Early childhood education and care as a historically located place – the significance for parental cooperation and the professional assignment

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ABSTRACT
In this study, we analyze the views of professionals and student teachers on their relation to the parents, their assignment, and the distribution of responsibility for the child from the perspective of early childhood education and care (ECEC) as a place/space. In our analysis of space and place, we relate to the French philosopher and sociologist Henri Lefebvre. We analyze ECEC as a place, historically located in time and space, by defining the positioning and legitimization strategies relating to ECEC in Swedish society from three different periods: a contemporary place for learning with demands on parental involvement; as a place for new citizens in a collaborative model with parents, as preceded in ECEC in the 1970s and at the beginning of the 20th century; and a place for care provision and transmission of knowledge to the home. The theoretical standpoint that ECEC is a historical place means that we analyze the influence of the conceived, perceived and lived place on the relations to parental cooperation and the professional assignment.

Introduction
This article is concerned with early childhood education and care (ECEC) as a historically located place in time and space. We understand the positioning and legitimization of ECEC in Swedish society as a matter of historically defined relational aspects, especially its relation to parents and parental cooperation.

In order to analyze ECEC as a historically located place, we use a progressive–regressive method (Sartre, 1984). This allows us to go back and forth in history when defining ECEC as a place in time and space. The disposition of the article mirrors the method in the sense that we start with two contemporary studies, examining how preschool teachers and student teachers view parental cooperation, their assignment and the distribution of responsibility for the child. In a movement backwards, we relate the results to a historical analysis of the relations between ECEC and parents. From that historical standpoint, we go forward and discuss continuities and discontinuities in the professional assignment and in parental cooperation.

The aim of the study
The main aim of this study is to analyze ECEC as a place, historically located in time and space, and its significance for parental cooperation and the professional assignment.

Theoretical perspective – ECEC as a place
From the standpoint that ECEC in Sweden constitutes a historically located place, we recognize that the position of ECEC has undergone a number of historical position transitions and transformations. In our presentation and analysis we will frequently apply the concepts space and place using references to Lefebvre (1991), and legitimization and legitimization strategies using references to van Leeuwen (2008) and the concept of positioning (Davies & Harré, 1990).

In our analysis of space and place, we relate to the French philosopher and sociologist Henri Lefebvre. His main theory has been an inspiration and a gateway to understanding and analysing the complex relationship between the positioning of ECEC, the professional assignment of ECEC and parental cooperation. According to Lefebvre, institutional and economic structures and social relations produce places and spaces. His core idea in The Production of Space (1991) is that space and spatiality have material, mental and social dimensions. As described by Rönnlund and Tollefsen (2016, pp. 40–41), the first of these dimensions corresponds to material, everyday and routinely perceived space; the second corresponds to abstract conceptions of space, the space of planners and experts; and the third, ‘lived space’, includes thoughts, feelings and experiences. There is reciprocity in the constitution of place. Henri Lefebvre stressed that real social change may be analyzed in relation to everyday life, in the everyday
routines of people’s lives. Lived space is constructed by the actor’s actions, experiences and views. In everyday life, the actor constructs a certain meaning for a given place that is embedded in a historical and cultural context.

These dimensions exist in a dialectical relationship to one another. Preschool staff work in a planned, institutional preschool space and cooperation with parents takes place in the context of everyday meetings, but also in scheduled activities: when a child is introduced to preschool, in meetings concerning the child’s development, in formalized parents’ meetings, etc. It is in the daily physical routines that conceptions and views of this space are negotiated and secured, while socio-political and economic structures create the ideological and institutional frame for the social practices of cooperation. While social and ideological processes, such as globalization, bureaucracy and juridification, constitute these practices, they also constitute participation, democratization, confinement, segregation and hierarchies (Kultti & Pramling Samuelsson, 2016; Lunneblad, 2013).

Legitimization involves processes of transformation (van Leeuwen, 2008) that reproduce regulatory and justified knowledge of social practices. In a dissertation on parenthood, Westberg (2016, p. 25) summarized by noting that legitimation processes can thus legitimize discourses, which means that they transform them into taken-for-granted ideas, by free-ing them from the need to be legitimized.

In order to analyze ECEC as a historical place and in relation to the professional assignment, we employ the concept of positioning (Davies & Harré, 1990). The institution and the social subject are positioned and position themselves in dialectical processes of formation. Position is a relational concept; it is in relation to something else that you can position the institution and yourself as a social and professional subject. The positioning of the parents and parental cooperation is of special interest in this study.

