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Class-based preschool enrolment - social stratification and quality differences in the Swedish preschool market

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ABSTRACT

In this article, we analyse overarching patterns of social stratification in, and quality differences between, Swedish preschools. Drawing on a Bourdieusian social classification scheme, we evidence in what type of preschools different social groups enrol their children in, and to what extent Swedish preschool children encounter different levels of quality at municipal, for-profit and non-profit providers in the preschool market. The analysis employs individual register data from Statistics Sweden covering all families in Swedish preschools for the year 2019. This comprises information on approximately 510 000 children and 122 000 unique families. We use descriptive statistics, looking at over- and under-representation in enrolment patterns of 38 social groups along with quality indicators of different providers in terms of preschool size, teacher and staff ratio and the level of teachers with Swedish background. Results from this total population analysis of Swedish preschool enrolment reveal indicators of particular class practices, where upper- and middle-class families are overrepresented in both for-profit and non-profit preschools in contrast to working-class families. Simultaneously, private providers may not always deliver high standards of structural quality, which clouds the image of how quality is viewed by parents in general, and by upper- and middle-class families in particular.

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Introduction

Early childhood education and care (ECEC) has grown exponentially around the world in recent decades, with preschool functioning as a tool for supporting family life and parents' participation in the labour market and education. In addition to this, children's attendance at preschool has been attributed to later school success and increasing equality (Dietrichson, Lykke Kristiansen, & Nielsen, 2018; e.g.; The Public Health Agency of Sweden, 2017). Developments in the preschool sector have led to a discourse concerning quality, giving rise to regulations on, for instance, the number of children per teacher and building size. Moreover, many countries have prioritised the implementation of preschool curricula and the professionalisation of staff (e.g. OECD,

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2019). While the discussion on early childhood education predominantly focuses on aspects of quality and equal access to the service, few studies pay attention to the extent to which enrolment in ECEC is associated with structural matters of social stratification and the diversity of preschools. Instead, research on social stratification has mainly focused on compulsory and upper-secondary schooling, where school markets tend to be more established (Felouzis, Henriot-Van Zanten, & Maroy, 2013; Forsberg, 2018; c.f.; Lubienski, 2003).

Sweden offers a captivating case for examining a well-funded public ECEC sector in which private actors operate. Whilst being publicly subsidised, the preschool system has been open to profit-driven private providers since the 1980s and was a forerunner to the wide-ranging Swedish deregulation and marketisation of the whole school system that began in the early 1990s (Westberg & Larsson, 2020). In 2009, a voucher system was implemented, allowing parents to choose between privately and publicly run alternatives without cost implications. Parents need to pay a small fee for their children to attend preschool; however, there are no price differences between institutions, with the majority of the financing allocated by the municipalities. In addition to cost regulations, all preschools, both privately and publicly run, must follow the national preschool curriculum, take children of all ages, follow regulations for the distribution of places, and have regulated opening hours (Education Act [Skollag], 2010). Nevertheless, they possess a degree of autonomy in forming their organisation and utilising their public funding. Thus, this distinctive context provides an opportunity for investigating the potential impact of marketisation on preschool enrolment and social stratification in a publicly funded system where there are no direct cost differences between providers. Additionally, it allows for examining the interplay between socially structured choice practices and preschool quality.

Despite the early introduction of publicly funded private providers, there has been little discussion on preschool choice, market initiatives, and social inequalities regarding preschools in Sweden. The debate has instead concerned insufficient access and quality (cf. Samuelsson & Sheridan, 2009), even though the Swedish preschool system is generally perceived as egalitarian. Since the introduction of the voucher system, public statistics from *The Swedish Agency of Education* (Skolverket) indicate that the number of privately-run preschools increased by 3% and publicly run preschools decreased by 4.5% between 2012 and 2019. The share of children attending a privately-run preschool rose from 13% in 1997 to 21% in 2019. Yet, little is known about how this consumer-oriented approach to ECEC affects equality at a structural level, i.e. which social groups opt for for-profit or non-profit private providers and the distinctive quality characteristics associated with these preschools.

Previous research has demonstrated that school choice, along with housing inequalities, contribute to the segregation in schools at both compulsory and upper secondary levels (cf. Brandén & Bygren, 2022; Forsberg, 2018; Yang Hansen & Gustafsson, 2016). In the realm of preschool education, recent studies illustrate a predilection among parents with higher education to opt for preschools attended by children whose parents have similar educational backgrounds. This preference often manifests in an inclination towards privately run preschools, particularly those driven by non-profit objectives (Alm Fjellborg & Forsberg, 2023).

Today, in Sweden, as in most countries, we lack essential structural knowledge on the extent of social stratification in children's preschool environments – a far-reaching institution that lays the foundation for the social and institutional structure of children's socialisation processes. However, recent studies have begun to shed light on the preschool and neighbourhood segregation gap in the Scandinavian context, indicating a potential transformation in our current understanding of this issue (Alm Fjellborg & Forsberg, 2023; Drange & Telle, 2020; Fjellborg & Forsberg, 2022). These studies offer new insights into social inequalities related to housing and preschool enrolment by examining socio-economic characteristics at an aggregate level within neighbourhoods and preschools. These characteristics include factors such as income, educational attainment, and national origin. To further explore the complexities of these segregation patterns, it is crucial to take a more detailed, disaggregated approach. This will allow us to acquire more nuanced insights into how these segregation patterns are influenced by the propensity of different social groups to opt for certain types of preschool providers.

This paper analyses overarching enrolment patterns in Swedish preschools, considering social stratification across different geographical levels and discerning disparities in quality between municipal, for-profit, and non-profit providers. More specifically, we pose two interrelated research questions: 1.) To what extent do different social groups enrol their children in a preschool managed by the municipality, a for-profit, or a non-profit provider? 2.) To what extent do preschool children encounter various levels of quality in municipal, for-profit, and non-profit providers? The study focuses on enrolment patterns across various preschool providers, considering socio-economic class, and analyses the associated quality characteristics of providers. This approach provides valuable insights into the dynamics of segregation within preschool settings, enhancing our understanding of social stratification in the ECEC context.

We begin by briefly describing the Swedish case's particularities and then turn to previous research on social stratification and the quality of preschools. Subsequently, we discuss our theoretical point of departure, elucidating how it is operationalised in our use of data and methods. The result section begins with an analysis of the overarching social enrolment patterns across different providers and geographical scales based on a Bourdieusian classification scheme of social groups deriving from the households' highest occupation. In the following step, we provide an overall picture of how different providers are characterised regarding the quality indicators of preschool size and the staff composition children encounter once enrolled. In the final section, we examine the results and discuss our findings with previous research.

