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# “We help Germany create greater equality.” Logics and rationales in exporting ‘Scandinavian’ early childhood education and care

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## ABSTRACT

This study targets hitherto largely understudied empirical processes and activities through which certain ideas and imaginaries are being commercialised and used by corporate actors in the global Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) industry. The aim is to analyse and critically discuss representations of the Scandinavian ECEC regime in the context of ECEC export. This is achieved empirically through a case study of a Swedish education company and its expansion in Germany, as well as by devoting analytical attention to the social, political and fantasmatic logics in the processes that constitute and characterise the “Scandinavian ECEC offer” as it is being exported. The analysis draws on corporate documents, websites and interviews with top-level company representatives. The analysis highlights how the Scandinavian ECEC regime is made up of four interlinked elements; equality, the autonomous child, integration of care and learning and outdoor pedagogy, aligned and sustained by “gripping” and “sticking” forces in fantasmatic logics that hide contingencies. In summary, the powerful imaginary of the Scandinavian ECEC regime, bringing accessibility, social justice, gender equality, nature, democracy, children’s rights and autonomy, serves to conceal the political and ideological dimension of the economic logic of capitalism.

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## Introduction and aim

There is growing interest in education delivery and services from commercial actors and one manifestation of such interest comes in the form of international chains operating schools and/or early childhood education and care (ECEC) services in multiple nations. On the expanding international ECEC market we find global actors such as Babilou Family, Creches de France and Grandir. In this ECEC segment of the “Global Education Industry” (Verger, Steiner-Khamsi, & Lubienski, 2017), Nordic corporate actors also take an active part. For example, Norwegian businesses own and operate ECEC centres in countries such as Sweden, Finland, Germany, Poland, Latvia, Hong Kong, South Africa, and Dubai. A central point of departure in the following is that commercial actors – their expansion and

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operation – both mirror and promote certain imaginaries of (good) education, learning, students and teachers (Parreira Do Amaral, Steiner-Khamsi, & Thompson, 2019). Such commercial ECEC activities thus represent particular imaginaries of not only past and present but also of futures – imaginaries of what has been and is about to come. Hence, such private ECEC actors have a performative role in what ECEC has been, is and should be. As these actors move across the globe, they carry and promote certain ideas, for instance of what constitutes “good ECEC service”, “future-ready child” or “successful pedagogy”.

In the following, we will explore the (commercialised) fantasies of ECEC and how opportunities become opportunities through what we label as export of the Scandinavian ECEC regime – a regime made up of particular social practices and imaginaries. In recent decades, the Scandinavian and the Nordic<sup>1</sup> have increasingly been used for commercial branding due to (often but not only) positive connotations in the non-Scandinavian domain (Marjanen, Strang, & Hilson, 2021; Marklund, 2017). Even if Scandinavia and its geographical boundaries, administrative entities, and ideational constructs are fluid and contested, it provides a powerful imaginary of a “we” with certain traits in relation to its “others” (c.f. Rönnerberg & Hinke Dobrochinski Candido, 2023). As Nordic commercial education actors expand internationally and export their ECEC services, what we label as a Scandinavian ECEC regime becomes re-instituted in new national and local contexts. It becomes embedded in, and a part of, business strategies and branding with implications for imagined futures within capitalist dynamics (Andersen, 2020; Beckert, 2016). Still, we know little about the empirical processes and activities through which such ideas and imaginaries are being commercialised and used by corporate actors in the global ECEC industry. Even if there is a growing literature on the role of commercial actors in education (Au & Ferrare, 2015; Ball, 2012, 2019; Hogan & Thompson, 2021; Moeller, 2020; Parreira Do Amaral, Steiner-Khamsi, & Thompson, 2019; Verger, Lubienski, & Steiner-Khamsi, 2016), the role and function of Scandinavian commercial actors and framings has not been highlighted very much in the ECEC context. In Nordic literature on education export, the role of Higher Education Institutions as “exporters” have been highlighted, in particular in the Finnish case (c.f. Chung, 2017; Juusola & Nokkala, 2022; Schatz, 2016) but the role of private education delivery companies has received less attention. This study thus seeks to contribute perspectives from an under-studied area, the ECEC sector, and type of commercial education actor; a private ECEC delivery company.

In this article, we aim to analyse and critically discuss representations of the Scandinavian ECEC regime in the commercialised context of ECEC export. We do this empirically by focusing on a Swedish education company (“EducaCorp” (EC), a pseudonym) and its international expansion in Germany. We pay particular analytical attention to social, political and fantasmatic logics (Glynnos & Howarth, 2007) in the processes that constitute and characterise the “Scandinavian ECEC offer” as it is exported. The overall research question guiding the analysis is: *How can the export of the Scandinavian ECEC regime be understood through social, political and fantasmatic logics?*

The empirical case, EC, is a very large Swedish education company, covering pre-school to adult education services, currently operating 300 ECEC centres in four countries. The export to Germany has been selected as a particularly suitable empirical case for study in this article as EC uses and draws on the “Scandinavian” to promote

certain imaginaries of desirable futures in the context of Nordic ECEC export in their “ambition to create a new Nordic export industry” (EC, 2017, p. 7).

