering to disadvantaged families. In the two German municipalities, the impact that the (un)availability of financial resources can have on the local provider structure is discernible in both cases, whereby the expansion of municipal facilities is scaled down for cost reasons and left to private providers. In DE2, an attempt is made to find a happy medium by offering a provider representing the interests of local authorities.

In Germany and Sweden, the financing burden for the ECEC system must primarily be borne by the public side. In contrast, ECEC services are mostly financed by parental fees in Canada – and these are also very high compared to those in Germany and Sweden. It is therefore far more difficult for families with insufficient financial means to access ECEC services – or at least the licensed services, which tend to be more expensive. The cap on parental contributions in Sweden and sliding scale in the two German municipalities suggests that financial barriers to access are less of an issue at this time. In the German and Canadian municipalities, families must apply for exemption from having to pay fees at all or request that they are reduced, however. This can be time-consuming and requires certain resources, which means that the bureaucracy can present a barrier to access. The regional and local discrepancies in the fee regulations in Germany, but also in the possibilities of receiving financial support in the Canadian cases, stand out in particular.

3.3 Accessibility

The actual access to local ECEC services can above all be assessed by considering the providers' admission procedures as well as the information services available to families. National guidelines for the design of these procedures do not exist in any of the countries. Consequently, both similarities and differences in implementation can already be discerned in the intranational comparison. The providers' local admission procedures differ in their organisation: while the individual providers or even individual facilities must take care of these procedures in some municipalities, a tendency towards the centralisation of procedures can also be observed, for example by combining the registration procedure with the allocation of places (potentially across all providers). In four municipalities (DE2, KA1, SE1, SE2), the registration procedure has at least already mostly been centralised by means of an online tool, though the registration procedure in SE2 has only been centralised for the municipal provider so far. The private providers have the option of participating in the procedure. In two municipalities (DE1 and KA2), the procedure is still decentralised, which means that families must register at each individual facility separately. In these cases, a great deal of effort is required on the part of the families to obtain a place.

With the exception of the big Swedish city (SE1), the allocation of places is organised on the provider or facility level. Municipalities are therefore free to apply their own criteria for the allocation of place, whereby this scope for decision-making is also used and potentially has selective consequences for the design of access accordingly. In the two Swedish municipalities and DE2, the municipal providers have centralised the allocation of their places, which means that the procedure is at least more accessible for this segment. The private providers are free to allocate places as they see fit. The allocation criteria are similar in all of the municipalities; as a rule, places are allocated according to the supposedly 'neutral' factors of the child's age, sibling status and registration date. Priority is also sometimes given to single parents or parents who work. The registration date can potentially constitute a barrier to access, however, especially for families with ECEC needs at short notice or lacking knowledge about the need to register at an early stage. In addition, providers and institutions seem to apply further criteria of their own, especially when the allocation of places is organised decentrally as is the case in DE1.

All in all, in its various forms, the admission procedure represents a neuralgic point in the accessibility of services. Due to a growing awareness of this issue, local centralisation approaches are being implemented (DE2, KA1, SE1) or at least discussed (DE1, KA2, SE2). This means less work for parents to organise a place and uniformity across facilities and providers. A centralised admission procedure can thus help to improve access for all parents. That being said, allocation criteria (such as the registration date) can (still) lead to disadvantages for parents with less system knowledge and fewer personal resources, regardless of how the procedure is designed.

The information policy is also key to accessibility. In all of the municipalities considered, the local administration provides information on the ECEC services available, though with varying degrees of visibility. In the Canadian municipalities, a

market-based approach has traditionally been taken to ECEC services, whereby parents are seen as having a duty to inform themselves. At the same time, however, the local authorities also strive to raise awareness specifically about quality issues in order to boost demand and counteract the increase in unlicensed arrangements. A variety of awareness raising measures and multilingual information channels are used for this purpose. The big Swedish city also actively informs about ECEC services and their benefits using innovative methods to cater to the local target groups; it provides digital information services, too. In contrast, local administration and the ECEC providers sometimes intentionally refrain from sharing information in the German municipalities, as the number of places is insufficient and demand can already hardly be met. Ultimately, particularly resource-rich families who afford prior knowledge and understand the admission procedure stand a better chance of being allocated a place and thus afford better access.