From the theoretical standpoint that ECEC is a historically located place in time and space that gives meaning to the social practices of parental cooperation and to the professional assignment, we draw the conclusion that history is mediated in what Lefebvre (1953) refers to as a vertical (contemporary) and a horizontal (historical) complexity. The vertical complexity is the material, mental and social dimensions in a place that is shared in the ECEC settings of today, while the horizontal complexity is the historically located place. By using a progressive–regressive method (Sartre, 1984), we try to overcome the simplification of seeing history as a background to the contemporary study. Instead, we find that history is present and mediated in the sense that the professional subject’s opinion of the assignment and of parental cooperation today is a part of an ongoing historical production and reproduction of ECEC as a place.

By using the progressive–regressive method we take as our starting point two studies on the professional assignment. In order to understand the relation between ECEC as a place and the assignment in terms of parental cooperation we relate the results to historical analyses. In order to understand continuity and discontinuity in the professional assignment and in parental cooperation, we relate the results to a historical analysis.

The previous study

Before presenting the main study, we will first shortly recapitulate an earlier study that we conducted 20 years ago on the professional assignment in ECEC (Persson & Tallberg Broman, 2002). Comparing this previous study with the current one may help us to explore continuities and discontinuities in the professional assignment and in parental cooperation.

During the autumn of 1996 and throughout 1997, interviews were conducted with 21 preschool teachers and 22 compulsory school teachers in two areas of Malmö that were different in terms of their social, economic and population composition. The preschool teachers in the different areas had strikingly similar views of their profession and its transition towards increased diversity and fragmentation. Following an analysis of the interview data, a questionnaire was constructed and students in their first and final terms of teacher training programmes for preschool teachers, recreation instructors and compulsory school teachers (460 in total) were asked to rate statements using a five-point scale.

What were the most important tasks of preschool and school, respectively? This was an open question. Student teachers formulated and ranked the most important tasks. While there was some variation among those in their first term, all of the student teachers were in agreement in their final term of the teacher training programmes. Providing trygghet, (or ‘safety and security, caring’) was reported to constitute the most important task of both preschool and school by a large majority of the teacher student teachers. They also emphasized that the work had assumed an increasingly social character, which they regretted. Both student teachers and working preschool teachers emphasized that, to a large degree, both their assignment and the preschool place constituted a social institution.

The current study

On the basis of these results, the study was repeated in a somewhat different form in 2015. Preschool
teachers, carers and other ECEC staff completed a questionnaire with 11 open questions and 37 statements that they were asked to rate on a five-point Likert scale; a total of 48 statements and questions. The four themes covered by the survey were: the task of the preschool, the professional assignment, cooperation with home and parents, and the knowledge needed to fulfil the assignment and meet professional demands. The background variables were: profession, gender, age, whether born in Sweden, the length of professional experience, preschool parents’ level of education, preschool children’s first language and the status of the preschool area.

A stratified sample was produced by an administrative management expert in order to ensure the inclusion of preschools in areas with varied socio-economic status, e.g. variation in the socio-economic status of the households. The questionnaire was first distributed to preschool managers and then to the staff of the selected preschools, and was in most cases collected by the researchers. A total of 301 professionals, representing 59% of those to whom questionnaires had been distributed, completed the survey.

Students in preschool teacher training completed a questionnaire containing 55 items; 11 open questions and 37 statements. The student teachers were in the first and fifth terms of their training programmes. We also included a group of students belonging to a programme (FO/flex) that provides additional education for carers to become preschool teachers. The survey was presented during lesson time, in most cases by the researchers themselves. The same four themes were covered in this survey as in that conducted among the professionals, and an additional theme was added on how the students’ education had contributed to their professional competence. The survey background variables were somewhat different from those used for the professional groups: gender, age, household size, mother tongue other than Swedish, born in a non-Nordic country, whether the participants’ parents were from a non-Nordic country, and the status of the preschool area. A total of 524 student teachers completed the survey, representing 90% of those to whom questionnaires had been distributed.

Data analysis

The survey was processed statistically using (a) descriptive statistics and frequency calculations, (b) an exploratory, rotated factor analysis, (c) correlations between individual variables and the participants’ ratings of the statements, (d) correlations between background variables and the participants’ ratings of the statements and (e) correlations between responses to the open questions and background variables.