Swedish preschool enrolment

In the wake of the voucher reforms in upper-secondary, compulsory, and preschool education, the number of private actors in the Swedish educational market has increased. This has especially been the case since the mid-2000s, mainly in metropolitan areas and larger cities (e.g. Forsberg, 2018; Rönnberg, Lindgren, & Lundahl, 2019). Hence, choosing a preschool has emerged as a pivotal first step in families' educational strategies, providing them with the opportunity to choose a desirable social context for their children. Consequently, preschool choice significantly impacts the social

structuring of children's upbringing in Sweden. Official data shows that in 2019, 510,578 children attended preschools in Sweden, divided among 9,733 preschools that typically comprise multiple smaller groups. Preschools accept children from one to five years old, and about 85% of children in this age range currently attend preschools. The share of children increases by age, with around 95% of all 4- to 5-year-olds enrolled in preschool.

Parents pay a nominal fee for preschool services. However, these costs are heavily subsidised, meaning families pay a maximum of three per cent of their household income, a fee much lower than in many other European countries (Penn, 2014). Moreover, there is a fee cap of around 146 Euros per month. From the age of three, children are legally entitled to attend preschool for 525 hours a year without fees, which means that the overall cost for parents is reduced.

The majority of preschools in this publicly supported system are run by the municipalities. However, private organisations can also establish preschools, including foundations, businesses, and cooperatives. The municipal voucher system distributes financial resources to private and municipal preschools, meaning there are no cost differences for parents regarding the type of preschool they opt for.

In the context of preschool choice, parents in Sweden have the option to indicate their preferences for which preschool their child attends. However, the extent to which parents are actually allocated their first choice depends on various factors such as demand and the number of places available in the preschool. It is important to note that while many parents receive their first choice, there are also situations where parents are assigned an alternative preschool.

Literature on social stratification and quality of preschools

Regarding previous research on social stratification concerning preschool and childcare choice, important research was conducted in the English context in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Holloway (1998), who studied two socio-economically distinct neighbourhoods, showed that childcare choices made by parents, typically mothers, were framed by distinct socio-geographic mothering cultures. Similar conclusions were presented by (Vincent & Ball, 2006), even when focusing solely on the middle classes. They found that parental choices for childcare vary from place to place and within different fractions of the middle class. These differences can be attributed to the geographical characteristics of neighbourhoods and the prevailing cultural norms and social dynamics that shape child rearing practices in childcare markets characterised by social segmentation. Therefore, different forms of childcare opportunities and choices are stratified and closely linked to families' social and economic assets, constituting a key arena for class reproduction (Ball, Vincent, Kemp, & Pietikainen, 2004). Many subsequent studies in different countries support these findings (cf. Bosetti, 2004; Grogan, 2012). However, a recently published study from Finland, focusing solely on preschools as they are the dominant form of ECEC, reveals that parents' expressed attitudes towards the choice of public or private preschools do not correlate with socio-economic status. Instead, parents' choices seem to be chiefly associated with levels of education, where highly educated parents are more prone to choose a private rather than a public preschool (Ruutiainen, Räikkönen, & Alasuutari, 2023).

Research from various academic disciplines suggests that providing a high-quality and nurturing preschool environment is essential. There is good evidence that participation in preschool contributes to children's cognitive and socio-emotional development (D'Onise, Lynch, Sawyer, & McDermott, 2010), with the effects more noticeable among children from socio-economically disadvantaged families (van Huizen & Plantenga, 2018). In a publicly financed system, as in Sweden, preschool enrolment is the first step of institutionalised early childhood socialisation that paves the way for developing a broad spectrum of skills and attributes, such as linguistic skills, norms and values (e.g. Frankenberg, Garces, & Hopkins, 2016; Garcia & Weiss, 2016).

Research in Sweden and other national contexts has investigated the repercussions of school choice on social stratification in schools and broader society. These studies elucidate how parents' opportunities to choose between different types of schools contribute to school segregation, amplifying the effects beyond those attributed to residential segregation alone. Marketisation policies, including the introduction of private actors in the publicly funded school market, have affected levels of segregation in preschool (Alm Fjellborg & Forsberg, 2023; Drange & Telle, 2020), compulsory school (Brandén & Bygren, 2022; Yang Hansen & Gustafsson, 2016), and upper secondary school (Fjellman, 2019; Söderström & Uusitalo, 2010). However, there is limited knowledge regarding parents' choices of different preschool providers and what may drive those choices, such as the quality of preschools, their location, or parents' social networks – especially regarding large-scale research. There are a few studies that show how preschool is a significant source of formal and informal information about future school choices (Karlsson, Löfdahl, & Prieto, 2013; cf.; Perez Prieto, Sahlstrom, Calander, Karlsson, & Heikkila, 2003), which suggests that social segregation at preschool feeds into later school segregation.

Turning to possible drivers of preschool enrolment and children's outcomes, the notion of quality is central to previous research. Research indicates that quality levels are unevenly distributed, with children from households with low education or migration backgrounds being more disadvantaged in this respect (Bainbridge, Meyers, Tanaka, & Waldfogel, 2005; Stahl, Schober, & Spiess, 2018). Moreover, there is evidence that the social composition of children in preschool influences cognitive development (Bainbridge, Meyers, Tanaka, & Waldfogel, 2005; Dearing, McCartney, & Taylor, 2009). This underscores the potential impact segregation may have on children's outcomes. Simultaneously, opinions are divided on how to measure and evaluate quality in preschools. Should the emphasis be placed on educated teachers and group size, or quality related to pedagogical and cognitive processes such as the interaction between children and staff (cf. Drange & Rønning, 2020; Vetenskapsrådet, 2015)? According to Persson (2020), it is fruitful to perceive these as different but often interrelated aspects of quality, where the first perspective focuses on the structural quality that frames the operation of preschools, which is simultaneously a prerequisite for the more process-oriented perspective on quality related to the interaction that takes place in preschool. Studies on children's outcomes in terms of the benefits of quality find that the structural aspects of quality are vital and that more staff, male staff, and educated staff have a positive impact on children over time (Bauchmüller, Gørtz, & Rasmussen, 2014; cf.; Drange & Rønning, 2020). In this paper, we will focus on some of the structural aspects of quality shown in previous studies to impact children, and describe to what extent children encounter various levels of quality in different preschool providers on a national level in Sweden.

To build on the previous research focusing on segregation patterns (cf. Alm Fjellborg & Forsberg, 2023; Drange & Telle, 2020) or children's outcomes, we provide a disaggregated analysis of the enrolment patterns of multiple social groups to various types of providers in a national preschool system and show to what extent children encounter different levels of quality in their preschool settings. Thus, this paper contributes with empirical data and a comprehensive sociological analysis of preschool enrolment patterns on different geographical levels and evaluates this across several quality indicators.