Next, a contextual background will introduce EC and its operations in Germany. After this, the theoretical and methodological approach is outlined and the empirical data and process of analysis is described. In the subsequent section, titled “The Nordic is really the cradle of preschools globally”, we initially analyse aspects of what and how the Scandinavian ECEC regime is constituted. We then move on to discuss the fantastic logics of the Scandinavian ECEC regime and how it aligns with commercial branding. A concluding discussion summarises the main points from the analysis.

## **EducaCorp and its international expansion**

Policies of universal ECEC coverage, mainly publicly financed through voucher systems (with income-related and relatively low maximum fees for parents), together with commercial interests allowed to operate for-profit, have created a large private ECEC sector in Sweden, and even more so in Norway (Trætterberg, Sivesind, Hrafnisdóttir, & Paananen, 2021; Trætterberg, Sivesind, Paananen, & Hrafnisdóttir, 2023). In Sweden (and in Norway) private ECEC providers follow the same rules and curricula as municipal ECEC centres and while they can offer different pedagogical profiles such as Waldorf, Montessori, Outdoor pedagogy or have more international or religious orientations many offer a more general concept. While there still are ECEC centres that are run by parent cooperatives and single ECEC centre owners, corporate groups are growing through both mergers, acquisitions and organic growth.

One of these corporate groups is EducaCorp (EC). EC established in the mid-1990s and is currently listed on the Swedish public stock exchange, Nasdaq Stockholm. The largest owner is a Swedish-based investment company with a portfolio of different businesses (EC, 2022b). EC claims they are the largest education company in Northern Europe, and the second largest education provider in Sweden after the municipality of Stockholm. The corporate group provides education services from ECEC to compulsory, upper secondary and adult education and operates close to 700 schools and ECEC centres, with almost 200 000 children and students and 20 000 teachers and staff (EC, 2021a). The EC has a multi-brand strategy and gathers education providers as independent subsidiary companies and brands in a chain structure that follows joint quality and management systems (EC, 2022a). EC is currently operating 300 ECEC centres in four countries (around one hundred in Sweden and one hundred in Norway, almost 80 in Germany and less than 10 in the Netherlands). The company’s international expansion goes back almost a decade, first by acquiring one of the largest Norwegian ECEC companies (Seedling Inc., pseudonym), followed by entering the German ECEC market. In 2020–2021 EC’s total turnover was almost 1300 million EUR and the international ECEC centres contributed about 20% to this figure (EC, 2021a).

Representing themselves as the leaders of the market “in prime position to export preschools” (EC, 2019a), they also positioned themselves as the most natural actor for market consolidation in Sweden, Germany and Norway with ambitions to continue to grow both organically and through acquisitions and further expansion in other countries as well. Countries mentioned as having high “attractiveness” besides Germany were for instance Finland, France, Poland and the Netherlands, where 10 acquisitions

were made in late 2022. Germany and France were presented as “most affected by the supply gap” and as “heavily incentivising the private sector to meet the growing demand” – making these geographies stand out as the most profitable business opportunities (EC, 2019b). Particularly in Western Germany and metropolitan areas, where traditionally childcare has been provided by religious foundations, parent and workers organisations and NGOs, ECEC places are lacking. This has become even more pronounced after the implementation of entitlement to ECEC enrolment from the age of one (c.f. Falkenberg, 2022). It is precisely in these areas in the states of Bavaria, Baden Württemberg, Berlin/Brandenburg and Nordrhein-Westfalen that EC operates where policies towards commercial actors are favourable. Commercial actors have been rare in Germany and previously were often fully funded by parental fees. Different local and regional policies and rules regarding public funding of commercial actors allow for different opportunities in different areas (c.f. Falkenberg, 2022).

While EC’s international expansion up until now has been focused on the ECEC segment of the company, other education sectors are also emerging as potential areas for continued international export. To illustrate, the EC has as of late 2022 acquired schooling and adult education services in Germany, given that “the [EC] model is internationally scalable, and a possible new acquisition would increase [EC’s] presence in Germany and open up for new opportunities for profitable growth” (EC, 2022c, p. 3).

## Theoretical and methodological approach

In this study, we turn to the political and social role of fantasies drawn from discourse theory and logics of critical explanation (Glynos & Howarth, 2007). All actions, practices, entities and social formations are inherently discursive, that is they are made meaningful within a particular discursive formation, forming a system of rules and regimes of practices (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001). Along these lines, this paper argues that Scandinavian ECEC can be conceptualised as a particular regime, made up of specific social practices, values, beliefs and imaginaries, hence inherently a radically contingent discursive construct, subject to change and transformation. In the ECEC literature, the traditional “Nordic ECEC model” is commonly associated with values such as accessibility and egalitarianism, as well as the integration of play, care, and learning, and viewing the child as an independent, active subject where adults support the child’s own development process (c.f. Andersen, 2020; Einarsdóttir, Purola, Johansson, Broström, & Emilson, 2015; Fehn Dahle, 2020). Even if there indeed are national variations in the Nordic ECEC systems (c.f. Alexiadou, Hjelmér, Laiho, & Pihlaja, 2022; de la Porte, Larsen, & Lundqvist, 2022; Kuusisto & Garvis, 2020; Trætteberg, Sivesind, Hrafnadóttir, & Paananen, 2021), Nordic ECEC has evolved from some common historical roots. In the idealtypical conceptualisation of a Nordic ECEC regime, principles of universalism and equality are particularly prominent. This goes back to the notion of the Nordics as “social democratic welfare states” (Esping-Andersen, 1990) characterised by a strong state that via taxation provide general, generous and equal access to social benefits, including child care (c.f. Andersson, 2009; Antikainen, 2006; Hilson, 2008). As pointed out by Mahon, Anttonen, Bergqvist, Brennan, and Hobson (2012), universality has been particularly important for the promotion of gender equality and women’s participation in the labour market.