3.4 Adequacy

Access to ECEC services is not just about whether children are allocated a place and how, though, but rather – more importantly – about whether the place offered meets their needs (and those of their parents) and is of a high quality. In all of the municipalities, the consideration of socio-spatial logics and the local conditions plays a central role. This is evident in the municipal needs planning, which is not anchored in the structures of all of the municipalities and rarely differentiates sufficiently during data collection. In the municipalities studied, there also appears to be little control of the location of private providers. This can lead to imbalances in the structure and distribution of providers. Both of these factors point to the unexploited potential of a (socio-spatial) needs-based orientation involving differentiated planning procedures and the availability of different concepts and providers locally.

The lack of financial resources thus limits the possibilities of the local administration in KA1 and KA2 to shape the local services (more) actively. This leads to a preponderance of private providers, to the benefit of the for-profit providers in particular. In the German municipalities, it is also the case that the private providers (mainly non-profit, but also for-profit providers) are largely responsible for increasing the number of places, while the municipal providers in DE1 and DE2 hold back due to a lack of resources. The two Swedish municipalities have different emphases: while the big city primarily relies on public provision rather than a variety of providers, the rural municipality is more dependent on private providers to be able to guarantee sufficient places. Overall, an unbalanced and/or less regulated provider structure can hamper access to adequate services if certain needs are not taken into account in the provision of services from the outset.

In addition to the diversity of providers, their respective quality or access to good quality plays a central role in the adequacy of services. The quality assurance and development procedures differ in each country: while there are no official requirements in Canada, in Germany the state and local youth welfare offices are responsible for quality assurance and the private providers for implementation. In contrast, an external, state-controlled quality monitoring procedure applies for all providers in Sweden. On the municipal level, the Canadian municipalities place clear emphasis

on the quality of ECEC services in their work – contrary to the market logic. In DE1 and DE2, the focus is still on increasing the quantity of services, to date with hardly any accompanying consideration of the quality. In Sweden, the municipality bears a dual responsibility – on the one hand as a provider accountable to the state authority with its own quality development and on the other hand as an authority responsible for monitoring the quality of the private providers' services. The two municipalities in the sample perform these tasks with different intensities: while SE1 focuses on systematic quality development at the municipal provider and implements comprehensive monitoring measures, SE2 is comparatively more concerned with the quantity of ECEC services.

To conclude, it can be said that a clear correlation exists between adequacy and availability. In concrete terms, it is often about the trade-offs between quantity and quality on the municipal steering level, which the stakeholders in all of the municipalities studied have to deal with in many different ways. In many locations, equal access to high quality is not yet the rule. Rather, there are indications that differences in quality exist between services offered by different providers or according to the social environment. These need to be examined in greater depth, for example with funding concepts oriented to local socioeconomic factors, as is already being implemented in most Swedish municipalities. Despite numerous target group-specific approaches such as family centres, which are implemented in all municipalities in the sample, families with fewer resources face greater difficulties (often also depending on their place of residence) within the municipalities considered in finding ECEC services that are of a high quality and at the same time meet their individual needs.

4 Access to ECEC in the context of welfare state traditions

According to Gøsta Esping-Andersen's welfare state typology (1990), Germany, Canada and Sweden can be classified as conservative corporatist, liberal and social democratic in terms of their welfare state type respectively. However, the empirical evidence suggests that this should only be understood as a preliminary approach to systematise complex and dynamic policy fields – such as that of ECEC in this case. In light of the access design in the individual countries, it subsequently becomes apparent that further differentiation is required within this classic typology according to the findings available for the national, regional and local levels.

On the national level, the findings for Germany confirm a readjustment of family policies that were for a long time conservative in nature (cf. Grunau/Mierendorff 2021). This is shown most prominently by the introduction of a legal entitlement to an ECEC place that aims to achieve a universal right of access (social democratic orientation). At the same time, the principle of subsidiarity clearly continues to dominate the provider landscape; this is primarily attributed to conservative corporatist welfare states. In Canada, and specifically in Ontario (regional level), the ECEC system is oriented towards the private for-profit sector and the strongly market-based elements can by all means be described as components of a liberal welfare model (Japel/Friendly 2018). That being said, though, discrepancies also exist in the welfare typology logic in Sweden: while the Swedish ECEC system boasts a generous public funding structure and comprehensive municipal provision and thus corresponds with the social democratic welfare model overall (Naumann 2014), the universal and free general pre-school is only available to children aged over 3. Children aged 1–2 also have a right to access ECEC, but this is still defined according to categories of need (albeit comparatively broad ones).

