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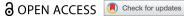
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ABSTRACT

This article sheds light on governance mechanisms at work when decentralised implementation of national educational and welfare policies encounters a heterogeneous sector of private service provider organisations. It illuminates how isomorphic pressure plays out at the interface between local governance and private providers' organisational strategies for quality development in early childhood education and care (ECEC). Key informant interviews are employed to investigate the function of local non-mandatory quality and competence-developing networks (QCDNs) as a locus for these interactions. Findings indicate that QCDNs contribute to shaping private ECEC providers' quality development efforts, and that coercive, normative, and mimetic isomorphic pressures become intertwined in this process. Most private provider organisations choose to participate in these non-mandatory networks. However, ECEC corporations and small private providers assign different meanings to their participation, and the networks thus appear to spur different organisational strategies. While small private providers harmoniously align their ECEC quality development strategies with institutionalised municipal practice, the provider corporations, while in formal compliance, exploit the resulting inter-municipal variation as one argument among many for more stringent national governmental standardisation. We demonstrate how isomorphic pressure may create and enable an impetus for endogenous and gradual institutional change agency.

Introduction

Research topic and research question

This article sheds light on the governance mechanisms in play when the decentralised implementation of national educational and welfare policies meets a heterogeneous sector of private service provider organisations, and how these impact on certain sector practices. Traditionally, Nordic education policy has aimed at facilitating equal

opportunity for children by the provision of uniform and universally high-quality education, defined by national policies and closely governed by the state (Lundahl, 2016; Lundahl, Arreman, Holm, & Lundström, 2013; West & Nikolai, 2013). More recently, New Public Management (NPM)-inspired government reforms and decision-making, decentralised to municipal level, have challenged this regime (Lundahl, 2016). Enabling high-quality schools and early childhood education and care (ECEC) centres to provide all children with the same advantages and life opportunities is now being pursued by approaches such as governance by objectives and quality assurance. The encouragement and support of quality development processes in provider organisations, including performance management techniques such as self-evaluations and quality audits, have become key policy implementation strategies (Hudson, 2011; Rönnberg, 2011). Decentralisation has also led to multi-stage policy processes, whereby educational goals are formulated at national level, with their interpretation and implementation left to lower levels and made adaptable to contextual prioritisation by local democracy. The facilitation and monitoring of national policy implementations rely on soft governance, by which peer-learning, transparency, and "*stakeholder commitment to common goals and coordinated processes*" (Wilkoszewski & Sundby, 2016, p. 458) are key to achieving policy goals.

These changes also facilitate increased privatisation. Enabling privatisation as a "soft" process may involve constraining private sector actors to severe quality standards and benchmarking that require measurement and indicators (Cone & Brøgger, 2020). In some contexts, however, the authorities rely on less socio-technical ways of blurring the distinctions between private and public actors, as is seen in the highly privatised, yet firmly governed, Norwegian ECEC provision sector. Norwegian ECEC head teachers, in private as well as public centres, have traditionally enjoyed significant levels of professional grass-root autonomy when defining ECEC service content and practices (Børhaug & Gotvassli, 2016), and a broad-based and long-standing public-private partnership in ECEC service provision (Haug, 2014) has evolved under these conditions. However, NPM-inspired reforms tend to reconstruct such professional activity arenas into formal organisations defined by their boundaries towards the outside world and internally defined goals, strategies and hierarchies (Brunsson & Sahlin-Andersen, 2000). Norwegian ECEC policy reforms have thus gradually defined a more active role for the owners of one or more kindergartens (centres), including both private and public ECEC provider organisations (The Kindergarten Act, 2005, section 7). As a result, the role of owner has become legally more clearly separated from the head teacher role, even in single-centre ECEC provider organisations. Municipalities act in the roles of both authority and provider (owner) with head teachers as municipal employees. At the same time, all ECEC centres in Norway must adhere to the same National Quality Framework Plan (Ministry of Education and Research, 2017a), although centre owners (ECEC providers) are given flexibility in terms of their interpretations, implementations and adaptations of practice within this plan (Gotvassli, 2020).

Few studies have examined the interaction between private provision and NPM-inspired governance reforms in the education sector (Lundahl, Arreman, Holm, & Lundström, 2013, p. 499), or the softer policy implementation mechanisms practiced in multi-level educational systems (Wilkoszewski & Sundby, 2016). Moreover, little attention has been directed at the juncture between ECEC governance structures and private provider organisations, or the shaping of private providers' quality development

strategies (Furenes, Reikerås, Moser, & Munthe, 2021). This article aims to address these research gaps by offering insight into how Norwegian ECEC policy, aimed at achieving a universal and high-quality service, is mediated by municipal officers and dealt with by a variety of private ECEC provider organisations. Ours is an empirical study of a sample of non-mandatory ECEC quality and competence development centre networks (QCDNs) facilitated by Norwegian municipalities. Our analysis draws on neo-institutional theories of organisations, which claim that under certain conditions, organisations will seek to enhance both their legitimacy within a given field and their organisational efficiency and performance. Individual strivings for legitimacy may result in isomorphy – a homogenisation among organisations at field level (Deephouse, Bundy, Tost, & Suchman, 2017; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Frumkin & Galaskiewicz, 2004; Wooten & Hoffman, 2017). Pressure on organisations stemming from power imbalances between actors joined in a common endeavour is referred to as coercive isomorphic pressure, and our interest focuses primarily on the softer or informal ways in which this pressure is applied using QCDNs. The article addresses the research question:

> How does coercive isomorphic pressure in ECEC provision play out among diverse private providers in Norwegian municipality-led networks aimed at developing competence and quality in ECEC centres?