Indeed, in the 1970s, a focus on working parents and mothers was a central driving force behind initial reforms in the ECEC domain. From the 1980s and onwards, the central role of the child and democratic participation etc., has gained increasing prominence on Nordic ECEC policy agendas (Karila, 2012). All in all, these historical features of the Nordic ECEC model has been appealing to other national systems in the form of policy learning and travel, as well as commercialised for export in particular ways (c.f. Andersen, 2020; Marjanen, Strang, & Hilson, 2021).

To analyse and understand what such a Nordic/Scandinavian ECEC regime is and what form it takes in the ECEC export context, including how it is being constituted, institutionalised and transformed, we turn to the conceptual tools of social, political and fantasmatic logics (Glynos & Howarth, 2007). Whereas social logics turns our focus to *what* distinguishes the Scandinavian ECEC regime as the overall characterisation, political logics focuses on the signifying practices in *how* the Scandinavian ECEC regime is being institutionalised in another national context and provides a conceptual understanding of how boundaries and limits are constituted and transformed. In the words of Clarke (2012, p. 178), “In contrast to social logics, which enable the researcher to delineate the contours of a regime or practice on a synchronic axis, political logics allow us to provide a diachronic explanation of the institution, reproduction, or contestation of a social practice or regime – how they are created or transformed”. For this endeavour, we turn to the logics of equivalence and difference as understood by Laclau and Mouffe (2001). The logic of equivalence means that the signifying space is simplified by elements being “substituted for each other with reference to a common negation or threat. That is to say, they are equivalent not insofar as they share a positive property (though empirically they *may* share something in common), but, crucially insofar as they have a common enemy” (Glynos & Howarth, 2007, p. 144). In contrast, the logic of difference refers to expansion and complexification, when differences between elements keeps them distinct, separate and autonomous (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001). Political logics allow us to analyse the processes of how the political frontiers of the Scandinavian ECEC regime is constructed, strengthened, or weakened, focusing on how certain traits are linked together to reduce the complexities and differences within them, simplifying what characterises the Scandinavian ECEC regime against what it is not. While the two dimensions presuppose each other, the focus is which one seems to dominate over the other (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001).

It is also necessary to analyse why the Scandinavian ECEC regime tends to grip subjects. Fantasmatic logics turn our focus to the forces behind the signifying practices – how “the contradictions, tensions, and other uncomfortable aspects of social reality are glossed over and obscured, in exchange for a fantasmatic vision of harmony and wholeness” (Clarke, 2012, p. 188). Hence it involves the role of fantasies, of what has been, are and about to come, in terms of both social salvation and decline. Fantasmatic logics helps us to analyse why the Scandinavian ECEC regime is reproduced, and hence defended, in practices of ECEC export. Why do some signifying practices make sense, grip, stick? The fantasies of the Scandinavian ECEC regime can, as Harling (2017) describes them, be seen as the ideological “motor” where the subjects accept the rules of specific practices. The fantasmatic logic turns our view to affect, where the ideological dimensions of the practice are viewed as natural, unquestionable, unavoidable, which tends to hide the radical contingency, which is that practices, relations, and entities can

be thought of differently. Fantasies also tend to make subjects accept contradictions and paradoxes. We will use fantasmatic logics to focus on what affective and ideological arguments are used to explain and reason about actions, and hence legitimise certain practices.

This overall lens lends us to ask the following analytical questions to our empirical case and material: What is characterising the “Scandinavian ECEC” regime in the context of EC’s ECEC export (social logics)? How is the “Scandinavian ECEC” regime constituted, transformed, and absorbed when institutionalised through Seedling Inc. in Germany (political logics)? Why do particular ideas of the Scandinavian ECEC “grip” and what makes certain fantasies “stick” in this for-profit commercial ECEC context (fantasmatic logics)?

We summarise our analytical approach in [Table 1](#) below before we describe the material to which this approach has been applied.

### Material and analysis

Different sources of empirical data have been collected and analysed. To begin with, various documents produced by the Swedish EC corporate group that in some way report or describe the companies international ECEC operations have been collected, covering the years 2014–2022. This includes company documents such as Annual Financial Reports ( $N=9$ ), Annual Quality Reports ( $N=9$ ), ECEC segment reports ( $N=2$ ), press releases ( $N=8$ ), presentation slides and a video from a Capital Market Seminar. In addition, company website materials have been harvested, including both the Swedish, Norwegian, and German corporate website versions. Such website texts, include descriptions of the education/care programme/concept and curricular content (or equivalent), with a particular focus on the original

**Table 1.** Analytical approach: logics of critical explanation.

Logic	Definition		Analytical question
Social logics	The character and contours of a social practice/regime, synchronic perspective		<i>What is characterising the “Scandinavian ECEC” regime in the context of EC’s ECEC export?</i>
Political logics	How boundaries and limits of a social practice/regime is constituted, reproduced and transformed, diachronic perspective	Logic of equivalence	<i>How is the “Scandinavian ECEC” regime constituted, transformed, and absorbed when institutionalised through Seedling Inc. in Germany?</i>
		Logic of difference	
Fantasmatic logics	The grip of ideology that hides the contradiction, tensions, and paradoxes for a vision of harmony and wholeness		<i>Why do particular ideas of the Scandinavian ECEC “grip” and what makes certain fantasies “stick” in this for-profit commercial ECEC context?</i>

Norwegian ECEC chain brand Seedling Inc. and its representation when exported to Germany.