Theory, methodology and data

Our analyses build on individual register data from Statistics Sweden concerning all households with children enrolled in preschool in 2019. When analysing the social enrolment, we use data from one cohort of households that comprises information on 122 999 households. For the subsequent analyses of quality indicators, we use the entire population of all children aged one to five enrolled in preschool 2019, which equates to 510 578 children. The choice of using one cohort in the first part of the analysis is to avoid counting families with several children multiple times. Moreover, the aim is to analyse household choices rather than all children's encounters with the preschool system, which is the main driver for the subsequent analysis. However, we acknowledge that children's age is important for how choices are made and discussed in families. Table 1 provides descriptive data on all children in Sweden, broken down by age, Swedish and foreign background, and by the proportion of preschool enrolment. This shows that the preschool system is used by the vast majority of households with children, even when children are quite young.

To gain high precision in the analysis of social differences in preschool enrolment, we employ a social classification scheme that derives from the Bourdieusian tradition of investigating social groups that occupy different positions in relation to one another in social space based on their volume and composition of various assets (Bourdieu, 1979, 1987; Flemmen, 2013). The specific social classification scheme that we employ, first developed by Broady and Palme (1989), is based on occupations, education, and employment sector and is built on register data from Statistics Sweden and modifications of administrative classifications of occupations deriving from the International Standard Classification of Occupation 2008 (SSYK/ISCO-08). The scheme has been used, developed, and modified over time by various Swedish scholars in the sociology of education (Broady & Börjesson, 2008; Forsberg, 2018; Waddling, Bertilsson, & Palme,

Table 1. Descriptive data on enrolment by age and background.

Age and background	Number enrolled	% of all children in population
Age 1–3		
Total	285,567	78.60
Swedish background	213,558	79.00
Foreign background	70,037	75.50
Age 4–5		
Total	235,583	95.30
Swedish background	175,001	95.80
Foreign background	58,503	90.70

Source: based on data from The Swedish National Agency of Education.

2019). Our modification of the social groups builds on these previous studies and denotes 38 distinct social groups that enable us to differentiate between the social positions of, for example, art workers, chief execute officers, physicians, primary school teachers, and trained and non-trained workers. More precisely, we have conscientiously aggregated 429 subgroups in the Swedish Standard Classification of Occupations (SSYK2012) into 38 occupations. The classification is derived from the hierarchical order of SSYK2023, which considers job assignment, work experience, and qualification level. To delineate horizontal variations and create a hierarchical order between professions, we utilised variables that account for employment sector, educational level, and field of study. The guiding principle for grouping different occupations derives from the idea of achieving maximum homogeneity and distinctiveness from other constructed groups considering their social, cultural, and economic resources. By focusing on the preschool enrolment patterns of different social groups, which can be understood as their dispositions played out as strategies, we can provide an overarching picture of how different social groups' dispositions of the preschool system unfold.

The Bourdieusian approach adds an analytical dimension to the interpretation of our statistical outcomes that highlights the relation between the institutions of preschools, their characteristics, and the dispositions and class-based practices of different social groups in the preschool market (Bourdieu, 1977; cf.; Forsberg, 2018). In addition to the social classification, we stratify the enrolment patterns by geography, building on a classification of municipalities from The Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (SALAR). In our analysis, we aggregate the original nine geographical levels into four levels: *National level* (full population), *Metropolitan* (Stockholm, Gothenburg, Malmö with suburban areas), *Large city* (Large cities and municipalities near major cities), *Small city/Rural* (Smaller towns and rural municipalities). The classification of municipalities is based on population count, population density, commuting patterns, and economic indicators, among other aspects.

Regarding the different types of preschool providers, we have developed a classification that derives from combining Statistics Sweden's variables on the *Legal form of the provider* [Juridisk form] and *Organisational form* [Organisationsform], which enables us to distinguish between *Municipal*, *For-profit*, and *Non-profit* providers. Municipal providers account for all preschools managed by the municipalities, For-profit providers include management by limited companies, trading companies, and incorporated associations that are not parent or staff cooperatives, and Non-profit providers gather registered faith communities, limited companies, and incorporated associations registered as a parent or staff cooperative. We argue that this classification best accounts for providers' different approaches to the local school market.

Departing from these social and geographical classification schemes, we use descriptive statistics to reveal the over- and under-representation of the 38 different social groups' enrolment patterns across four geographical levels. Following this, we turn to indicators of the quality of preschools discussed in the previous research section.

When choosing indicators of structural quality, we follow Drange and Rønning (2020) but also consider what Swedish parents tend to value according to a survey from the Swedish National Agency for Education, 2013 which indicates that parents, besides proximity from home, tend to value staff ratio and children's group size. Thus, based on our available data, we developed measures of the size of the preschool in terms

of the total number of children enrolled and the children's group within preschools, two ratios that measure the number of staff and teachers respectively per every ten children, and the share of staff with Swedish background. The final indicator of quality derives from research hypothesising that children from ethnic minority backgrounds benefit significantly less from a higher proportion of ethnic minority staff than ethnic majority children (Bauchmüller, Gørtz, & Rasmussen, 2014). However, we also anticipate that the share of staff with Swedish backgrounds might impact Swedish language acquisition (SOU, 2020).

The rationale and technicalities of these quality measures are more thoroughly addressed in the result section. However, a consistent thread in our quality analyses of providers is our adherence to the logic of enrolment patterns, investigating the extent to which children encounter varying levels of quality across different providers. The figures we provide on the size of preschool and children's groups, staff and teacher ratios, and staff with Swedish background are on an overarching level and do not consider the importance of the local context, such as the neighbourhoods' demography, communications, and local labour market conditions for ECEC staff. However, when departing from the full population data, we argue that these patterns still provide an important general picture of differences between the character of the providers children encounter regarding the quality of preschools.

We aim to provide an analysis that gives insights into the different measures of quality and how these relate to different actors in the preschool sector in Sweden. This type of structural quality frames the conditions for preschools' everyday operations and is pivotal to enabling high equality in Swedish preschools (cf. Vetenskapsrådet, 2015). In addition, we take each quality measure and use these as dependent variables in OLS-regressions. We control for social class fraction, type of municipality, and type of provider to increase our knowledge of the relation between preschool characteristics and the different quality measures.

Social groups' preschool enrolment patterns by occupation, provider, and municipality type

With the classification of occupations as the measure for social groups, Figure 1 shows enrolment patterns to different preschool providers (municipal, for-profit, and non-profit) on four geographic scales (national level, metropolitan areas, large cities, and small cities and rural areas). Incorporating multiple geographic levels enhances this particular analysis by mitigating the unequal geographic distribution of certain professions and the specific differences within occupational groups that are geographically rooted. Additionally, it reveals the uneven distribution of the different forms of providers.