Structures and actors in the Norwegian ECEC provision field

At the core of contemporary Norwegian ECEC policy lies an ambition to provide all preschool children (aged 1–5) with access to ECEC services of high and equitable content and output quality – ensuring them a happy childhood and the best possible start both in life and their educational careers. This policy is implemented within the context of the highest private ECEC provision rate in Scandinavia (Trætteberg, Sivesind, Hrafnsdóttir, & Paananen, 2021). A total of 5,800 ECEC centres are almost equally distributed between municipal and private provider organisations. National ECEC legislation aims at levelling up ECEC quality across the entire sector, while also striving to achieve effective coordination and equal operating conditions between public and private ECEC providers at municipality level (Haugset, 2023; Ministry of Education and Research, 2017a, 2017b). For-profit ECEC provider corporations spanning municipality and county borders started to enter the sector mainly after the 2003 Kindergarten Reform, which increased public funding for augmented public and private service capacity and quality, provided financial incentives for new private centres, and permitted for-profit ECEC service provision (Trætteberg, Sivesind, Hrafnsdóttir, & Paananen, 2021, p. 34). Corporate providers have since taken market shares mainly from local, non-profit or small proprietor private ECEC providers (Lunder, 2019), and their entry has increased the heterogeneity of the field of provider organisations.

The lack of clear-cut, measurable quality standards to which the authorities can hold centre practices accountable (Gotvassli & Vannebo, 2016; Haugset, 2023; Ljunggren et al., 2017; Ministry of Education and Research, 2017a) serves to add to the complexity of ECEC policy implementation. Gotvassli (2020, pp. 34–35) notes that different stakeholders maintain competing discourses regarding ECEC quality, and also that

key ECEC reforms frame the concept of quality as value-laden, contextual, and dynamic. Thus, in Norway, defining and operationalising quality is an ongoing political and professional process. At the same time, the encouragement and facilitation of incremental quality and competence development processes within ECEC centres has become an important governance approach (Ministry of Education and Research, 2021). Challenges related to low and varying ECEC quality have persistently been pointed out by government (Ministry of Education and Research, 2013, 2016), documented by researchers (Alvestad et al., 2019; Bjørnestad & Os, 2018; Bjørnestad, Broekhuizen, Os, & Baustad, 2020; Løkken, Bjørnestad, Broekhuizen, & Moser, 2018), and theorised as demanding ongoing quality and competence-enhancing reforms (Haugset, 2023; Ministry of Education and Research, 2017b; Rowan, 2006, p. 22). As a result, the levelling up of ECEC service quality has gradually evolved into the primary common endeavour in the field of ECEC provision and governance. ECEC providers that are perceived as lagging behind in quality, or in the quality development efforts, need to demonstrate their organisational efficacy and commitment to the shared objective (Deephouse, Bundy, Tost, & Suchman, 2017, p. 43; Haugset, 2023).

In accordance with NPM reforms, an elaborate set of ECEC actor roles and responsibilities in relation to quality development have emerged (Ministry of Education and Research, 2017a, 2017b; 2021). Both private and municipal providers are expected to act as self-contained and accountable organisations working actively to achieve quality improvement. Municipalities acting in the role of local ECEC authorities implement national policy by supervising provider compliance with the Kindergarten Act and the National Quality Framework Plan. They conduct audits, offer guidance, and fund private centres at the same rates as those that apply to municipal centres (The Kindergarten Act, 2005). Although QCDNs are not mentioned in ECEC policy documents, they have evolved over decades as key arenas offering guidance and professional support in connection with ECEC policy implementation at local level (Haugset et al., 2019; Ljunggren et al., 2017; Østrem et al., 2009. Path dependency has made these institutionalised networks the default approach to quality development. Ninety percent of municipal ECEC authorities organise at least one QCDN, involving mainly head teachers. Fifteen percent of private providers are represented in QCDNs by persons other than head teachers, such as the top executive or Board Chair of the provider organisation, while less than ten percent of private providers are not represented at all (Haugset et al., 2019).

However, as ECEC providers, municipalities are prescribed a role that is essentially identical to that of private providers. This places them in a challenging and highly debatable double role (Askim, 2013) in which they are expected both to implement the development of ECEC quality as recommended by national policy, and at the same time acknowledge the autonomy of private providers to develop and implement their own quality practices.