The selection criterion for correlations between background variables and statements was statistically significant at the 1% level. For the variables specified at the nominal level, Cramer’s V and Phi were employed, and for variables specified at the ordinal level, Spearman’s Rho was used. The statistical correlation coefficients Spearman’s Rho, Cramer’s V and Phi are interpreted in the following way: 0.00–0.25 = weak; 0.26–0.50 = weak/moderate; 0.51–0.75 = moderate/strong; 0.76–1.00 = strong. Negative correlations are interpreted in the same way as positive ones, the difference being in the direction of the relationship.

All hypothesis tests were conducted using two-tailed p-values. These are generally a little higher than the one-tailed values, but are recommended for use when testing hypotheses where causality is unclear.

An exploratory, rotated factor analysis was conducted, but an analysis of reliability showed the correlations between the variables and the factors to be too low and below the benchmark level of 0.3. Factor analysis could therefore not be used due to this lack of reliability. Instead, we present the correlations between individual variables.

Findings

A place for safety, caring and security – the professional assignment

The three professional groups (preschool teachers, carers and others) in ECEC agreed in their answers regarding what they themselves view as the most important task for the ECEC institutions. This was posed as an open question, and the participants were given the opportunity to rank three of the most important tasks for preschool. As can be seen in Table 1, the staff ranked and valued safety and security as the most important task for preschool. Nearly half of the staff stated that this was the most important task, and for the category ‘others’ the proportion is more than 10 percentage points greater than this. The meaning of the Swedish word trygghet is here translated as ‘safety and security’ but in the Swedish context the word trygghet may be interpreted more broadly than this, and may also include the notion that the child should be confident and secure about her/himself. There is thus a trace of social competence in the meaning of the word, in the sense that if the child has an inner sense of security s/he will also have the ability to trust others, to play with other children and to learn.

Other responses were reported by smaller proportions of the participants than those reported above,
and contained formulations related to children’s play, language development and values.

As was described earlier, curriculum and policy documents have given preschool teachers and other professional categories different functions and responsibilities in ECEC in the form of an enhanced knowledge and learning assignment. An open question included in the questionnaire was therefore what the professionals thought were the three most important professional tasks in preschool. The participants’ answers to this were very consistent with the answers to the question on the three most important tasks associated with their professional assignment; the vast majority stated that safety and security constituted the most important task for preschool.

In Table 2, the answers are presented based on a division into categories with regard to the respondents’ views of the socio-economic context of their preschool high resource level, mid-range resource level and low resource level. The respondents estimated the context in which they work on the basis of these categories. One reason for introducing this categorization was to find out whether the professionals related their assignment to the context in which they were working in terms of socio-economic resources. As can be seen from Table 2, safety and security, caring is the most frequent first answer. The proportions giving this as their first answer are almost as high as those reported in Table 1.

Student teachers answered the open questions in the same way as did the professional groups. More than 50% of student teachers ranked safety, security and caring as the most important task for preschool and for their own forthcoming assignment. There were no differences in the student teachers’ answers with regard to whether they were at the beginning or the end of their education. The main finding regarding what professional groups and student teachers value and rank as the most important task for preschool and for their own assignment is thus that this is the provision of safety, caring and security, in the sense of the word trygghet explained above. Among the professionals, this view is not related to the respondents’ education, the professional group to which they belong or the socio-economic area in which they are working. Among student teachers, the ranking and value placed on safety, caring and security are the same as for the professionals and there is no significant relationship with their educational situation, i.e. whether they are at the beginning or end of their education.

Comparing these findings to those of the previous study, we find that there is a strong continuity in the way professionals and student teachers view their assignment. One interpretation of the questionnaire responses is that they are similar to parents’ views regarding what are considered to be the most important tasks for preschool. The professionals and student teachers seem to agree with the parents in emphasizing safety, caring and security in preschool. Parents emphasized the importance of safety, caring and security in a range of evaluations. Parental complaints filed with the Swedish Schools Inspectorate in relation to perceived problems in preschool also relate to the complete range of socio-emotional aspects, and include criticisms of a lack of safety, caring and security for the children (Skolinspektionen, 2012, 2016). The increasing number of complaints submitted to the Schools Inspectorate (Skolinspektionen, 2012) also constitutes an expression of parental concerns about their children’s situation, with the focus to a large extent being directed at safety, caring and security, at children being exposed to negative experiences, at bullying and exclusion, and at child–child and child–adult relations, particularly if the child is in need of special support.