Patterns of enrolment are presented in Figure 1 as the ratio of over or under representation of each occupational group in the types of preschool on each geographic level. In addition, the general shares of the distribution of each occupational group in the types of preschools are represented numerically. The calculation of ratios considers the size of social groups by measuring the degree to which the share of an occupational group in each form of preschool compares with the share the group comprises in the wider population on each geographical level. Whilst the lowest possible under

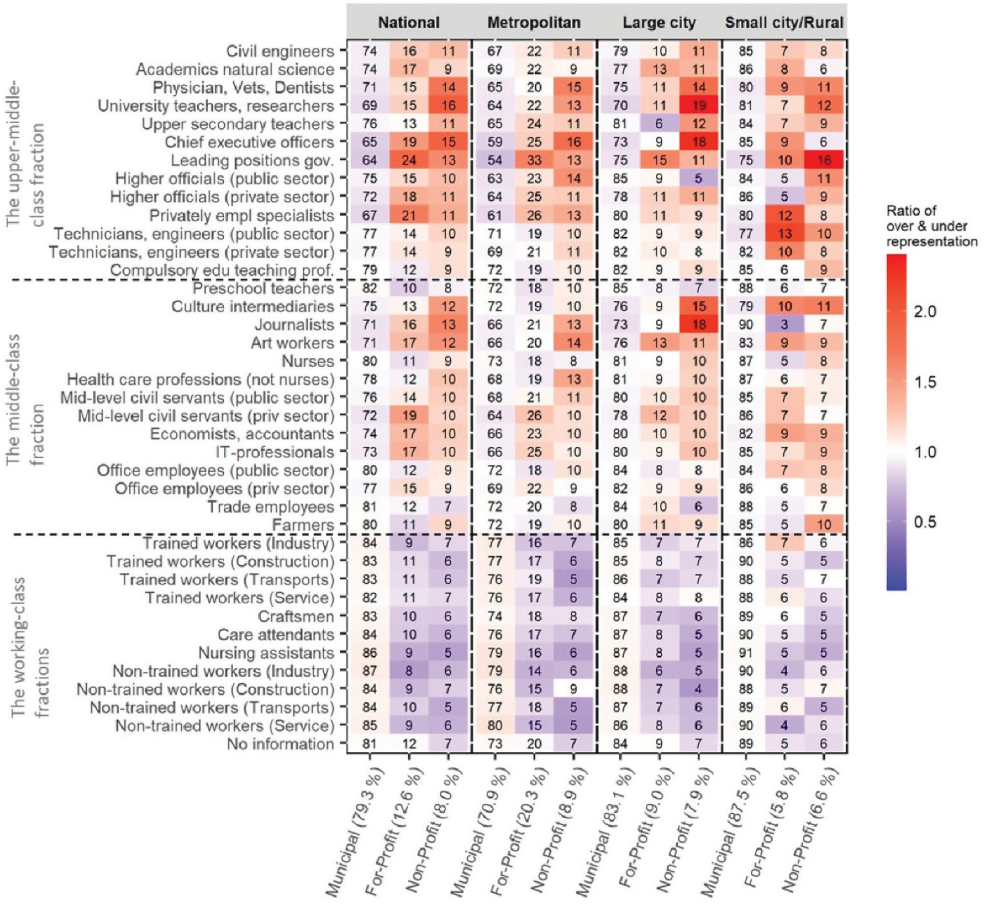

Figure 1. Heatmap displaying the 38 social groups' enrolment patterns by provision and geographical levels, in Sweden 2019. The ratio of over and under-representation is displayed in colours and shares of the occupational groups in numbers. The lower margin's heading shows the provider and share of the total population enrolled.

representation is 0.0, ratios of overrepresentation are not limited. Values below one indicate an underrepresentation, and those above an overrepresentation. The strongest ratio of under representation is 0.6, which is non-trained workers in construction in non-profit preschools in large cities. The highest overrepresentation is amongst leading positions in government in non-profit preschools in small cities and rural areas, which have a ratio of 2.4, i.e. 2.4 times as common as expected from an even distribution.

In the heatmap, occupational groups form three broad social class fractions based on income and education levels as well as sector of employment (Bourdieu, 1979). The upper section gathers the occupations of the upper-middle-class fraction, while the middle and lower sections gather the middle-class and working-class fractions, respectively. Demarcating the borders between class fractions is far from simple, especially when working with administrative data (Bourdieu, 2018, pp. 15–29). To overcome some of these difficulties, we have prioritised educational level when distinguishing

between the different class fractions. In Figure 1, the occupational groups are thus ordered hierarchically according to the average educational level of each occupational group.

The analysis predominantly compares the three social fractions; however, certain occupational groups are also referred to when they deviate from the more general patterns. Hence, we simultaneously explore enrolment patterns between the class fractions and unveil distinctions within them. The heatmap illustrates some rather clear differences between the three broad social fractions and their preschool enrolment patterns. Even when it comes to municipal preschools, which is the preschool type that has the lowest levels of under- and over-representation, patterns emerge. Occupational groups belonging to the working-class fraction tend to be overrepresented in municipal preschools, as indicated by the orange hues, whilst the purple colouring of the occupations making up the middle and upper-middle-class fractions illustrates their underrepresentation. Despite both the middle and upper-middle classes being typically underrepresented in this type of preschool, the underrepresentation is more substantial amongst the upper-middle class fraction. On an aggregated level, one can deduce that the higher the social position, the less inclined families are to opt for municipal preschools for their children.

There are, however, some exceptions to this pattern. Amongst the middle-class fraction, the compulsory education teachers, preschool teachers, nurses, health care professionals, office employees, and mid-level civil servants working in the public sector are not so clearly underrepresented compared to other occupations in this social fraction. A possible explanation for this could be related to the nature of their work, which is typically within the public sector and thus suggests an inclination towards the public sector over the private.

The patterns of over- and under representation are reversed when it comes to for-profit and non-profit preschools; occupational groups in the working-class fraction are typically found underrepresented in these types of preschools, whilst the middle and upper-middle-classes are overrepresented. Again, whilst both the middle and upper-middle-class fractions exhibit similar patterns, i.e. they are both overrepresented in for-profit and non-profit preschools, on a group level, the overrepresentation is higher amongst the upper-middle-class fraction. Indeed, nearly all the occupational groups found overrepresented in this type of provision are those belonging to the middle and upper-middle classes, with a few exceptions of some working-class occupations in small cities and rural areas, which may indicate towards particular socio-geographic parenting cultures (Holloway, 1998). Qualitative studies concerning parents' preschool choices show that the middle classes believe that one should make active choices (cf. Karlsson, Löfdahl, & Prieto, 2013). Thus, in the marketised Swedish preschool context, where choice is frequently framed as being between public (municipal preschools) and independent (for-profit and non-profit), an active choice might take the form of not opting for a municipal preschool.