On the local level, it is possible to trace how the guidelines set on the national level are (or can be) interpreted differently. Due to the shortage of places, the legal entitlement to an ECEC place continues to be (implicitly) linked to certain criteria in the two German municipalities (such as parents' occupations), thus upholding the conservative corporatist tradition. The cases of DE1 and DE2 also illustrate that the universal legal entitlement (associated with the social democratic welfare state) and the principle of subsidiarity (conservative corporatist welfare state) lead to a field of tension for the local authorities between pressure to act and dependency on private providers. In contrast, it is evident in the Canadian municipalities how the municipal study participants largely base their actions on encouraging non-profit services, despite the system's overall market orientation. In particular, they achieve this by focusing on the affordability and adequacy of services and collaborate with private non-profit providers to this end. The eligibility criteria for financial assistance also point to a liberal welfare state orientation however. The same ambiguity can be observed in the Swedish municipalities. It can on the one hand be seen that (especially in SE1, but also in SE2) particularly the public services have a high priority and the narrative of equality is a central concern for design of the ECEC sector

in keeping with social democratic traditions. On the other hand, in light of the steering activities in SE2, the ECEC landscape appears to be opening up to private providers, and thus also to competitive elements, in order to meet the demand for ECEC. For all of the municipalities in this sample, it can be stated accordingly that the respective welfare state traditions are not necessarily mutually exclusive in the organisation of access to ECEC services. Rather, stakeholders on the various steering levels may well pursue elements of different welfare state typologies, or these may also be linked and combined in the (local) implementation strategies.

5 Summary: the potential of local ECEC governance

The empirical results of the Equal Access Study provide insights into the extent to which (un)equal access to the ECEC system can potentially be reduced or reinforced on the local steering level accordingly. An inter- and intranational comparison reveals the relevance of local steering processes and the complex mechanisms for cooperation between the different stakeholders for the respective access conditions. In the countries studied, the local stakeholders (and particularly the local administrations) not only afford varying scope for manoeuvre within the respective steering structures. They also use this to varying degrees to set their own priorities – in expansion of the number of ECEC places, data-based planning, the financing structure, the cooperation with private providers and the structuring of place allocation procedures, to name just a few potential levers for targeted steering. In all of the municipalities investigated, access to (high-quality) ECEC services is more difficult for certain families nonetheless, albeit to varying degrees. This is usually due to the fact that access is linked to a variety of requirements that families are expected to fulfil, including financial resources, language skills, mobility and employment status. Disadvantaged families are generally less likely to meet these requirements and therefore face diverse barriers to access. Against this backdrop, even supposed improvements such as a central admission procedure can lead to unequal access being reproduced, for example, as the registration date is decisive to the allocation of places.

It is particularly important to note that empirical studies have shown that neither one single measure (such as a central admission procedure) nor the safeguarding of individual aspects of access (like a sufficient number of places) is enough to improve access to the ECEC system as a whole. Quite the contrary in fact: the various access dimensions are so closely related and linked that comprehensive strategies are needed to design services that cater to as many of the diverging needs as possible. Given the often scarce resources and differing political priorities in the municipalities, it is becoming something of a balancing act for local stakeholders to take all of the dimensions into account in equal measure, not least because they are also subject to the respective local governance constellation. It thus became clear that particularly disadvantaged social groups need to be considered by designing targeted approaches of provision, but should also be borne in mind more in the design of regular service provision. Too little attention has been paid to needs-based approaches as a whole to date. For it is not only particularly crucial for children from disadvantaged backgrounds to be allocated an ECEC place, but also for these services to be of a high quality and at the same time take the families' living conditions and actual needs into account.