The empirical data also includes semi-structured interviews with central EC company representatives (named Top-Level Manager 1–6). The interviews provide in-depth descriptions of EC's international expansion and operations. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed and focus on questions such as reasons for international expansion, where and how expansion took place, business and governance models, challenges, adaptations and what they bring to the new national settings, exchanges, and circulation between different ECEC centres/brands within and beyond the national contexts. Excerpts from the interviews that were conducted in Swedish or Norwegian have been translated to English by the authors. To provide more contextual information on the German ECEC context, four expert interviews were carried out with informants with expertise, for instance, in German ECEC policy and regulation, teacher union/organisation and municipal responsibilities for ECEC. Even if we do not explicitly draw on these interviews in this article, this empirical material has contributed to informing our understanding of the German ECEC context in which the Scandinavian ECEC regime seeks to connect, adapt, and embed itself, via and through the EC.

The research ethical framework on good research practice from the Swedish Research Council (Vetenskapsrådet, 2017) has been carefully followed. This includes, among other things, the informed consent of all participants, how data would be used and stored in the research project, that participation was voluntary and that each interviewee could withdraw at any time. Respondents were also informed that the company names, although replaced by pseudonyms, might be indirectly identifiable due to necessary context description of examples, sites and materials used. The interviewees were, furthermore, informed that their first- and last names would not be disclosed, and we have taken care to make sure that the position held by the respondent should not be revealed either. This means that we will use the label "Top-level manager" followed by a number to signify the respondents, and thus the more specific titles of the positions held by the interviewees are not disclosed to enhance confidential treatment of the data supplied by the company interviewees.

With the above-mentioned analytical questions in mind, that were derived from our theoretical approach, we started analysing the material by focusing on arguments for international export and on identifying elements that were articulated as distinctive of Scandinavian ECEC (social logics). We continued with analysing how these elements were linked together in logics of equivalence and difference, if articulations meant that complexification and distinctiveness were dominant or if the signifying space was simplified and what united these elements in a relation to a discursive outside (political logics). Finally, we analysed the ideological dimension of these articulations, focusing on expressed and underlying ideological arguments legitimising ECEC export and the Scandinavian ECEC regime (fantasmatic logics). The above-mentioned analytical questions also structure the presentation of the forthcoming sections, beginning with identifying what and how the Scandinavian ECEC regime is being constituted in international export. We then discuss the fantasmatic logics this entails, the gripping forces that make such fantasies stick and how they become useful in commercial branding.



## “The Nordic is really the cradle of preschools globally”

As we will see, it is no coincidence that EC targeted their ECEC segment as the main and starting focus for international expansion; a rationale that naturally follows a social logic of the market (c.f. Clarke, 2012). Justifications for the EC export endeavour include articulations that contain certain imaginaries of past, present, and future opportunities:

We want to contribute to increased gender equality, increased growth, and to more children getting a good start in life. We want to share one of the best things we have in the Nordics, our preschools. We also want to learn from other European preschool actors. With joint forces and shared knowledge, we can contribute to a more competitive Europe. (EC, 2016b)

Situating ECEC as “one of the best things in the Nordics” can be linked to a logic of competitiveness positioning the common “Nordic”, with its universalism and gender equality, as a competitive advantage in relation to the non-Nordic within Europe as well as for European competitiveness globally. As Top-level Manager 1 said: “It is primarily within ECEC we have something unique with our Scandinavian model, [...], there is something here that others imitate and demand”. Or, in other words, “The Nordic is really the cradle of preschools globally” (EC, 2019b). The Nordic or the Scandinavian model – and we should note that these terms most often are used interchangeably in our data – is thus positioned in contrast and in opposition to childcare and preschools “globally” drawing political frontiers between the “origin” of preschools (Scandinavian) and the ones imitating this origin – indicating a potential demand for such services.