Table 1. What is the most important task for preschool? The highest ranked and most common answers from ECEC professionals.

| Category       | First answer                          | Second answer                           | Third answer                           |
|----------------|---------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------|----------------------------------------|
| Preschool teachers | Trygghet – safety and security, caring | Provide care                            | Stimulate learning, life-long learning |
|                | 46.7%                                 | 8.9%                                    | 5.2%                                   |
| Carers         | Trygghet – safety and security, caring | Stimulate learning, life-long learning  | The curriculum                         |
|                | 47.3%                                 | 5.5%                                    | 4.1%                                   |
| Others         | Trygghet – safety and security, caring | Stimulate learning, life-long learning  | Provide care                           |
|                | 58.8%                                 | 11.8%                                   | 5.9%                                   |

Table 2. What is the most important task in your assignment? The highest ranked and most common answers from ECEC professionals, categorized on the basis of their estimation of their preschool area’s socio-economic context.

| Estimation of the socio-economic context | First answer                          | Second answer                           | Third answer                           |
|-----------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------|----------------------------------------|
| High resource level                     | Trygghet – safety and security, caring | Maintaining good relations, fostering  | Other                                  |
|                                        | 44.2%                                 | 7.0%                                    | 7%                                     |
| Mid-range resource level                | Trygghet – safety and security, caring | See the needs of the child, individualize | Work according to curriculum            |
|                                        | 43.8%                                 | 5.2%                                    | 5.0%                                   |
| Low resource level                      | Trygghet – safety and security, caring | See the needs of the child, individualize | Other                                  |
|                                        | 43.2%                                 | 9.5%                                    | 6.8%                                   |
The vision of sharing responsibility for the child with the parents has been challenged by the new institutional position of ECEC in the educational landscape. We will now present the respondents’ answers to questions on shared responsibility and cooperation with parents.

**Shared responsibility**

The three professional groups were asked to rate nine statements on parental cooperation and shared responsibility for the child. Here, we present the results for three of these items that are related to the vision of shared responsibility.

Two of the statements are related to the responsibility for fostering the children. As can be seen from Table 3, almost 87% of the responding professionals agreed completely or partially with the statement ‘Preschool’s responsibility for fostering the children has been increasing for several years.’

The professionals agreed with the statement that preschool is a place that has today come to have more responsibility for children’s fostering than was previously the case. They also agreed that this tendency has been increasing for several years.

The statement ‘Preschool has taken over too much of the parents’ responsibility for children’s fostering’ focuses on the shared responsibility and power relations between professionals and parents. As can be seen from Table 4, a vast majority (more than 75%) of the professionals agreed either completely or partially with this statement.

There is no significant difference between the professional groups with regard to how they rated the statements presented in Tables 3 and 4. However, this might not be true for those who work in an area in which the majority of parents have a mother tongue other than Swedish. There is a weak but significant negative correlation which may suggest that ECEC staff in migrant areas do not agree with this statement in the same way as others do (Spearman’s r = 0.147, phi = 0.022). It is more likely for ECEC staff who were not born in Sweden to work in such areas. The size of the difference is medium–high and significant (p = 0.00, Cramer’s V = 0.198).

For student teachers we find the same tendency, although it is not as strong as for the professionals: 55% of the student teachers agreed completely or partially with the statement.

With the exception of the professional group mentioned above, the professionals’ view is that they have taken over too much of the responsibility for fostering the child, and by extension, that the idea of shared responsibility might not work for them. They want the parents to take more responsibility for the fostering of children and they do not want them to leave too much of this responsibility to preschool.

The picture is more complex than this, however. The idea of shared responsibility might not relate to the children’s learning and education. As is shown in Table 5, the majority of the professionals (62.8%) did not think that parents have the knowledge needed to assume more responsibility for the educational component of the preschool assignment. Thus, in this respect we find that professionals want to retain responsibility for the part of their assignment that is related to education and learning.