6 Bibliography

- Autorengruppe Bildungsberichterstattung (2020): Bildung in Deutschland 2020. Ein indikatorengestützter Bericht mit einer Analyse zu Bildung in einer digitalisierten Welt. Bielefeld
- Bertelsmann Stiftung (2020): Ländermonitor. KiTas nach Träger. www.laendermonitor.de/de/vergleich-bundeslaender-daten/personal-und-einrichtungen/traeger/kitas-nach-traeger-1?tx_itaohyperion_pluginview%5Baction%5D=chart&tx_itaohyperion_pluginview%5Bcontroller%5D=Plugin-View&cHash=ebcae510dcaba92198a99eb01bce2e03 (04.11.2021)
- Blatter, Joachim/Janning, Frank/Wagemann, Claudius (2007): Qualitative Politikanalyse. Eine Einführung in Forschungsansätze und Methoden. Wiesbaden
- Blossfeld, Hans-Peter/Kulic, Nevena/Skopek, Jan (Eds.) (2017): *Childcare, early education and social inequality. An international perspective*. Cheltenham
- Childcare Resource and Research Unit (2021): Summary and analysis of key findings. Early childhood education and care in Canada 2019. Toronto
- Esping-Andersen, Gøsta (1990): *The three worlds of welfare capitalism*. Reprint. Cambridge
- Garvis, Susanne/Lunneblad, Johannes (2018): *Inequalities in Access to Early Childhood Education and Care in Sweden. The Equal Access Study*. Munich. www.intern.dji.de/fileadmin/user_upload/icec/Expertisen/WEB_DJI_Report_Sweden.pdf (18.11.2020)
- Grunau, Thomas/Mierendorff, Johanna (2021): Wohlfahrtsstaatliche Interessen an der Qualität der Bedingungen des Aufwachsens und der Qualität der Kindertagesbetreuung. In: Bilgi, Oktay/Blaschke-Nacak, Gerald/Durand, Judith/Schmidt, Thilo/Stenger, Ursula/Stieve, Claus (Eds.): „Qualität“ revisited. Theoretische und empirische Perspektiven in der Pädagogik der frühen Kindheit. Weinheim, p. 148–162
- Holtkamp, Lars (2007): Local Governance. In: Benz, Arthur/Lütz, Susanne/Schimank, Uwe/Simonis, Georg (Eds.): *Handbuch Governance. Theoretische Grundlagen und empirische Anwendungsfelder*. Wiesbaden, p. 366–377
- Japel, Christa/Friendly, Martha (2018): *Inequalities in Access to Early Childhood Education and Care in Canada. The Equal Access Study*. Munich.
- Jessen, Jonas/Schmitz, Sophia/Waights, Sevrin (2020): Understanding day care enrolment gaps. In: *Journal of Public Economics*, Vol. 190, p. 104–252
- Kuckartz, Udo (2018): *Qualitative Inhaltsanalyse. Methoden, Praxis, Computerunterstützung*. 4th revised edition. Weinheim/Basel
- Kutsar, Dagmar/Kuronen, Marjo (2015): Introduction. In: Kutsar, Dagmar/Kuronen, Marjo (Eds.): *Local welfare policy making in European cities*. Cham, p. 1–14
- Leuffen, Dirk (2007): Fallauswahl in der qualitativen Sozialforschung. In: Gschwend, Thomas/Schimmelfennig, Frank/Bièvre, Dirk de/Dür, Andreas/Hönnige, Christoph/Lehnert, Matthias/Leuffen, Dirk/Miller, Bernhard/Rathke, Julia/Sieberer, Ulrich/Thiem, Janina/Wonka, Arndt (Eds.): *Forschungsdesign in der Politikwissenschaft. Probleme – Strategien – Anwendungen*. Frankfurt/New York, p. 201–221
- McCoy, Dana Charles/Yoshikawa, Hirokazu/Ziol-Guest, Kathleen M./Duncan, Greg J./Schindler, Holly S./Magnuson, Katherine/Yang, Rui/Koepp, Andrew/Shonkoff, Jack P. (2017): Impacts of Early Childhood Education on Medium- and Long-Term Educational Outcomes. In: *Educational researcher* (Washington, D.C.: 1972), Vol. 46, Issue 8, p. 474–487
- Menzel, Britta/Scholz, Antonia (forthcoming): *Frühkindliche Bildung und soziale Ungleichheit. Die lokale Steuerung von Zugang im internationalen Vergleich*. Weinheim/Munich
- Meuser, Michael/Nagel, Ulrike (2009): Das Experteninterview – konzeptionelle Grundlagen und methodische Anlage. In: Pickel, Susanne/Jahn, Detlef/Lauth, Hans-Joachim/Pickel, Gert (Eds.): *Methoden der vergleichenden Politik- und Sozialwissenschaft. Neue Entwicklungen und Anwendungen*. Wiesbaden, p. 465–479
- Muno, Wolfgang (2009): Fallstudien und die vergleichende Methode. In: Pickel, Susanne/Jahn, Detlef/Lauth, Hans-Joachim/Pickel, Gert (Eds.): *Methoden der vergleichenden Politik- und Sozialwissenschaft. Neue Entwicklungen und Anwendungen*. Wiesbaden, p. 113–132
- Naumann, Ingela (2014): Access for All? Sozialinvestitionen in der frühkindlichen Bildung und Betreuung im europäischen Vergleich. In: *Zeitschrift für Erziehungswissenschaft*, Issue 17, p. 113–128
- OECD (2020): *Early Childhood Education: Equity, Quality and Transitions. Report for the G20 Education Working Group*. www.oecd.org/education/school/early-childhood-education-equity-quality-transitions-G20.pdf (21.12.2021)
- Scholz, Antonia/Erhard, Katharina/Hahn, Sophie/Harring, Dana (2018): *Inequalities in Access to Early Childhood Education and Care in Germany. The Equal Access Study*. Munich. www.dji.de/fileadmin/user_upload/icec/Expertisen/WEB_DJI_ExpertiseDeutschland.pdf (17.05.2021)
- Skolverket (2019): *Annan pedagogisk verksamhet: Barn och personal per 15 oktober 2018*. <https://www.skolverket.se/getFile?file=4069> (10.02.22)