Imaginaries of future markets are articulated in terms of demographic and political developments in Europe, leading to a supply gap of ECEC places that is seen as opportunities for financial growth. It is stated that millions of ECEC places are lacking in Europe. According to EC, this is a problem for European countries as, “Access to high quality preschools is crucial to a country’s sustainable development and growth” (EC, 2019b). This problem is something EC positions itself to contribute to resolve. To do that they first went from Sweden to Norway and then to the German preschool market, but that is not the only potential ECEC export destination:

In other words, there is a significant need for our services, particularly as the Nordic preschool model generates interest in more countries than we currently operate in. (EC, 2019c, p. 12)

Still, the demand for ECEC places is considered very high in Germany, especially for children between 0–3 years of age. As a result, the EC views the German ECEC market as particularly prosperous for international expansion and as a great opportunity for Germany to “benefit from the experience of the multiple award-winning Scandinavian educational model” (EC, 2021b). Three aspects are put forward as important in terms of where they are acquiring and expanding their operations in Germany in particular. One is to establish in Bundesländer who welcome commercial actors, the second in geographical areas with high shortage of supply, and the third where population density and growth is high and property development intensive (EC, 2016a). By establishing in the regions with highest growth potential and where commercial actors are welcomed,

“Germany shows short ramp-up time and low initial investments” (EC, 2019b), and “break even” is reached within the first year:

The fastest and most profitable growth is currently happening in Germany. The major shortage of capacity means that the preschools can be filled and break even within the first year of establishment. New establishments require limited investment, with the exception of Norway, and also require little or no working capital, because school voucher funding is paid by municipalities in advance. (EC, 2020, p. 24)

Continuous business development and intelligence activities take place to identify potential acquisitions and new commercial ECEC actors on the German preschool market, for instance by establishing contacts with municipalities, property developers and investors and so on (EC, 2019a). EC is positioning themselves as the legitimate actor to consolidate the German preschool market, becoming “the leading independent preschool operator” (EC, 2018a, p. 15). However, to export the Scandinavian ECEC model, a coherent and transferable educational concept was needed, and this was a central motive behind the initial acquisition of the Norwegian ECEC company Seedling Inc. This ECEC company had size, market share, brand recognition and an unique pedagogical concept, being “well ahead” in terms of concept development, including digital packaging of communication and management (Top-level Manager 1). These were all central elements in assessing this as the most suitable educational concept for exporting the Scandinavian ECEC model. As one of the interviewees explained:

[Seedling Inc.] has this more coherent concept while [Manikin, pseudonym, their largest ECEC company operating in Sweden] is more of ... well you have common, joint, mutual principles and a set of common tools you work from, but these local ECEC centres have had large opportunities to form their own concepts. We have a number of Montessori and Reggio Emilia and we have different pedagogical orientations at [the Manikin] preschools and the result is that these centres don't really have the same clear profile or concept at company level as [Seedling Inc.] has. (Top-level Manager 1)

Seedling Inc. is articulated as a “proven” and “transferable concept” with pedagogical “tools designed to ensure attractive preschools” and “tailor-made indoor & outdoor environment” leading to “competitive advantage in new markets” and “low cost of implementation” (EC, 2019b). A prominent feature in the data is this social logic of the market via competitiveness in the global economy (c.f. Clarke, 2012, p. 181). What is it that is articulated as characterising and distinguishing this Scandinavian ECEC model and how is it being constituted, institutionalised, and transformed in ECs expansion and practice in Germany?

### ***Constituting the Scandinavian ECEC regime***

In the arguments and justifications for ECEC export, and in marketing the ECEC services that Seedling Inc. offers German parents, the Scandinavian ECEC regime is constituted primarily through a logic of equivalence, simplifying the space of what Scandinavian ECEC is and should be. Four crucial elements: equality, the autonomous child, the integration of care and learning, and outdoor pedagogy are linked together

and made equivalent to what the “Scandinavian ECEC” regime is and how it thereby constructs frontiers and boundaries to that which it is not.

### *Equality*

A core element making up the Scandinavian ECEC regime is equality. The Scandinavian ECEC model is articulated as bringing equality to unequal countries and contexts. There are primarily three overall rationales linked to the equality element, namely as socio-economically, gender-based and interculturally oriented.

Firstly, ECEC services are to be financially accessible through a model where ECEC services primarily are funded by the public with relatively low fees for parents and regulated maximum payments. In addition, although EC is a commercial education business, they claim that they “shall operate, establish preschools and schools funded by the state. We shall not have purely privately financed”. (Top-level Manager 2)

The financial model we have in Norway and Sweden, with regulated maximum fees for parents regardless of whether you choose public or private preschools, it is a very good model. [...] The model contributes to social cohesion and the opposite is when you see, like in Germany, where there has been a very large part based on parental fees, but this is changing. (Top-level Manager 3)

Scandinavian ECEC is said to “bridge socio-economic gaps” and prepare for lifelong learning (EC, 2019a). With reference to research and statistics, it is argued that Scandinavian ECEC, with accessible and affordable education for all, brings both individual and societal gains in health, education, employment rates and tax revenues (EC, 2019e),

Children who have attended preschool are better than other children in language and math. Their mental health is better, and they also get fewer infectious diseases. As adults, they have higher education and higher income. (EC, 2020, p. 7)

Secondly, Scandinavian ECEC brings gender equality to Germany (and Europe), positioned as the discursive outside, where women are forced to stay at home caring for the children instead of pursuing their own careers – the opposite to the gender equal Nordic countries where “it has long been taken for granted that all children have access to a preschool place” (EC, 2018b).