To summarize the results, we find that professionals and student teachers value and rank safety, caring and security, in the sense of the word trygghet explained above, as the most important task for preschool and for their own assignment. This is consis-

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**Table 3.** Preschool’s responsibility for fostering children has been increasing for several years. All professionals.

|                      | Frequency | Percent | Valid Percent | Cumulative Percent |
|----------------------|-----------|---------|---------------|--------------------|
| Valid                |           |         |               |                    |
| Completely agree     | 127       | 42.2    | 43.8          | 43.8               |
| Partially agree      | 125       | 41.5    | 43.1          | 86.9               |
| Neither agree        | 24        | 8.0     | 8.3           | 95.2               |
| nor disagree         |           |         |               |                    |
| Partially disagree   | 8         | 2.7     | 2.8           | 97.9               |
| Completely disagree  | 6         | 2.0     | 2.1           | 100.0              |
| Total                | 290       | 96.3    | 100.0         |                    |
| Missing              | 11        | 3.7     |               |                    |
| Total                | 301       | 100.0   |               |                    |

**Table 4.** Preschool has taken over too much of the parents’ responsibility for children’s fostering. All professionals.

|                      | Frequency | Percent | Valid Percent | Cumulative Percent |
|----------------------|-----------|---------|---------------|--------------------|
| Valid                |           |         |               |                    |
| Completely agree     | 106       | 35.2    | 36.2          | 36.2               |
| Partially agree      | 121       | 40.2    | 41.3          | 77.5               |
| Neither agree        | 42        | 14.0    | 14.3          | 91.8               |
| nor disagree         |           |         |               |                    |
| Partially disagree   | 14        | 4.7     | 4.8           | 96.6               |
| Completely disagree  | 10        | 3.3     | 3.4           | 100.0              |
| Total                | 293       | 97.3    | 100.0         |                    |
| Missing              | 8         | 2.7     |               |                    |
| Total                | 301       | 100.0   |               |                    |

**Table 5.** Parents do not have the knowledge that is needed to assume more responsibility for the educational component of preschool. All professionals.

|                      | Frequency | Percent | Valid Percent | Cumulative Percent |
|----------------------|-----------|---------|---------------|--------------------|
| Valid                |           |         |               |                    |
| Completely agree     | 54        | 17.9    | 18.6          | 18.6               |
| Partially agree      | 128       | 42.5    | 44.1          | 62.8               |
| Neither agree        | 60        | 19.9    | 20.7          | 83.4               |
| nor disagree         |           |         |               |                    |
| Partially disagree   | 39        | 13.0    | 13.4          | 96.9               |
| Completely disagree  | 9         | 3.0     | 3.1           | 100.0              |
| Total                | 290       | 96.3    | 100.0         |                    |
| Missing              | 11        | 3.7     |               |                    |
| Total                | 301       | 100.0   |               |                    |
tent with the results from the previous study in 2002, despite the discursive change that has led to preschool becoming a place for education, learning and knowledge production as articulated in the curriculum and by experts and bureaucrats. The results show that the staff perceive themselves as having taken over too much responsibility from the family for fostering. They want to retain their responsibility for the part of their assignment that is related to education and learning.

**ECEC – historical places in time and space**

The ECEC institution, like other institutions, has developed historically under the influence of different ideas, ideologies and traditions, which influence how it is reproduced and produced by teachers and student teachers, but also by parents. The institution has had to deal with a range of historical dilemmas and positions in relation to the parents.

Thus, we also analyze the results from the contemporary study in a historical context. ECEC, at the time our study was conducted, was in a phase of transition from earlier perspectives and paradigms. Using material from governmental inquiries, curriculum, the education act and academic dissertations from this field (see below) we have categorized ECEC according to historically located places in three different periods. Our analysis starts with the current period.

**A place for learning and shared responsibility, with demands on parental involvement**

ECEC is currently considered to be a place/space for learning and knowledge production within the education system (Lpfö 98, 2010, 2016; SFS 2010:800; SOU 1997:157). Parental involvement and influence is emphasized together with liability ethics. The transformation of ECEC into a place with new functions in Swedish society has consequences for the professional assignment, as well as for cooperation with parents (Persson & Tallberg Broman, 2015). The latent contradiction within the professional assignment – between socialization and education – becomes evident when ECEC is transformed into a place that emphasizes learning, subject education and knowledge production, but also socialization and parental cooperation. The professional position becomes more complicated and uncertain.

The position of preschool as a place is now so powerfully integrated in society that its very existence no longer has to be legitimized in the same way as before, and strategies to legitimize continued efforts for investing in and improving the preschool place primarily refer to economic incentives and to scientific authorities. A central and increasing focus on macro-economic arguments is particularly notable.