Theoretical framework

In neo-institutional theories of organisations, formal rules, norms, and cognitive and cultural structures such as shared beliefs and perspectives, are recognised as institutions, along with the organisational behaviours that they may exogenously structure. Diverse

organisations that rely on each other in a common endeavour in a "*recognized area of institutional life*" (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983, p. 148), whether in complementary or competing roles, constitute an organisational field. As such, they are subject to the same field-level rules, expectations and beliefs. In their seminal article, DiMaggio and Powell (1983) categorised the forces to which organisations are subjected within an organisational field into three analytical, but interacting, categories: coercive, normative, and mimetic isomorphic pressure. While coercive pressure stems from financial dependencies and power imbalances among interdependent organisations, normative pressure is typically applied via professional communities extending across organisational borders. Mimetic pressure arises when the emulation of successful peers emerges as the preferred solution to legitimacy issues in a complex task environment. All three pressure types contribute to homogenisation of the structure, culture and output of actors in an initially heterogeneous field (ibid., p. 147).

The Norwegian ECEC sector displays several of DiMaggio and Powell's (1983) preconditions for the emergence of isomorphic pressure. These include a heavy reliance by provider organisations on public funding and legislation, the strong presence of the pre-school teacher profession (partly because owners must fill the head teacher role with certified pre-school teachers), the ambiguous policy goal of "developing ECEC quality", and the lack of clear links between service content and processes and ECEC quality outcomes. In an educational context, an institutional analysis should consider forces stemming from coercive power and resource dependency (Bidwell, 2006; Rowan, 2006), as well as normative isomorphic pressure and the mediating role of key professionals (Birbili & Myrovali, 2020). Since the levelling up of quality is key to Norwegian ECEC policy (Haugset, 2023), one might even say that the emergence of an isomorphic field in terms of quality standards and quality development practices is a key component of the common endeavour that defines the public-private partnership in ECEC provision. Leaning more towards mimetic isomorphic pressure, Gotvassli and Vannebo (2016) claim that both quality and quality development have evolved into a self-justifying "master idea" in the field of Norwegian ECEC. They attribute this to the concept of ECEC quality being highly eclectic, expandable and mouldable, defying attempts to arrive at a clear definition. Dale and Granrusten (2021) find that municipal consensus-building strategies based on guidance in quality development may impose coercive and mimetic pressures on ECEC centre practices, narrowing the scope of market strategies available to provider organisations with differing resources. The sum total of institutional pressures being exerted on private provider organisations seems to be levelling up the Norwegian ECEC provision field, especially with regard to pedagogical ECEC centre practices (Haugset, 2019).

Contemporary neo-institutional theory, while not disregarding the classical concept of isomorphy, also recognises that organisational actors rarely become prisoners of "*an institutional iron cage from which no escape is possible*" (Heugens & Lander, 2009, p. 76). Theorists have taken an increasing interest in how isomorphic pressure, as well as organisational responses to it, manifest themselves in ongoing, dynamic social interactions (Lawrence, Suddaby, & Leca, 2011; Powell & Rerup, 2017; Scott, 2017; Wooten & Hoffman, 2017). Institutional pressure works through the everyday "*responsive and problem solving behaviour of individuals*" (Selznick, 1996, p. 274), within a given social context. Because different organisations are dealing with dissimilar

problems, they may respond differently to isomorphic pressure. Isomorphy as an outcome may imply organisational decoupling and the ceremonial and superficial organisational convergence of forms and structures (Meyer & Rowan, 1977), as well as tight coupling and actual compliance in culture and organisational strategies (Ashworth, Boyne, & Delbridge, 2007). The presence of *isomorphic pressure* should thus be analytically separated from *isomorphy as an outcome* (Beckert, 2010).

The coercive isomorphic pressure of Norwegian ECEC governance meets private providers that possess a heterogeneous set of resources, organisational forms and ambitions, and the QCDNs investigated in our study represent local arenas for social interaction at the interface between provider organisations and ECEC authorities.

Organisations subject to coercive pressure by governmental bodies may employ different strategies to address it (Oliver, 1991; Powell & Rerup, 2017), as influenced by their organisational path dependencies and resource environments (Ramanath, 2009). Problem-solving behaviour may contribute to gradual institutional change through shaping, adapting and translating the institutional pressures prevailing in their organisational field (Gotvassli & Vannebo, 2016; Haugset, 2021a; Mahoney & Thelen, 2009; Wooten & Hoffman, 2017). In this regard, it is worth noting that the ECEC concepts of quality and quality development lend themselves well to "*ongoing tensions and struggles, acceptances and rejections*" within the current institutional configuration (Gotvassli, 2020; Hudson, 2011, p. 684). The use of strategic discretion among leaders is shaped by isomorphic pressure (Hambrick, Finkelstein, Cho, & Jackson, 2005), but such pressure may also act to enable agency (Woelert & Croucher, 2018) that changes the rules of the game. For example, in Norway, ECEC provider corporations have emerged as well-coordinated political actors at national level, shaping the institutional environment around them (Haugset, 2021a).