The lack of preschools is very much a political issue, as this is considered to have a major impact on both gender equality and the labour market. Today, it is common for women to take career breaks to be at home with their children, something that could be changed by a major expansion of preschool education. The lack of preschools presents a great opportunity for [EC] to make a socially important contribution in Germany by offering more preschool places at high quality facilities. (EC, 2021a, p. 13)

In justifying international expansion, boundaries are drawn between the more fair, modern, liberal, and economically wiser Scandinavian ECEC model compared to the German counterpart. The Scandinavian model is articulated as:

A preschool model that suits a modern society, a society based on equality, where both women and men can work. (...) We want to contribute to more families having the opportunity to live the life they want. (Top-level Manager 1)

What we really do here is we help Germany create greater equality. We want to help increase their work force utilization. We have a high labour force utilization in Sweden. This is not the case in Germany, because it has been a very traditional division of child responsibility. We contribute to that. So, it's not just that, yes, we should make money, we're a commercial business, but we do it a little faster and a little better than many others, and the purpose is precisely to help this infrastructure grow. (Top-level Manager 2)

Thirdly, bringing equality is also positioned in relation to the ECEC practices itself as a fundamental element of what the Scandinavian ECEC regime is, promoting the brand Seedling Inc. as being the inclusive, egalitarian, “cosmopolitan” (Seedling, 2021a) and intercultural alternative for social integration on the German preschool market:

We warmly welcome all children, families and carers to our facilities and offer them equal opportunities, education and guaranteed quality, regardless of individual characteristics such as gender, social affiliation, economic conditions, origin, language, religion or special needs. (Seedling, 2021c)

We attach great importance to integration! We respect the differences between cultures, we value the origins and language of our fellow human beings, we are multicultural! (Seedling, 2021e)

Whereas equality here primarily is articulated as providing equal opportunities, by bridging socio-economic gaps and segregation and bringing gender equality, the element of equality is linked through a logic of equivalence to the element of the autonomous child.

### *The autonomous child*

The element of the autonomous child is closely linked to the element of equality, as its articulations relate to aspects of social participation, democracy, and children's rights, and as such it is linked to equality and modernity in terms of breaking down the autocratic and paternalistic relation between children and adults. Discursive frontiers are constructed between this modern view of the child, distinctive of the Scandinavian ECEC regime, and positioned in opposition to a traditional European or German preschool regime.

... there are good things in the Nordic preschool model. We consider the child, and the child's rights and the child's learning, the meeting with the child, which is completely different from how it looked like 20–30 years ago or how it looks like in other countries. The starting points are different. (Top-level Manager 5)

The autonomous child is made visible in expressions such as “Our children are co-designers of their everyday lives” (Seedling, 2021e) and “actively and autonomously shaping their everyday life with us” (Seedling, 2021e). The democratic influence of children is emphasised through articulations of hearing and meeting children's wishes and suggestions. With the view of the child as autonomous and the emphasis on children as active participants, adults are positioned as supporters, “initiators”, “advisors”, and “role models” (Seedling, 2021e) that:

... create play and learning situations every day according to the needs and wishes of the group or individual children. You carefully observe the children's play and give impulses when support and help is needed or desired. (Seedling, 2021b)

In Sweden, you create learning environments that, to a greater degree, make the children themselves discover, learn, and become active. Then you don't have to have an adult who constantly leads everything they do. In Germany you can probably say, yes it is probably a little more towards that traditional direction, but we want to roll out this more pedagogical concept and learning environment. (Top-level Manager 2)

The autonomous child, as constituted in the Scandinavian ECEC regime, is a competent and creative child where “each child is full of amazing talents and capabilities, and should be the driving force behind learning and development” (EC, 2019b), placed in contrast to a more traditional pedagogy and view of the child. The difference constructed in relation to a more traditional pedagogy and view of the child can be seen in articulations of what material and tools they have access to:

In our Swedish preschools there is an enormous range of material for children, colours, and different materials, so you won't believe it, but it's there. Otherwise, it's a lot of “you can't just put it in front of small children, it has to be locked up, put in a cupboard”. No, here it is accessible and up front for stimulating learning environments. That is a huge difference. (Top-level Manager 5)

### *Integrating care and learning*

The third element characterising the Scandinavian ECEC is the integration of care and learning, where this “holistic pedagogy” (Seedling, 2021d), is said to have developed a “world leading preschool model” (EC, 2019d) in contrast to the “many countries [that] place more emphasis on childcare” (EC, 2019a, p. 22).

The model we have in Scandinavia, of both care but also a very explicit learning perspective, a very clear curriculum, that is what differs, that it is such an emphasised learning perspective, or education perspective, in preschool. (...) Care is provided in many countries, but the fact that it is such a clear part of the education system with goals, curricula, and evaluations/assessments of actual learning in preschool (Top-level Manager 4)

This combination of care and learning, with an emphasis on learning and development, is articulated as particularly unique for the youngest children, and also linked to the previously discussed elements of equality (in terms of accessibility and entitlements), and the autonomous child (in terms of rights and the pedagogy of the child in the centre). The learning perspective is articulated as especially attractive and competitive in Germany, positioning it in contrast to unenlightened parents and a supposed traditional care regime in Germany:

In Germany, there are also young conscious parents who want the best for their children and not only a preschool that offers care and storage but also learning. Then you see the Nordics as a role model. There are some cultural differences in how you view the business and the attitudes of the staff: “what is preschool about, is it education or is it care?” (Top-level Manager 5)

The Scandinavian ECEC regime is thus constituted by drawing boundaries and frontiers towards supposedly existing cultural traditions and values of German ECEC that need to be changed. This is expressed in the need to change mindset and practice of the people in daily interactions with the children through bringing Scandinavian staff to the German ECEC centres and the use of a clear framework that follows Scandinavian educational goals. Here the brand Seedling provides a “proven”, “scalable” and

“transferable” concept, as previously mentioned. This is materialised in the Seedling Activity Cards, a support material, and standards to bring about learning and development by offering “our employees well-thought-out suggestions” for their work (Seedling, 2021e).