The preschool type with the highest over or underrepresentation ratio is non-profit preschools, where parental cooperatives comprise the lion's share. The upper-middle-class fraction is most overrepresented in these preschools. A possible explanation for this can be the reported search amongst resource-strong families for provision with

high levels of parental involvement (Perez Prieto, Sahlstrom, Calander, Karlsson, & Heikkila, 2003). Moreover, given the limited number of these preschools, serving only 8.9% of children in metropolitan areas, 7.9% in large cities, and 6.6% in small cities and rural areas, the overrepresentation amongst the middle classes and especially upper-middle classes may stem from these groups' propensity and capacity to travel longer distances. This was confirmed in a study examining preschool commuting patterns in metropolitan areas (Fjellborg & Forsberg, 2022).

Concerning the enrolment patterns between for-profit and non-profit preschools, a discernible relationship emerges between families' sector of employment and their choice of preschool. Several middle and upper-middle-class occupational groups are distinguished by whether they work in the public or private sector. Despite these groups having similar educational and economic resources, there is somewhat of a tendency amongst public sector workers to be more overrepresented in non-profit than for-profit preschools, albeit with some geographic differences. Other occupations characterised by more significant numbers of public sector workers support this, such as the occupational groups of compulsory education teachers, nurses, and health care professionals. However, with the geographic context seemingly influential, the explanation for these patterns demands further investigation.

To summarise, the patterns of enrolment to different preschool providers indicate that preschool choices are class-based. Those belonging to the middle and upper middle- classes are more inclined towards for-profit and non-profit preschools than the working classes, even when the geographic context is taken into consideration. However, whilst the hierarchical differences in economic and educational resources explain the patterns on a general level, it is also apparent that the parents' employment sector may relate to distinct choices.

So, does it matter which type of preschool provider children are enrolled in? The next step is to provide an overall picture of how different providers are characterised in terms of quality concerning the size of preschool, staff and teacher ratios, and the share of staff with Swedish backgrounds that children encounter once they are enrolled.

Children's encounters with quality

As discussed in the section on methods and data, how to measure the quality of preschools is debated. In the following analyses, we focus on the structural aspect of quality and try to capture differences, on an overarching level, in providers' resource allocation and recruitment patterns. On a national level, we will compare municipal, profit-driven, and non-profit-driven preschools by examining the shares of children receiving various aspects of structural quality concerning the size of preschool and children's groups, teacher and staff ratios, and the share of staff with Swedish backgrounds.

Enrolment patterns concerning the size of preschools and children's groups

Figure 2 a-b displays the share of children attending small, average, and large preschools in terms of the number of children per preschool (Figure 2a) and the number of children per group (Figure 2b). The measure of these entities of size departs from the extent to which preschools deviate from the mean, which is 70.7 children per preschool

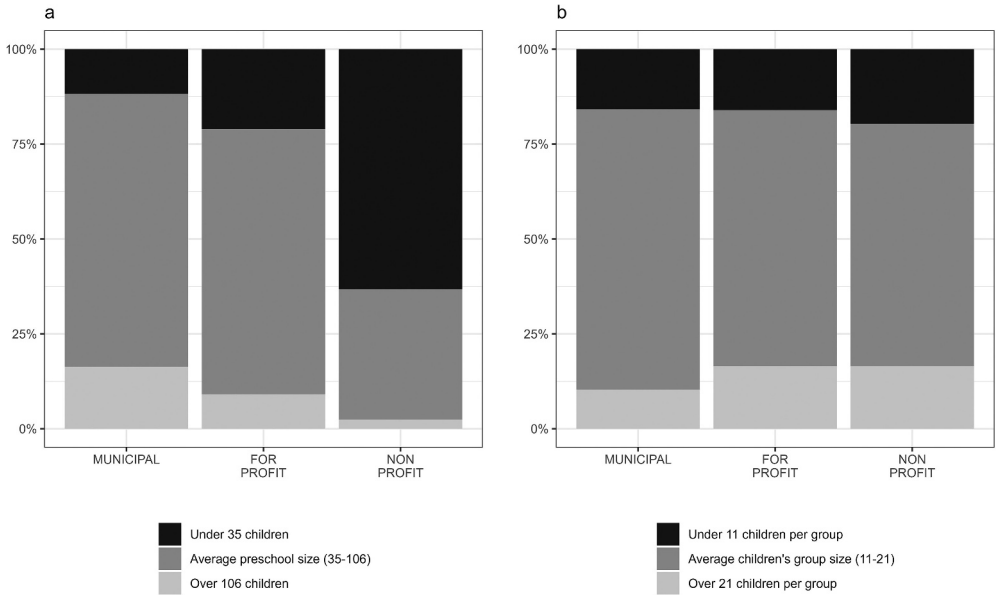

Figure 2. a – b. The share of children in small, average and large preschools (Figure 2a) and groups (Figure 2b) by the provider, Sweden 2019.

and 16.3 children per group of children [*barngrupp*]. In the analysis, we have grouped children who attend a preschool that deviates more than one Standard deviation (SD), negatively or positively, into groups characterised by a small or large number of children in the preschool or the group, respectively. Children in preschools that deviate less than one Standard deviation from the mean are allocated to the category of average-sized preschools.

To begin, the category of average-sized preschools in Figure 2a shows that there is a large variation in the size of preschools that span from 35 to 106 enrolled children. This category is most prominent among municipal and for-profit providers, while non-profit providers tend to run smaller operations. The majority of children who attended a municipal preschool, 71.9%, attended an average-sized preschool. The equivalent figures for the share of children attending average-sized preschools of a for-profit and non-profit provider were 69.9 and 34.4%, respectively. The vast majority of children in non-profit providers, 63.2%, went to a preschool with less than 35 children. The same figure for municipal and for-profit providers was 11.8 and 21.1%, respectively. The share of children who attended a large non-profit preschool was only 2.4%. It was more common for children to attend larger preschools, with over 106 children, among municipal and for-profit providers, 16.3 and 9.1%, respectively.

In general, there are differences in the enrolment patterns related to the preschools' size. Municipal preschools, which most children in Sweden attend, were typically larger operations, while for-profit providers were more heterogeneous regarding the size of preschools. Non-profit providers were primarily small preschool operations. As displayed by the correlations from the OLS-regression in Table 2, preschool size does not seem to correlate with social groups. Instead,

Table 2. OLS – dependent variable: number of children per preschool.