Our starting point is that QCDNs function as arenas for ongoing dynamic processes in which isomorphic pressure encounters and shapes provider organisations' purposive agency. No doubt, this "*juncture of marketisation and state control*" (Rönnberg, 2011, p. 559), which manifests itself in the networks we study here, may also be fruitfully approached through theories of hybrid organisations (Haug, 2014; Vakkuri & Johanson, 2018), soft governance (Moos, 2009), network governance (Røiseland & Vabo, 2016) or co-optation (Haugset, 2021b). We find, however, that neo-institutional theories of organisations offer a richer analytical framework when it comes to understanding the dynamics of differently equipped provider organisations and the interactions between ECEC providers and the authorities.

Materials and methods

Data sources

The empirical data for our analysis are sourced from a policy evaluation project in which the first author held a key position and led the data gathering process (Haugset et al., 2019). That project assessed multi-level governance in a heterogeneous ECEC sector, focusing on the implementation of national rules and guidelines for quality development. The interview guide used was designed to reveal how national, regional and municipal ECEC authorities, municipal ECEC providers and private provider

organisations perceived and worked with ECEC quality development, and how they cooperated with other parties on this issue. In recognition of the Norwegian discourse on ECEC quality as broad, dynamic, political and contextual (Gotvassli, 2020, p. 34), we asked informants open questions such as *what is your perception of ECEC quality*, *what tools are most important to you in contributing to the development and assurance of ECEC quality*, and *how and with whom do you work to enhance ECEC quality*. The interviewer then posed adapted follow-up questions about the organising and content of ECEC quality development arenas and practices.

Similarly to earlier research findings, municipality-led networks of head teachers from both public and municipal centres emerged as important arenas for local ECEC policy implementation in the evaluation (Haugset et al., 2019). The present article analyses and theorises processes taking place outside the scope of policy evaluation, at the interface between attempts by municipalities to govern ECEC quality, and at the same time supervise the activities of private ECEC providers. In line with Norwegian research ethical guidelines (NESH, 2016), permission to gather and store data was obtained and the material anonymised before re-use in this article.

Sampling and representativity

This study employed a subset of 18 interviews with key informants from the previous evaluation project (Table 1). In Norway, legislation and policy documents stipulate that the implementation path of ECEC policy, including centre quality development, runs from local ECEC authorities to the provider organisations (referred to as "kindergarten owners"), and from there to head teachers. Our four informant categories ("authority" and three types of provider organisations) have thus been sampled as representative of the policy-prescribed interface between the authorities and provider organisations working to develop and assure ECEC quality (The Kindergarten Act, 2005; Ministry of Education and Research, 2017b). Head teachers were included in the previous policy evaluation project within case studies of a few sampled ECEC centres. The case studies mainly investigated internal professional work processes directed at enhancing quality in daily activities with children, and paid less attention to centre external arenas (Haugset et al., 2019, p. 41). Hence these interviews do not shed light

Table 1. Overview of informant categories and sampling strategies used to create the dataset of 18 interviews.

Informant category	Number of informants	Sampling unit and strategy
Municipal employees in local ECEC authority roles	9	9 municipalities (with at least one private centre). A diversity of regions, population size (<5,000 to >100,000), and private sector share of ECEC provision. A maximum of one informant in each category from each municipality.
Municipal employees in ECEC provider (centre owner) roles	3	
Representatives from traditional, small, private provider organizations	4	Sampled within the 9 municipalities, a maximum of one informant from each. Sub-categories: parental cooperatives (2), single-centre private owners (2).
Executive representatives of ECEC provider corporations (>50 centres and centres in > 10 municipalities)	2	Multi-site private providers exhibiting variation in commercial/idealistic orientation and number of centres. Sampled independently of the aforementioned 9 municipalities.

on the QCDNs and are not included here. However, some private provider informants also occupied the role of head teachers, and this served to enrich the network operation data.

During the recruitment process and the interviews, it became clear that the roles of municipal providers and authorities regarding quality and competence development were merged and handled by the same employee in 8 of the 9 sampled municipalities.[1] In the results and discussion sections, we do not distinguish between informants in provider and authority roles when discussing practices in the municipalities that did not themselves make this distinction. Instead, they are referred to as municipal informants to ease the presentation. The largest municipality in our sample kept the municipal provider and local authority roles more strictly apart from each other, and hence we refer to the two roles separately when discussing this municipality.

Although the sample includes only three of several types of private ECEC providers, we argue that these organisations are still representative of the heterogeneity in size and geographical scope of private providers that are designated roles and responsibilities in ECEC legislation. In the case of private providers, we requested interviews with the CEO or a top executive to discuss their organisations' efforts to develop and assure ECEC quality at their centre(s). We thus interviewed the Board Chair of the two parental cooperatives, two self-employed head teachers in small private provider organisations, and ECEC quality managers/developers in the two corporations.