Even if learning (in the integration of care and learning) tends to be emphasised in contrast to a traditional care regime, the essence of the element integration of care and learning is an understanding of learning through play and everyday activities that is making up the Scandinavian ECEC regime. The competitiveness lies in “use of play as a pedagogical tool” (EC, 2016b), by careful design of facilities, what materials and toys are provided as well as a conscious reflexive practice in all everyday activities, such as:

... to pedagogically dress children, rather than to just put on their clothes, counting buttons, one, two, three, four. You do the same thing but in a conscious pedagogical way. (Top-level Manager 5)

This element of care and learning through play and everyday activities is further linked to the last element: outdoor pedagogy.

### *Outdoor pedagogy*

The final element making up the Scandinavian ECEC regime is outdoor pedagogy. This is linked to the previous elements in logics of equivalence in terms of every child’s entitlement (right to access) to nature and the outdoors, and the view of the child as an autonomous explorer that develops and learns in relation to its surroundings, where movement brings about a competent and healthy child bridging socio-economic and cultural differences. This is, for example, articulated in representations of the educational goals related to outdoor activities: “to promote the joy of discovery, identity formation and the development of physical and mental agility in all children” (Seedling, 2021e). Scandinavian ECEC is positioned as the alternative to traditional German ECEC, bringing a modern outdoor pedagogy for a prosperous future.

Seedling has a well-developed educational concept. The goal is for the children to move and spend a lot of time outdoors. A big focus is on stimulating the children’s desire and joy to discover the world around them. (EC, 2019c)

This connection to nature and the implementation of an outdoor pedagogy is seen as useful for the German preschool market, not only to attract parents and their children, but also to recruit staff:

It is very Nordic, Norwegian, you are outdoors a lot. There is a Scandinavian outdoors concept which makes it stand out and be attractive. It is easier to recruit staff and it attracts children and parents too. (...) It is the design of it all, the Scandinavian design, you get the impression that it is Norwegian-Swedish, it is very much activities outdoors, it is an outdoor pedagogy. You grow plants, you do a whole lot of excursions, different things. (Top-level Manager 2)

The daily outdoor play, regardless of weather, is constructing frontiers between the Scandinavian ECEC regime and imagined preschool pedagogy in Germany and other parts of Europe, as further expressed by another one of the managers:

In Germany, when children are picked up, they [parents] can see problems with outdoor play, 'You've *been* outside today!?' In Norway, 'You *haven't* been outside today!?' (Top-level Manager 3)

Outdoor pedagogy is further constructed as Scandinavian emphasising the use of natural materials, mainly wood, for the interior design, equipment, and toys. The ECEC centres are described as having "spacious gardens" and indoor and outdoor areas that encourage physical activity, movement and "allow climbing, crawling and pulling up" (Seedling, 2021a). So why do these ideas of the good Scandinavian ECEC tend to "stick" or "grip", what forces make certain fantasies stick in this for-profit commercial ECEC context – and how does this reproduce an imaginary of "Scandinavia"? These are issues we turn to next.

### ***Fantasies of Scandinavian ECEC on the move***

The articulation of the Scandinavian ECEC regime is reducing the complexities and differences of what ECEC is and has been in the Nordic countries (c.f. de la Porte, Larsen, & Lundqvist, 2022; Trætteberg, Sivesind, Hrafnadóttir, & Paananen, 2021). To begin with, it silences the German Kindergarten heritage from Fröbel and Schrader-Breyman, for instance, of a Kindergarten for all and a pedagogy centred in play and children's natural urge for discovery, learning and development. This heritage also includes the intrinsic value of childhood, emphasising children's participation, self-expression, initiative, and interests in reducing hierarchies between adults/teachers and children to create knowledge together and from a common starting point (Bae, 2018; Johansson, 2020; Karila, 2012; Korsvold, 2005). Our selected commercial edu-business constructs and reproduces the imaginary of the Scandinavian ECEC as the "cradle of preschools globally" and as bringing something new and unique to the German ECEC context and market, that paradoxically can be argued to rest on a German heritage and philosophy. This inconsistency tends to be accepted and seen as unquestionable and hides the radical contingency, that the modern Scandinavian ECEC regime could also be signified as a traditional German ECEC regime.