Legitimizing strategies focused on content and everyday social practices also refer to various authorities, but perhaps less to authorities on a scientific level and more to those at the level of public sector agencies. There are recurrent references to the central curriculum, and also to the conclusions of international organizations such as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (Starting Strong 2006, 2012) and UNICEF (2008), to international conventions such as the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), and also to an increased extent, to research findings. The transfer of responsibility for preschool from the Ministry of Health and Welfare to the Ministry of Education in 1996 emphasized the role of ECEC in an educational context. The new curriculum from 2010 has a multi-discursive approach to learning and value-embedded education and has extended the role of language, mathematics, natural science and technology. ECEC is in the process of becoming a new place for education (Folke-Fichtelius, 2008; Hammarström-Lewenhagen, 2013; Jönsson, Sandell, & Tallberg Broman, 2012; Karlsson, 2006).

This is part of the historical context for our survey on professional assignment, parental cooperation and distributed responsibility for the child. In the contemporary phase, ECEC and the professional assignment is presently formulated in terms of education, teaching and subject knowledge in the ideological institutional space.

**A place for new citizens in a collaborative model with parents**

Preschool did not, however, become a place with political currency and legitimacy until the end of the 1960s and beginning of the 1970s (SOU 1967:39; SOU 1972:26; SOU 1972:34; SOU 1975:67; SOU 1979:63; SOU 1981:25). During this period, a model for cooperation was formulated within the idea of shared responsibility for the child, although there was a critique of the family’s possibilities to form a new citizen in the society. The professional assignment is positioned and legitimized by scientific authority. ECEC is politically accepted and constructed as a place for educating and fostering the new citizens, and is a socially and politically supported project integrated with family policy and child health policies (Folke-Fichtelius, 2008; Gars, 2002; Gleichman, 2004; Hammarström-Lewenhagen, 2013; Hultqvist, 1990; Ivarsson Jansson, 2001; Karlsson, 2006; Socialstyrelsen, 1988).

In 1968, the government appointed the highly influential Day-Nursery Inquiry (Barnstugeutredningen)
(SOU 1972:26) with the task of breaking with the Fröbel-inspired teaching tradition. This constituted a conscious break with the past, a discontinuity in the history of the ECEC place. In order to facilitate political consensus in relation to preschool as a place, and in order to construct it as so-called public childcare and give it a political foundation, a break was required from earlier conceptions and the long-standing resistance to nurseries and preschools. The ECEC place that was being written into existence, in Lefebvre’s words the ideological institutional place – i.e. the deliberately thought-out place of the policy experts and planners, was to serve as a complement to the family, to support it, educate it and to work towards good parental cooperation. The old was contrasted with the new at the formulation level. The formulations were produced by politicians. ECEC was a public place and became a place for politicians, with many areas of policy-making claims on preschool.

Preschool was positioned as a highly essential part of the so-called ‘Swedish folkhem’, the home of the people, and of the new democratic society that manifested in many different ways during the 1970s. At the same time, the expansion of preschools was motivated by reference to the family no longer having the same broad range of functions as before. First and foremost, it was no longer possible for the family to raise children to become social citizens. This critique of the family and of parents constitutes a relatively continuous characteristic of the positioning and legitimation of the preschool place (Donzelot, 1979; Persson, 2010; Persson & Tallberg Broman, 2002). This new preschool corresponded to a place, a necessary condition for the new society, characterized by social and gender equality. The role of the children was prominent in this regard, the position of the parents somewhat more uncertain. During this period, the family developed a need for, and created a demand for, public childcare that was not only motivated by the occupational lives of the parents, and particularly the mothers, but also by the fact that children had a need for stimulation that could not be satisfied in the family. We may view this as a continuous argumentation and legitimation strategy focused on the preschool place as being ‘for the sake of the child’. During this period, these arguments were explicitly combined with a critique of the ability of the family to raise children and provide stimulation in the way required to form new citizens for the new society.

The preschool as a place became a societal concern, one part of a larger labour market, and a social services, population, health, and gender equality issue. The place became part of the public domain. Legitimization of the ECEC place was given a thorough political foundation and preschool came to be related to many areas of policy. The place was positioned and legitimized with scientific authority. Jean Piaget’s theory of cognitive equilibrium and Erik Homburger Erikson’s epigenetic theory of development were specified as constituting the background to this great project – the preschool child in preschool.