Analytical strategy

The analysis was conducted in three consecutive steps. Firstly, text was extracted from the interviews with the 12 municipal provider and local ECEC authority informants, addressing quality and competence-development networks, as well as the practices, ambitions, tools and approaches applied to enhance quality development in ECEC centres. Based on this material, we investigated the organisation of the QCDNs and compared results across the municipalities. The informants' descriptions of their quality development strategies, and of how the private centres were included in them, were evaluated in the light of the classical neo-institutional concept of isomorphic pressure (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983).

Step two involved extracting texts from interviews with private providers addressing their ECEC quality development strategies, as well as their interaction with, and perception of, municipal ECEC governance. This database was then analysed for factors such as quality development challenges, the meanings they assigned to QCDNs, their interaction with the municipality, and descriptions of their problem-solving behaviours or strategies in the area of quality development. This step was guided by more contemporary neo-institutional theories of organisational agency within institutional structures (Lawrence, Suddaby, & Leca, 2011; Scott, 2017; Selznick, 1996). Step three involved an examination of the interplay between structures and organisational agency in relation to institutional stability and change in matters of quality and quality development.

Results

This section is organised in line with our analytical strategy. The first part is based on data from the municipal informants organising the QCDNs, followed by the stances of the private provider organisations.

Municipal ECEC quality development efforts and ambitions

Our municipal informants reported that all of the private ECEC centres owned by small, locally embedded organisations participated in the QCDNs. Where corporate centres existed, these participated too in most municipalities. In most cases, the municipal ECEC authority and provider roles in the fields of ECEC quality and competence development were administered by the same person. However, the formal auditing of centre quality was often strictly separated from the municipal provider role. Moreover, one large municipality made a clear distinction between its provider and authority roles in its quality development efforts, organising separate networks for municipal centres and private providers. Bimonthly provider meetings were attended by the municipal provider representative and the private providers and chaired by the ECEC authority. The municipal ECEC authority described how guidance offered to all centres regarding key policy document content was her principal tool in developing and assuring ECEC quality:

> We consider centre practices through the lens of "what is best for the child". We attempt to reach a common understanding through guidance. And … when we can't reach agreement on this, they should at least be aware of what we expect. This should not come as a surprise during an audit.

In this municipality, the provision of quality development guidance and advice in relation to quality audits went hand in hand with an expectation that private providers were both "hands-on" and accountable in terms of quality development. In this regard, the informant expressed concern that small, private ECEC providers "*may lack the necessary resources and compe-tence*". Similar anxieties were revealed by informants in other municipalities. However, concern was also expressed regarding non-participation in QCDNs by corporate centres. One informant from a medium-sized municipality claimed that:

> In the past, there were centres with small, private owners, and they participated all the time. Now, these centres are being acquired by large corporations. We lose touch with them because they practice corporate quality and competence development and we lose the big picture.

In the smaller municipalities, the same QCDNs included both municipal and private ECEC centre head teachers. Deliberate efforts were made to invite and motivate all centres to participate in shared programmes:

> We emphasize that all our children are citizens, and we want them to have equal opportunities regardless of whether they attend a municipal or a private ECEC centre. So, we include the private centres in all our quality development efforts, but of course – they may choose not to participate.

In terms of the content of quality development efforts, the municipal informants referred to several programmes initiated by the Norwegian government. These addressed topics such as

social competence, assistance for children with special needs, ICT/digitalisation practices and the learning environment. As implementors of national policy, the municipal informants were subject to several sets of guidelines. One stated that "*the County Governor has provided us with funding tied to national programmes, to which we have to adapt*". The integration of private ECEC centres into these programme investment areas must be founded on voluntary cooperation, and their participation was often achieved. For instance, after a child abuse incident, one of the municipalities wanted to offer all ECEC personnel an online course on sexual abuse: "*We can only request that the private centres participate. But they wanted to. They are eager to take part in municipal quality development efforts*".

Informants also described how discretion in the interpretation and implementation of broad national ECEC quality guidelines was applied in the QCDNs, and how this served to reduce the discretionary scope of ECEC providers. Municipal network leaders added their views on ECEC quality to the national guidelines and urged the centres to conform to the latter. For example, one informant explained that "*service quality may be low, and centre personnel may need guidance even if they are meeting the formal requirements*". Some persuasion and pressure might also be involved. One informant recalled how, during a shared development project, "*all centres conducted the Directorate of Education's standardized internal assessment after some pressure from the network leader*".

However, one informant pointed out that there was scope for ECEC centre adaptation: "*Today, we are working together with the same investment challenges, but individual centres are also able to work with issues that they want to improve. The shared programme does not aim to yield 27 identical centres'*. Head teachers also took an active part in defining and negotiating the scope of shared projects. Nine of the 12 municipal informants were preschool teachers, and in fact the QCDNs in all the municipalities were led by preschool teachers. An experienced preschool teacher in a local authority role claimed that '*my most important tools are my experience and competence as a provider of guidance. (. . .) I have quite a few years of experience, both from ECEC centres and governance roles, and I actively use this knowledge and experience*".