- Skolverket (2020): Barn och personal i förskola 2019. https://siris.skolverket.se/siris/sitevision_doc.getFile?p_id=549814 (17.11.2020)
- Statistics Canada (2021): Type of childcare arrangement, household population aged 0 to 5 years. www150.statcan.gc.ca/t1/tbl1/en/tv.action?pid=4210000501&pickMembers%5B0%5D=1.1&cubeTimeFrame.startYear=2019&cubeTimeFrame.endYear=2019&referencePeriods=20190101%2C20190101 (27.01.2022)
- Vandenbroeck, Michel/Lazzari, Arianna (2014): Accessibility of early childhood education and care: a state of affairs. In: *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, Vol. 22, Issue 3, p. 327–335

Afterword

In addition to the authors, a number of other individuals were involved in implementation of the Equal Access Study, whom we would like to thank for their support and participation.

Dr. Katharina Erhard, Dr. Sophie Hahn, Dana Harring and Sabrina Mannebach as members of the project team and Simon Zentgraf as research assistant were involved in various phases of data collection and analysis forming the basis of this summary. We received advice and support from numerous staff at the German Youth Institute (DJI), including Birgit Riedel as head of the research department, Dr. Herwig Reiter regarding methodological matters, and Sylvie Ganzevoort for the project organisation. Dr. Ludovica Gambaro, Daniela Kobelt Neuhaus and Dr. Ingela Naumann acted as external scientific advisers.

We would above all like to thank all of the study participants from the municipalities and professional practice, who were willing to share details of their procedures and activities with us and placed their trust in us accordingly. It should be emphasised at this point that the analyses of the Equal Access Study do not focus on the unique steering actions of individual stakeholders, but rather offer a critical reflection on the overall structural issues. With regard to the surveys in the three countries, a huge thanks also to Ursula Armbruster, Martha Friendly and Prof. Dr. Sven Persson, who provided comprehensive support for the project on an ongoing basis as experts on the Canadian and Swedish early childhood education and care systems. As reviewer of the final publication, Prof. Dr. Johanna Mierendorff helped us to refine our analyses even further. We are delighted that it has been possible to complete this complex project with support from many sides and countless stakeholders at home and abroad. We very much hope that it will contribute to the academic, policy and practical discourse on the local steering of access to ECEC services.

Munich, May 2022

Britta Menzel and Dr. Antonia Scholz