Earlier theories and references to psychological theorists such as Bowlby (1969), for example, had long functioned as an obstacle (Brembeck, 1998) and had been used as legitimizing strategies to prevent the expansion of preschool. The contact with parents was now formulated in terms of a collaborative model (Socialstyrelsen, 1988), but this did not constitute a major issue in the new preschool project and in the formulation of the preschool of the 1970s. Of the governmental inquiry’s 349-page report (SOU 1972:26), three pages dealt with the parent–staff relationship as it is expressed in the report (pp. 138–141), and four pages were devoted to parental education (pp. 97–101). Parental education was to take place in stages and would focus in part on the parents themselves as educators, and in part on general lines of development for the child.

**A place for care provision and transmission of knowledge to the home**

In the initial Fröbel-inspired phase at the beginning of the 20th century, ECEC was formulated as an institution ‘for the sake of the child’ and as providing assistance for childrearing in and by the home/mother. Contact with parents was formulated as highly significant and was to constitute a prioritized and important part of the institution’s work. It was not only the child that was to be raised and educated, but rather also the mother/family. ECEC was positioned and legitimized as a place for caring and dissemination of knowledge to the home.

ECEC was in this period constructed as a place outside state regulation. ECEC was positioned as a role model, a social and educational place for children and an asset for needy families. It was an institutional space for caring and dissemination of knowledge to the home. The contact with parents (mothers) was based on legitimizing strategies of ECEC as a role model and to moral authority, related to philanthropy and class position (Hammarström-Lewenhagen, 2013; Johansson, 1992; Tallberg Broman, 1991; Vallberg Roth, 1998; Westberg, 2008).

Thus, in the terminology of Lefebvre, what we are talking about here is the second dimension – the ideologically institutional space and the abstract conceptions of space that may be found in texts, lectures and speech. Legitimizing arguments referred to the possibility, in a time of major social change, of producing better treatment for children and improved childrearing. There was little acceptance of this
conception in the public, political society of the time. The institution was positioned to serve as a model, a socio-educational place for children and a resource for needy families. Social and educational work were combined both in the work with the children and in the contact with parents (Halldén, 2016). The ECEC place was long linked to a small number of women in Nordic networks with a commitment to children, who were often highly trained in teaching. They were given little recognition, either at the time or in more recent historical accounts, but they nonetheless laid the foundations of a socio-educational and methodological approach to the work, which was conveyed via seminars and was then carried forward by former pupils well into the latter decades of the 20th century. This was a place linked to gender (women), class (poverty) and to the non-public sphere. The social practices employed in the contact with parents via parent meetings (with mothers) were based on legitimizing strategies focused on role modelling using references to authorities, primarily in the form of the educational interest movement for the education and fostering of children, and paediatric medicine, but also in the form of a moral authority related to philanthropy and class position (Tallberg Broman, 1991).

The collaboration with parents was characterized by the conceptions of ECEC as a place for care provision and knowledge transmission. This was a place constructed through work evenings, small lectures, informational and work meetings, and a substantial flexibility with regard to time and form.

The beginning of a new phase characterized by a certain level of state influence over societal children’s issues was marked by family policy reforms that began to emerge cautiously during the 1930s. Governmental inquiries proposed a range of measures to improve the standards for families with children: preventive maternity and childcare, child benefit, maternity allowance, etc. The primary motive behind these reforms was the need to raise the birth rate, but gender equality motives would also emerge later. The ECEC place slowly became a part of public sector society, but its expansion was very slow up until the 1970s (SOU 1938:20; SOU 1943:9; SOU 1947:46; SOU 1951:15). It could not to be permitted to compete with the home. In governmental inquiries and the political debate, the family was presented as the pre-eminent place for care provision and learning for younger children, and home-based child minders were preferred over day nurseries/whole-day kindergartens up until the end of the 1960s. Handing one’s children over to the care of others was not a part of normalized parenting (Tallberg Broman, 1995).

Discussion

In line with the aims of this article, we have presented an analysis of ECEC as different places located in time and space, and of its significance for parental cooperation. We have presented the results of a survey on the views of professionals and student teachers about parental cooperation, their assignment and the distribution of responsibility between themselves and parents. Using the progressive–regressive method, we have analyzed ECEC as different historical places by defining positioning and legitimizing strategies in three periods of modern Swedish history. We have identified social practices and ideas relating to parental cooperation in these periods. In line with the method, and with the background of this historical context, we will finally discuss the contemporary period.