Since the position of head teacher requires a preschool teaching qualification, networks come together to form professional communities facilitating cooperation and co-creation when defining shared goals and perspectives:

> In the network, where representatives from both municipal and private centres participate, we have collaborated to produce an ECEC quality handbook. (. . .) This handbook is a kind of operationalization of quality development efforts in our centres.

Several of the municipal informants stated that this cooperative and trustful professional community of head teachers had to some extent helped to reduce the need for quality audits. As the following quote illustrates, municipal ECEC authorities viewed audits addressing centre quality as challenging because of the wide-ranging and ambiguous regulations:

> We have tried to make audits and related guidance part of quality development as well. But it is hard to find anything that breaches the regulations when the issues involved are inexact or intangible. We have investigated practices regarding child participation, but this is very difficult and is too easily reduced to subjective judgement. What practices here are outside the law? Participation can be understood in several ways, and it is not understood in the same way by all the centres.

The municipalities held that sharing experiences and mutual learning in networks with "*a strong cooperative culture*" and a "*collaborative climate among the centres*" helped to prevent non-conformances. One informant noted that "*centres that share their experience of non-conformances in the network enable others to learn from their mistakes*".

Informants from both the municipalities and provider organisations referred to disagreements and conflicting interests between the authorities and private providers, especially when it came to the calculation of private centre funding. Factors such as transparency, the honest admission of mistakes, and the prompt correction of errors emerged as municipal strategies used to promote trust and cooperation during recurring conflicts. Municipal informants "*make efforts to keep discussions about conflicting interests out of those arenas dedicated to sharing quality development initiatives*". In one municipality, where the majority of ECEC centres were privately owned, the ECEC authority has had to establish a cooperative QCDN climate from scratch:

> When I started this job, municipal and private ECEC centres were in competition with each other. They were unwilling to share their experience, and private providers had a strained relationship with the municipal ECEC authority. We have devoted a lot of time and effort to show that "we want the best for you", even if our role occasionally requires us to make unpopular decisions.

How private providers experienced local ECEC quality governance

Regarding interaction with the municipality, the smaller provider organisations all emphasised issues of uncertainty and disputed calculations related to annual centre funding. These issues strained their relationship with the municipality. One centre owner, who was also its head teacher, felt that it wasn't "*regarded as appropriate to bring these questions up with the municipality, such as in situations where they had made calculation errors*". However, the interviews also revealed how small, private providers' resource dependency on municipalities included professional support and access to quality development programmes:

> As small private providers, we often find ourselves in situations where we have no one to turn to for professional advice.

> We do not have a large budget to fund quality and competence development. The municipality has contributed and has shared its resources, so we have saved a good deal of money in the last couple of years.

Usually, single-centre provider managers were unable to provide leadership support to their head teachers in terms of ECEC quality development. Lobbying and discussion with the municipality over issues such as operating conditions and funding were conducted by Board members, while the planning of centre quality and competence development were delegated to the head teachers who attended the QCDNs. The Board Chairs of the parental cooperatives, where parents take turns as Board members, themselves recognised that "*ECEC competence is not at its highest on the Boards of this kind of centre*". However, in terms of ECEC provision, they also referred to the municipality as "*our most important ally*", a "*key supporter*" and the "*client*", noting that

the municipality "*facilitates for private ECEC providers, enabling us to run our centre as we do*". Although once having been approached by an ECEC corporation, one parental cooperative Board Chair had "*found no reason to sell our centre*".

The two corporate ECEC providers, on the other hand, referred to their elaborate internal systems employed to facilitate quality development and assessment. They emphasised the strong links established between quality and government policies, how these were implemented in their centres, and how they offered support to head teachers. Although their internal quality systems and didactic models were distinct, both providers had gradually redirected their focus towards ECEC process quality. They called for "*a more systematic approach to enhancing it*" and expressed a need for definitions regarding "*what high ECEC process quality is and what characterizes good relations*", as well as "*a more precise quality assessment tool*". A quality manager at one of the corporate providers held that "*we need criteria for determining what good ECEC process quality is. I don't think it would do any harm if the Directorate of Education provided that. After all, they have clear opinions on several other issues*". This might reduce uncertainties in quality assessments made at a distance from individual centres, and might also be consistent with more resource-efficient quality assurance.