Term	ß	*SE*	*t*	*p*	95% CI
Intercept	75.3010098	0.21	359.56	<.001***	[74.89, 75.71]
Upper middle classes (ref. = middle classes)	−0.0512136	0.31	−0.17	.869	[−0.66, 0.56]
Working classes (ref. = middle classes)	−0.3847631	0.23	−1.67	.094	[−0.84, 0.07]
Metropolitan (ref.= Large cities)	5.1235509	0.24	21.24	<.001***	[4.65, 5.60]
Small city/Rural (ref.= Large cities)	−7.9830902	0.28	−28.87	<.001***	[−8.53, −7.44]
For-profit (ref. = municipal)	−12.8904863	0.32	−40.03	<.001***	[−13.52, −12.26]
Non-profit (ref. = municipal)	−38.7655753	0.38	−101.09	<.001***	[−39.52, −38.01]

Note. Source: Authors' calculations using data from Statistics Sweden.
Multiple R-squared: 0.1076, Adjusted R-squared: 0.1076
* p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001.

Table 3. OLS – dependent variable: number of children per group in the preschool.

Term	ß	*SE*	*t*	*p*	95% CI
Intercept	16.139	0.03	521.89	<.001***	[16.08, 16.20]
Upper middle classes (ref. = middle classes)	−0.043	0.05	−0.95	.341	[−0.13, 0.05]
Working classes (ref. = middle classes)	−0.330	0.03	−9.72	<.001***	[−0.40, −0.26]
Metropolitan (ref.= Large cities)	0.678	0.04	19.05	<.001***	[0.61, 0.75]
Small city/Rural (ref.= Large cities)	0.085	0.04	2.08	.037*	[0.01, 0.17]
For-profit (ref. = municipal)	0.483	0.05	10.17	<.001***	[0.39, 0.58]
Non-profit (ref. = municipal)	0.136	0.06	2.41	.016*	[0.03, 0.25]

Note. Source: Authors' calculations using data from Statistics Sweden.
Multiple R-squared: 0.007465, Adjusted R-squared: 0.007408
* p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001.

municipal and preschool types seem to be influential. Urban preschools tended to be larger, and rural preschools smaller. Private preschools, in particular, non-profit providers, were smaller.

When examining children's group size, we observe similar enrolment patterns as with the overall size of the preschools, with the mean of children's groups being 16.3 children. However, the differences between municipal, for-profit, and non-profit providers were less pronounced regarding the children's group size, especially in groups with fewer than 11 children. Of the children who attended a non-profit preschool, 19.6% were enrolled in a children's group with less than 11 children. The corresponding figures for municipal and for-profit providers were 15.8 and 16.1%, respectively. Being in a group with more than 21 children was just as common in for-profit as in non-profit providers, 16.5%, respectively, while the share of children in larger groups among municipal providers was somewhat smaller with 10.2%. the OLS-regression (see Table 3) displayed that larger group sizes are found for the middle class, especially in metropolitan areas and in for-profit preschools.

In summary, children enrolled in municipal preschools generally attended larger preschools than children in for-profit and non-profit preschools. Those who attended a non-profit preschool were significantly more likely to be enrolled in a smaller preschool than those in a municipal or for-profit preschool. Differences between providers regarding children's group size were less striking. Nevertheless, children in municipal preschools had a lower probability of being in a large children's group than those attending for-profit and non-profit preschools.

Adults-to-child ratios in preschools

Previous research indicates that staffing levels are crucial in preschools as they impact a preschool's possibility to meet curriculum intentions, support children's learning and knowledge formation, and ensure the safety of children (cf. Pramling Samuelsson, Williams, & Sheridan, 2015; Skolinspektionen, 2014). To measure this aspect of quality in preschools, we developed two adult-to-child ratios, one concerning the entire pedagogical staff and the other regarding trained teachers. Both ratios are based on calculations of the staff's working hours, which means that, for example, two teachers working 50% equals one full-time teacher. Even the hours that managers/principals [chefer/rektorer] spend working with the children are included in the ratios. The teacher ratio accounts for all teachers with either permanent or temporary contracts. In contrast, the staff ratio solely considers those with permanent contracts, aiming to mitigate the impact of preschools' volatile situation with temporary staff in the measure. The variables are the number of equivalent full-time staff and teachers divided by the number of children at the preschool multiplied by ten to retain a ratio of staff/teachers for every ten children.

In Figure 3(a,b), the ratios of staff and teachers are grouped by the same principle of standard deviations as applied to the calculation of the preschools' and children's group sizes. The only difference is that we only allow a 0.5 SD divergence from the mean when we measure the staff and teacher ratios since overall variation in these ratios is low. In this case, the calculation gives us three groups that display to what extent children's enrolment at different providers is associated with various staffing and teacher levels in preschools.

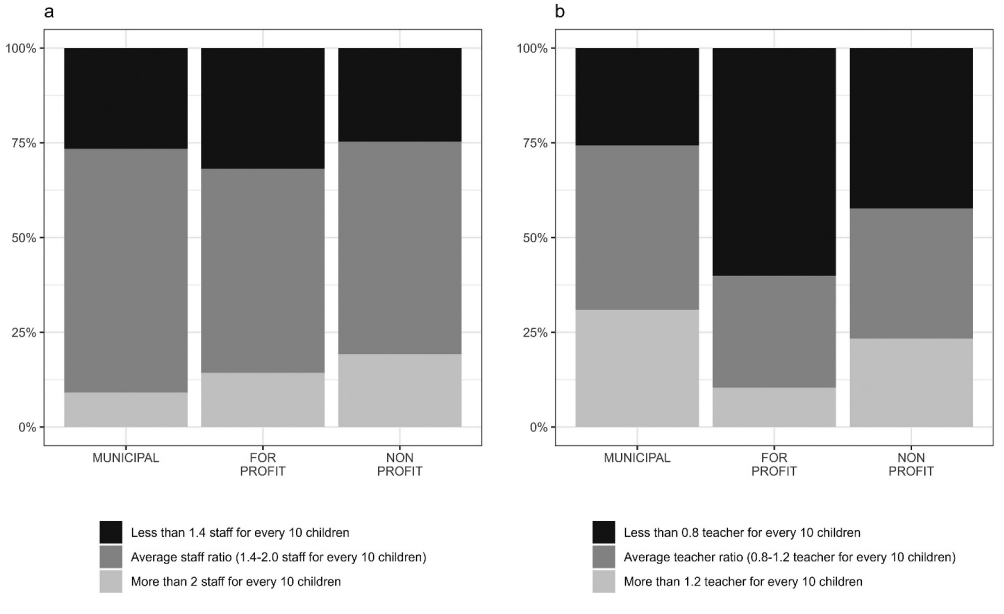

Figure 3. a – b. The share of children enrolled in different preschool providers by staff ratio (3a) and by teacher ratio (3b), Sweden 2019.

Table 4. OLS – Ratio of number of staff for every 10 children.