Positioning ECEC as a contemporary place

In this article we have paid attention to how ECEC is positioned in history as different places, and the significance of parental cooperation in the defined periods. We have identified ECEC as three places in a historical context: a place for learning, a place for creating the new society, and a place for caring and dissemination of knowledge.

Here, we relate to Lefebvre’s (1991) conception of space and spatiality as having material (perceived), mental (conceived) and social (lived) dimensions. The first of these dimensions corresponds to material, everyday and routinely experienced space (in our model the staff’s conceptions and experiences), while the second corresponds to abstract conceptions of space, the space of planners and experts (for us exemplified by the presentations of ECEC in governmental inquiries, policy documents and other texts of central importance to preschool).

As regards the most recent period, the study allows us to discuss both the abstract place, in the form of the ECEC place of ideas and policy documents, and the staff’s positioning of preschool as place. In relation to the first of these conceptions of place, we see a preschool for learning with a greater emphasis on the task of conveying knowledge, but that also has a social task focused on the child’s development, well-being and health. This place and what it produces is evaluated and controlled both by the customer, in the form of the parents, and by the governing authorities and government, in the form of the Schools Inspectorate. The ideas that have been developed about the ECEC place include individual development plans, discussions of the child’s progress, comprehensive documentation – primarily in order to describe to parents the chosen preschool’s activities – and recurrent evaluations.
In our study, the preschool staff and the preschool student teachers emphasized both safe and secure children and a safe and caring environment as the most central goals and aspects of their professional assignment. From the viewpoint of professionals and student teachers, preschool is not primarily a place for education, learning and knowledge production. In fact, these have a secondary role. Instead, preschool is seen as a place that deals with a socially and psychologically oriented task, relating to caring and to children’s security and safety.

Policy documents, particularly at the local level, also express the importance of safety and security, both in terms of the child’s sense of safety and security, and in terms of the child actually being safe and secure, and the value of a safe and caring environment. This view is shared to a large extent by parents. Parents also raise the importance of safety, caring and security in the context of various evaluations. Thus, parents, staff and local policy documents are very much in agreement in their emphasis on the importance of safety, caring and security. Studies have also shown that it is the aspects relating to the care ethic that are given the highest priority in preschool (Bigsten, 2015; Emilson, 2008). Here, we can speak of the ethics of care or the care ethic in terms of a relational and contextual, rather than a rule-governed, approach to morality and decision making (Noddings, 2012, 2013).

The assignment and parental cooperation in the era of ECEC as a place for learning and shared responsibility

The three professional groups (preschool teachers, carers and others) in ECEC agreed in their answers regarding what they view as the most important task for the ECEC institutions – that preschool should represent and constitute a space for caring, safety and security. The abstract conceptions of the ECEC space that are expressed in policy documents and official public sector texts emphasize it as a space for learning and knowledge, development and health. It is a space that must be evaluated both within the system itself and by the parents, the customer. It is a space that should be controlled and inspected, and the professionals are located between these expectations and the scrutiny of parents and inspections of governing authorities.

In our studies of preschool student teachers and professionals, parental cooperation was not emphasized as an important task for preschool. Both in evaluations and in our own questionnaire, preschool student teachers expressed not being prepared for cooperation with parents. This may be discussed in relation to the fact that the ECEC place is perceived as the child’s space, not the parents’.

The extended rights of the parents are specified in the Education Act (2010:800), which regulates both children’s/students’ and guardians’ influence over education, and which also emphasizes freedom of choice, with the latter having become very notable as a result of the school reforms of recent years. The contents of the Education Act involve a strengthening of parental powers and a change in the relations between preschool and school managements, teachers, children/students and parents in the direction of a customer–purchase–sales–relationship. The speech focused on parental cooperation includes many expressions of the increased power of this market-oriented thinking; rights are linked to responsibilities and a shift can be noted from an emphasis on rights to an accentuation of responsibilities.

A significant aspect of Swedish and Nordic ECEC policy is the idea of sharing child education and care between families and public institutions. The professional and political struggle for the legitimization of early childhood education is based on the acceptance of shared responsibility for the socialization and education of young children.

However, as we have shown in this article, there is an evident contradiction between perceived, conceived and lived parental cooperation and positioning of ECEC as a place for learning.

Disclosure statement

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