One of the corporate providers argued that "*large differences in competence levels between the municipal ECEC authorities*" represented the principal challenge to ECEC centres in terms of quality development. The provider claimed that, especially in the smaller municipalities, "*municipal ECEC authorities link their work to personal practices and opinions and to how they think a centre should be run, without actually referring to relevant sources*". Both of the corporate providers left dealing with local expectations to their head teachers. One of them referred to handling municipal requests for the use of certain quality assurance programmes and tools as a "*balancing act*" between professional autonomy and "*the needs of provider organizations accountable for centre quality*". The other provider pointed out that while "*each centre has to refer to municipal guidelines*", head teachers should not be expected to conduct "*several different analyses*". Rather, "*if the municipality is very keen on us using specific tools, we can by all means apply them and integrate them into our own systems later*".

Discussion

The nature of isomorphic pressure in QCDNs

In the QCDNs that we investigated, municipal network leaders acted as policy implementation intermediaries resembling the "school advisers" described by Birbili and Myrovali (2020). In line with national policy, network leaders communicated expectations that individual centres plan and implement continuing quality and competence development activities. Efforts were made to encourage private ECEC centres to take part in coordinated quality development across centres. Some municipal authority informants overtly questioned the legitimacy of small private providers, referring to their limited organisational and professional resources, and suggesting that participation in QCDNs may compensate for this. In terms of quality development efforts, the municipal informants referred to ambiguities in the formal guidelines and regulations, pointing out the significant discretionary scope available to provider organisations. This

was highlighted as contributing towards complicating the municipal auditing of centre quality, possibly indicating a desire for measurable quality standards at local governance level. However, most of the ECEC authorities interviewed tended to emphasise strategies for building trust, consensus, and social capital among network members. Moreover, they actively shield their networks from controversial issues such as private centre funding. In some cases, the resulting social capital-based cooperation and coordination may substitute for centre audits. We believe that this connects to a discourse on ECEC quality as being contextual, political and dynamic, rather than general and standardised (Gotvassli, 2020).

Coercive isomorphic pressure within the QCDNs seems to interact with preschool teachers' need for arenas that promote professional cooperation, support and development (Scott, 2008). These will also facilitate normative isomorphic pressure. The head teacher of a small private centre often has no internal sparring partners on strategic and leadership issues in the field of quality development. Both municipal and private provider informants note that the content of shared programmes is actively negotiated and defined within the networks under the guidance of an ECEC official who is also a qualified preschool teacher. Shared professional norms and values across organisations prepare the ground for collaborative quality development across the different centres.

In terms of the key drivers of local isomorphic pressure, two distinct models stand out. The largest municipality makes significant efforts to avoid confounding its roles as ECEC authority and provider organisation. Its approach in dealing with private providers leans heavily towards supervision, guidance and, not least, the looming threat of centre audits. As a result, coercive isomorphic pressure is more prominent, but guidance is still anchored firmly in key professional norms and aiming at achieving a common understanding. In contrast, the approach adopted by the smaller municipalities seems to involve a deliberate combination of the ECEC provider and authority roles on quality development issues. The integration of head teachers in shared and professionally co-created quality enhancing projects facilitates normative isomorphic pressure among professionals across organisational boundaries (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Scott, 2008). However, the central position of ECEC authorities, combined with the generous sharing of resources with participating private providers in these municipalities, serves to expand the resource dependency that is key to coercive isomorphic pressure.

The existence of non-mandatory QCDNs, encompassing both public and private centres in 90% of Norwegian municipalities (Haugset et al., 2019), points to the existence of isomorphy in ECEC quality governance practices. In the majority of municipalities investigated, the QCDNs appear to represent a shared function rather than homogenous practices, involving a closer integration of private providers into the municipal welfare provision project than that required by existing legislation. This is achieved through voluntary cooperation, resource sharing, consensus building and gentle persuasion to comply with agreed practices. This network governance approach (Røiseland & Vabo, 2016) is tied to a perception of ECEC quality as dynamic, complex and contextual, rather than standardised and measurable (Gotvassli, 2020).

The fact that most head teachers participate in networks, is in itself a degree of centre leadership practice isomorphy. Small, private providers display isomorphic practices in

this regard, but head teachers from ECEC corporations often exhibit the same. Our analysis sheds no light on in-house ECEC centre quality development practices. Nevertheless, it does indicate that the professionalism and social capital-based communities inherent in the QCDNs serve to restrict the discretionary scope available to private ECEC providers regarding quality development strategies at their centres. The outcome is a juxtaposition of quality development practices that usually encompasses most centres.

QCDN isomorphic pressure and private provider strategies

In the majority of municipalities investigated, we have been unable to identify the provider organisations' role as prescribed in policy documents (see for instance Ministry of Education and Research, 2017b, p. 12) as a mediator between municipal ECEC authorities and head teachers in the fields of quality and competence development. Instead, it is the head teachers participating in the QCDNs who liaise between private providers and the municipal ECEC authorities. This common adaption, although isomorphic, is a response to quite dissimilar challenges facing private providers (Deephouse, Bundy, Tost, & Suchman, 2017; Haugset, 2023; Selznick, 1996). Small providers are keen to ally themselves with the municipality in order to obtain the resources, as well as the professional and financial support, they need to meet expectations regarding quality development in an organisational field revolving around this common endeavour. The Boards of the parental cooperatives and sole proprietorships are painfully aware that they lack the skills to support centre development processes. For them, an invitation to join QCDNs offers access to the resources they lack, as well as the supportive professional network needed by their head teachers. The municipal and collegial support offered by the QCDNs may even represent an alternative to mergers with the larger ECEC corporations.