Term	ß	*SE*	*t*	*p*	95% CI
Intercept	1.609	0.00	843.19	<.001***	[1.61, 1.61]
Upper middle classes (ref. = middle classes)	−0.000	0.00	−0.07	.944	[−0.01, 0.01]
Working classes (ref. = middle classes)	0.005	0.00	2.78	.005**	[0.00, 0.01]
Metropolitan (ref.= Large cities)	0.018	0.00	8.26	<.001***	[0.01, 0.02]
Small city/Rural (ref.= Large cities)	0.025	0.00	10.10	<.001***	[0.02, 0.03]
For-profit (ref. = municipal)	0.003	0.00	0.91	.365	[−0.00, 0.01]
Non-profit (ref. = municipal)	0.0147	0.00	4.06	<.001***	[0.01, 0.02]

Note. Source: Authors' calculations using data from Statistics Sweden.
Multiple R-squared: 0.001662, Adjusted R-squared: 0.001593
* p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001.

Table 5. OLS – dependent variable: ratio of number of teachers for every 10 children.

Term	ß	*SE*	*t*	*p*	95% CI
Intercept	1.179	0.00	563.53	<.001***	[1.17, 1.18]
Upper middle classes (ref. = middle classes)	0.002	0.00	0.65	.517	[−0.00, 0.01]
Working classes (ref. = middle classes)	−0.011	0.00	−5.15	<.001***	[−0.02, −0.01]
Metropolitan (ref.= Large cities)	−0.229	0.00	−95.06	<.001***	[−0.23, −0.22]
Small city/Rural (ref.= Large cities)	0.063	0.00	23.06	<.001***	[0.06, 0.07]
For-profit (ref. = municipal)	−0.215	0.00	−62.00	<.001***	[−0.22, −0.21]
Non-profit (ref. = municipal)	−0.173	0.00	−43.05	<.001***	[−0.18, −0.17]

Note. Source: Authors' calculations using data from Statistics Sweden.
Multiple R-squared: 0.2078, Adjusted R-squared: 0.2077
* p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001.

Examining the average staff ratio category in Figure 3a, reveals that children typically encountered a staffing level ranging from 1.4 to 2.0 staff for every ten children. However, there were differences between providers regarding the share of children who received a high or low level of staffing. Among the children who attended non-profit providers, 19.2% received a ratio of more than 2.0 staff for every ten children, while the corresponding figures for municipal and for-profit providers were 9.1 and 14.2%, respectively. For-profit providers had the highest proportion of children (31.9%) with low staffing levels (less than 1.4 staff for every ten children), compared with 26.6 and 24.7% for municipal and non-profit providers, respectively. Overall, children met a variety of staffing levels, but they were more likely to encounter high staffing levels in for-profit and, especially, non-profit preschools. Simultaneously, for-profit providers also had the highest share of children in preschools with low staffing levels. The OLS-regression output (Table 4) also adds to our understanding; staff ratios seem higher in small cities and rural areas when controls for social groups and type of provider are added.

A slightly different picture emerges when we narrow our focus to examine only the enrolment patterns related to the ratios of trained teachers (Figure 3b). There is less variation in the average category of teacher ratio, 0.8 to 1.2 teachers per every ten children. However, the share of children (30.9%) who attended a municipal preschool were more likely to be in a preschool with a high ratio of teachers than children attending for-profit and non-profit providers (10.4% and 23.3%, respectively). It was more common for children to meet low teacher ratios in for-profit (60.1%) and non-profit (42.3%) preschools than for those who attended a municipal preschool (25.7%). The OLS-regression (Table 5) indicates a lower teacher ratio in metropolitan areas and larger cities even when controlling for class fraction and type of provider.

In summary, both for-profit and non-profit preschools seem to prioritise the number of staff over the number of trained teachers to a larger extent than municipal preschools. This priority is most noticeable among for-profit providers, where 60% of their children were enrolled in preschools with a low teacher ratio. In the final step, we examine the extent to which children encounter staff with a Swedish background.

Enrolment patterns concerning staff with Swedish background

In 2018, the Swedish Government appointed a committee to review how children's Swedish language development can be strengthened in preschool, especially for newly arrived migrant children. Summarising research on preschool equality, the committee points to the importance of Swedish language skills among staff and that preschools with a majority of children with foreign backgrounds have considerably lower shares of teachers with a teacher training diploma than the national average. Furthermore, the lack of sufficient mastery of Swedish seems to be a particular problem among untrained staff, who also tend to lack in-depth knowledge of the preschool's curriculum. Simultaneously, the committee stresses that multilingualism should be seen as a pedagogical asset but that the multilingual staff must have adequate training and, in addition to their mother tongue, have well-developed Swedish language skills (SOU, 2020). Therefore, we will inquire to what extent children enrolled at different providers encounter staff with Swedish backgrounds. We acknowledge that whether someone has a Swedish or foreign background is an insufficient measure of their language skills and, therefore, should only be interpreted as an indication of the staff composition regarding the possibility of having Swedish as a first language. In defining Swedish background, we apply the classification recommended by Statistics Sweden, which defines Swedish background as being born in Sweden with one or two native-born parents.

Here, we apply a different principle of grouping than previously, as we are interested in the relationship between the staff with Swedish and foreign backgrounds. Hence, we measured the share of staff with Swedish backgrounds based on full-time equivalents and then divided these into three equally large groups based on the total number of preschool children. In other words, a third of the preschool children population is found in each group. This gives us a broad indication of the extent to which preschool children experience a high, medium, or low share of staff with Swedish backgrounds. The equal grouping identifies one category in which less than 76% of the staff have Swedish backgrounds, one mid-category in which the share of staff with Swedish background was between 76 and 92%, and one category in which more than 92% of the staff have a Swedish background. The mean share of staff with Swedish backgrounds was 79.3%.

In Figure 4, these groups are stratified by different types of providers. At non-profit preschools, 46.5% of the children attended a preschool in which more than 92% of the staff had a Swedish background. The corresponding figure for those attending municipal preschools was 33.6%, while the same figure for children enrolled in for-profit preschools was only 22.1%. Simultaneously, the latter type of provider had the highest share of children (45.9%) enrolled in preschool with under 76% share of staff with Swedish background. The corresponding figures for municipal and non-profit providers were 32.2 and 26.0%, respectively.