So why do these ideas of the Scandinavian ECEC grip subjects and what is it that makes them stick? The linking of equality, the autonomous child, the integration of care and learning, and outdoor pedagogy makes up the imaginary of the good Scandinavian ECEC and draws attention to the gripping forces of *equality/justice, modernity, freedom, development* (economic development, child development), and *nature*. It provides powerful fantasies of the good and healthy childhood promising all positive things in life and for the future; environmentally friendly, outdoor-oriented, and naturistic logic with a view of the child as autonomous, promising development and learning through independent exploring and creativity with care and learning for all individual differences. The images on the German Seedling website portray children outdoors, that are physically active in sunshine and rain, growing plants, surrounded by trees, flowers and greens – portrayals that strengthen the fantasy of nature and the happy innocent childhood of discovery, exploration and movement in symbiosis with nature, growing and developing children no different from other life on the planet, all symbolised with the logotype portraying a seedling. These fantasies, however, stretch even further into

the future and expressions such as, “We want our children to become colourful solid flowers when they continue the education ladder” (EC, 2019b) signals that it is not only the fantasy of a particular form of childhood but also the fantasy of future adults becoming prosperous climbing (upwards) the education ladder and later future life. Furthermore, the emphasis on learning in the integration of care and learning as a modern ECEC is related to the gripping forces of competition in education, as well as in working life, and the fear of falling behind or losing out.

The gripping and sticking of the Scandinavian ECEC regime lies not only in that it provides fantasies for a child’s prosperous future, but also encompass fantasies of salvaging parents, particularly women, enabling them to live “the life they want” by bringing “Nordic” gender equality and facilitating access to the labour market – to the benefit of the entire German economy. It echoes historical discourses and arguments for preschool expansion and availability (c.f. Karila, 2012; Mahon, Anttonen, Bergqvist, Brennan, & Hobson, 2012) that are clearly linked to work force utilisation and GDP growth through the gripping forces of gender equality, freedom, and modernity. As “world leaders” of gender equality (Markkola, 2021), the branding of Scandinavian ECEC as bringing gender equality signifies a specific type of gender equality; that of a dual-earner family model. The gripping forces of gender equality, freedom and modernity hide the radical contingency of gender equality being signified as something perceived differently and that work-family life could be thought of differently.

## Concluding discussion

Our analysis set out to explore how the export of the Scandinavian ECEC regime could be understood through social, political and fantasmatic logics. The empirical case of EducaCorp (EC) was used to highlight how the “Scandinavian ECEC offer” was represented and legitimised. The analysis identified four elements characterising the Scandinavian ECEC regime (its social logics), as it is being exported and highlighted how these were linked together in logics of equivalence, filling it with specific meanings (its political logics). We showed how this is reproducing an imaginary of Scandinavia as a prosperous, democratic, egalitarian, modern, and environmentally sustainable place (cf. Marjanen, Strang, & Hilson, 2021). The historical embeddedness of Nordic ECEC in values such as universalism and equality (c.f. Karila, 2012; Mahon, Anttonen, Bergqvist, Brennan, & Hobson, 2012) has been a forceful imaginary to draw on by the exporting ECEC company. Indeed, the export of the ECEC chain brand Seedling as the “Scandinavian offer” almost paraphrases how the Nordic or Scandinavian ECEC has been described in research and policy documents in terms, for instance, of integration of education and care with a child-centred, holistic approach that emphasises core values such as democracy, participation, autonomy and freedom (Andersen, 2020; Einarsdottir, Purola, Johansson, Broström, & Emilson, 2015; Fehn Dahle, 2020; Karila, 2012). As the “Scandinavian ECEC” becomes commercialised via the actions of corporate export actors it simplifies what ECEC is and should be and silences its German heritage for competitive purposes.

Through the analysis of fantasmatic logics we illustrated how the export of the Scandinavian ECEC regime promises harmony and salvation – how ideal and desired ECEC should be implemented in Germany through the ECEC offer by



EducaCorp – by bringing positive values ranging from being socially just and environmentally friendly and outdoor-oriented, to safe-guarding a view of the child as an active explorer, creator, and independent learner. However, not only the child but the entire nation and its citizens were drawn into the fantasies of the good and more equal future (Beckert, 2016), as expansion in Germany is articulated as salvaging parents, not least women, by bringing gender equality and facilitating access to the labour market. This is done for the benefit of the entire German economy – a strong “gripping” force indeed, further legitimised by the historical promotion of women’s emancipation and gender equality strivings that were such prominent as drivers for the development of “Nordic ECEC” historically (Hilson, 2008; Karila, 2012). These gripping forces are tied not only to desires but also to the fear of the child falling behind and losing out in the competitive game of life, as well as the fear for the nation of not falling behind in the competitive global economy (c.f. Clarke, 2012).

We argue that the powerful imaginary of the Scandinavian ECEC regime, bringing accessibility, social justice, gender equality, nature, democracy, and participation, learning and individual development, children’s rights and autonomy, hides the important political and ideological dimension of the economic logic of capitalism. Scandinavian ECEC export through commercial actors is legitimised through justifications and rationales connected to social betterment, which is used to make these (commercially delivered) practices and activities seen both natural and unquestionable. Furthermore, it promotes a certain market organisation of preschool delivery; that of publicly funded but commercially operated ECEC centres as the one-and-only solution to universal ECEC coverage, accessibility, gender equality, and growth. In summary, this study contributes to our understanding of how ECEC as a commodified trade reproduces and modifies discourses on Scandinavian ECEC and highlights the role of private commercial actors as co-creators of a particular desired future of ECEC policy and practice.

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## Note

1. In this article Scandinavia and the Nordic is used interchangeably. The preference of Scandinavia in terms of “Scandinavian ECEC regime” is based on the signifier used in the German context. For an elaborated discussion on Scandinavia and the Nordic see (Marjanen, Strang, & Hilson, 2021)

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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