In contrast, the quality assurance managers at the two ECEC corporations are investing significant professional and financial resources in quality development strategies for implementation across their centres. These strategies are anchored in the broad and ambiguous government guidelines, but also represent the corporations' perspectives on quality development within the discretionary scope allowed by formal regulation. In terms of preschool teachers' expectations of professional autonomy, the two corporations leave it to their head teachers to decide whether they will participate in local professional networks. The centres have to comply with their corporate quality standards, but the managers interviewed also recognised the significance of catering to municipal ECEC authority expectations. Post-hoc adaptations are made to ensure that locally shared practices fit in with their own systems. From the managers' point of view, participation in QCDNs seems to represent something resembling a legitimising ceremony (Meyer & Rowan, 1977) rather than an opportunity to obtain access to unavailable resources. This is corroborated by the fact that they also question the municipalities' professional competence, dismissing the stances taken by the municipal ECEC authorities' as "private opinions" lacking "relevant sources". Both managers call for clearer and/or more stringent government guidelines on ECEC process quality that would limit discretionary scope when it comes to municipally-coordinated and shared local adaptations of ECEC quality development. This is in line with formal feedback provided by Norwegian ECEC corporations in response to governmental ECEC policy propositions (Haugset, 2021a).

Conclusion and implications

The guidance, support, and social capital-based strategies employed by the municipalities to level-up and coordinate ECEC policy implementation across provider organisations also serve to integrate private providers. The network governance approach identified in our analysis requires governmental discretion at municipal level, combined with a view that ECEC quality should be democratically anchored, context-sensitive, and open to local adaptation. On the surface, this seems to yield a high degree of isomorphism among centres when it comes to quality development. Nevertheless, our findings also indicate that existing governance structures, despite appearing to be successful in terms of integrating and coordinating ECEC provision, may come under pressure. Private providers assign different meanings to network participation. The smaller, traditional, private providers still turn to the QCDNs for support and access to essential resources. They are willing to trade an opportunity for discretionary action that they lack resources to exploit, for participation in the co-creation of shared programmes and practices. However, this collaborative approach also reduces, without actually eliminating, the discretionary scope of the larger and more resourceful private providers to efficiently define and adapt ECEC quality development within their own organisations.

In response, the investigated corporate ECEC providers react by conforming to local norms, while at the same time demanding more stringent national guidelines to curb what they perceive as a problematic variance in the quality development approaches adopted by the municipalities. Successful municipal coordination of local ECEC provision appears to act to incentivise corporate providers to initiate institutional change (Mahoney & Thelen, 2009) that focuses on more centralised ECEC quality government configurations (Haugset, 2021a). The same local structures that hamper internal streamlining also serve to enable this institutional change agency. This is because in an organisational field focused on enhancing and levelling up centre quality (Haugset, 2023), municipal variance in quality development expectations, guidance and practices, may provide excellent arguments for a more stringent national standardisation of ECEC quality. Hence, one consequence of the ongoing consolidation of private ECEC provision into large corporations may be to change dominant conceptions of ECEC quality and how it should be governed, implemented and developed. This may reduce the influence of the municipalities and local democracy.

In a theoretical light, our analysis shows the significance of looking beyond the presence of structuring institutional forces, and into how these forces are dealt with by the heterogeneous set of actors that is influenced by them. In our case, the structuring theoretical concepts of isomorphic pressure, and a seemingly stable local field isomorphism of practices, are linked with an impetus for endogenous and gradual institutional change agency (Beckert, 2010; Mahoney & Thelen, 2009). Empirically, we consider our strategic sample to be sufficient to demonstrate the occurrence and significance of such variations, but neither the whole variety of pressure/response dynamics, nor the full extent of their detailed operation at the interactional micro-level through networks and other arenas have been fully considered. Tracing these dynamics back to specific aspects of the issue of quality or the context of reform as major prerequisites is also outside the scope of this

paper. Finally, since this paper merely uses ECEC quality as an issue where the governance strategies that interest us are played out, we have not discussed concepts of quality and quality development as such. Nor have we addressed potential drift in the welfare mix and in the make-up of the public-private partnership in the ECEC field. All these would be fruitful questions for future research.

Note

1. These practices imply that the municipalities use the scope available to them within legislation to split the authority as well as the provider roles in separate parts assigned to different persons. This keeps the local authority's contested (Askim, 2013) formal centre quality auditor role apart from the municipal provider role as well as the local authority more general quality advisor role. At the same time, it enables divisions of work that help ensuring local QCDN leadership by a trained preschool teacher even when the local authority belongs to another profession.

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Disclosure statement

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