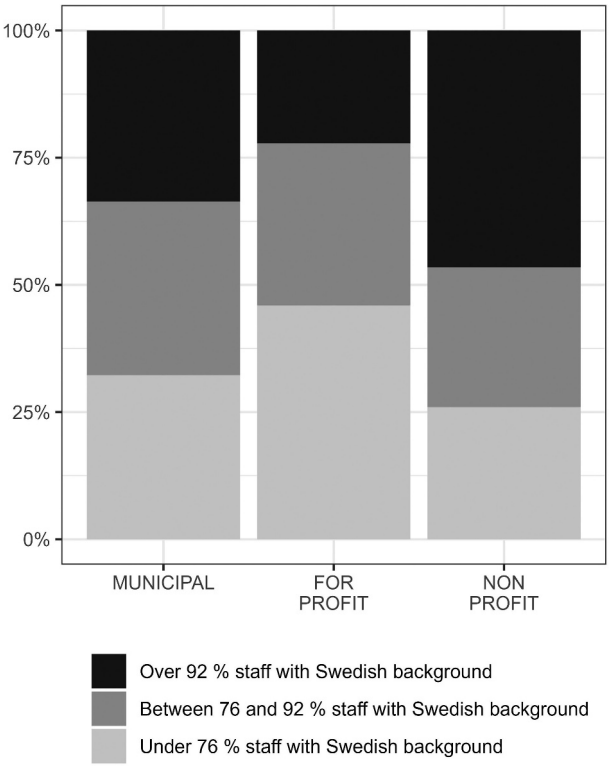

Figure 4. The share of staff with Swedish background, by preschool type, Sweden 2019

In summary, children in municipal and non-profit preschools met, to a large extent, staff with a Swedish background. In contrast to municipal and non-profit providers, children at for-profit preschools were more likely to attend a preschool with a lower share of staff with a Swedish background. OLS-regression results (Table 6) strengthen this picture even when controlling for the type of municipality and social fractions.

Table 6. OLS – dependent variable: the share of staff with Swedish background at the preschool.

Term	ß	*SE*	*t*	*p*	95% CI
Intercept	87.190	0.11	784.31	<.001***	[86.97, 87.41]
Upper middle classes (ref. = middle classes)	−0.165	0.17	−1.00	.318	[−0.49, 0.16]
Working classes (ref. = middle classes)	−4.086	0.12	−33.27	<.001***	[−4.33, −3.85]
Metropolitan (ref.= Large cities)	−16.442	0.13	−127.65	<.001***	[−16.69, −16.19]
Small city/Rural (ref.= Large cities)	7.205	0.15	48.67	<.001***	[6.92, 7.50]
For-profit (ref. = municipal)	−2.138	0.18	−11.59	<.001***	[−2.50, −1.78]
Non-profit (ref. = municipal)	4.164	0.21	19.70	<.001***	[3.75, 4.58]

Note. Source: Authors' calculations using data from Statistics Sweden.
Multiple R-squared: 0.254, Adjusted R-squared: 0.254
* p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001.

We now proceed to our conclusions, where we discuss the overarching picture of quality and resource allocation characteristics amongst different preschool providers in relation to the social enrolment patterns highlighted in the heatmap.

Conclusions

In this paper, we have examined and analysed overarching enrolment patterns in Swedish preschools, focusing on social stratification across geographical levels and general differences in quality between municipal, for-profit, and non-profit providers. Our findings indicate that patterns of enrolment in the various types of preschools are class-based, despite there not being any direct cost differences between providers. Families from the middle and upper middle classes are more likely than those from the working class to attend both for-profit and non-profit preschools. However, while hierarchical differences in economic and educational resources can account for the patterns at a general level, it is apparent that the sector of parental employment is also associated with particular preferences. This suggests a divide between culturally and economically orientated class fractions (cf. Forsberg, 2018; Palme, 2008; Poupeau, François, & Couratier, 2007). Notably, social groups employed in the public sector exhibited a stronger preference for non-profit providers.

The patterns of preschool quality that children encounter between different providers show that children who attended municipal preschools were generally enrolled in larger preschools than children in for-profit and non-profit preschools. Meanwhile, children in non-profit preschools were much more likely to attend smaller preschools and children's groups than those in municipal or for-profit preschools. Moreover, for-profit and non-profit preschools prioritised the number of staff over the number of trained teachers to a greater extent than municipal preschools. When examining teacher ratios across providers, children enrolled in for-profit preschools were more likely to have a lower teacher ratio and a higher proportion of staff with a foreign background than those attending municipal preschools. In non-profit preschools, children also encountered a lower teacher ratio than in municipal preschools but were simultaneously more likely to meet staff with Swedish backgrounds than children in both municipal and for-profit providers.

Drawing on previous research on schools' market strategies (cf. Forsberg, 2018; Lloyd & Penn, 2014; Penn, 2014), the patterns of recruitment of staff and teachers indicate different incentives driving providers' participation in the preschool market. The municipality is responsible for providing ECEC to their citizens, answering to the taxpayers and aligning more closely with national political aims for preschool, possibly explaining their higher teacher ratios in their preschools. For-profit providers, on the other hand, have a primarily commercial interest. Even if this does not necessarily contradict taking a civic responsibility, shareholder profits are important. Non-profit providers, often operated as parent cooperatives, answer mainly to the parents who enrol children and manage the preschool. Families in a parent cooperative might not necessarily value quality in terms of a teacher with adequate training. Our analysis indicates that these parents may instead emphasise other aspects of the staff's qualities, such as having a Swedish background and possibly social skills since they employ and are responsible for staff. All three types of providers have incentives to reduce costs and use their resources efficiently, but for different reasons.

In line with findings from previous research (Ruutiainen, Räikkönen, & Alasuutari, 2023; Vamstad, 2016; cf.; Vincent & Ball, 2006), we conclude that the market incentives

of different providers corresponded with the class-based practices that the social stratification in the enrolment patterns display. Parents from the upper middle-class and middle-class tended to prefer private alternatives, even though they do not necessarily provide high standards of structural quality in terms of permanently employed staff and teacher ratios. Working-class families, on the other hand, were enrolled in municipal preschools to a greater extent than the other social fractions, meaning they were more often encountering higher teacher ratios. Concerning the size of preschools, where smaller preschools are known to be preferred (cf. The National Agency for Education, 2013), the working class was disadvantage in this respect. They were more often enrolled in larger preschools, while the middle and upper-middle classes were more frequently associated with smaller preschools. This may suggest that ECEC choices may be driven by parenting cultures, which give rise to divergent preferences of structural quality (Holloway, 1998).

Previous research has shown how preschool enrolment patterns are shaped by where families live and the supply of providers in the local preschool market (cf. Alm Fjellborg & Forsberg, 2023; Fjellborg & Forsberg, 2022). Our study provides a detailed picture of how preschool enrolment is related to social groups' class-based practices. Our findings somewhat contradict, or at least nuance, previous research on the ECEC childcare market, which suggests that the Scandinavian countries are often perceived as providing a public good regarding services and infrastructure (Lloyd & Penn, 2014). What we have shown, is that children are not encountering equal ECEC-experiences concerning various forms of structural quality. Instead, ECEC markets function as an arena for social stratification, where class-based preferences are manifested and influence the forms of quality children receive. Thus, while earlier research findings displaying social, ethnic, and geographical differences in recruitment to different providers, we also point to an uneven access to quality. In this respect, our findings shed new light on how the processes of marketisation in the Swedish preschool system (Rönnberg, Lindgren, & Lundahl, 2019; Westberg & Larsson, 2020) undermine equitable and universal access to quality for all children.

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