

The consequences of the decentralization of pre-school child care in Sweden – national balance and local imbalances

Nathalie Le Bouteillec National Institute for Demographic studies (INED), CURAPP-ESS
University of Picardie (France)[#]

Anders Ögren Department of Economic History, Uppsala University(Sweden).

Sweden is often used as a positive example for welfare states not least when it comes to measures within pre-school child care. In the 1970s a system based on collective care of children of the pre-school age was implemented and has since then been developed. These day cares are in the Swedish form of kindergarten (known traditionally as “day-homes” (*daghem*) and today labeled “pre-schools” (*förskolor*)). But since the 1990s this system of collective care of pre-school children has step by step been transformed to a system which combines collective care with individual choices. Our main question is how these changing policies have affected the supply and quality of the service of pre-school day care.

In 1992 the then conservative government implemented the possibility for private day care – to offer an alternative to the publicly supplied day-care. Besides arguing that this would close the gap between supply and demand for day care services, arguments were in line with ideas on liberalization through providing freedom of choice and making competition increasing the quality also of the existing public day care.

More recently, the 1st of July 2008, the Swedish government (again led by the conservatives) implemented another law that influenced parents’ possibilities to chose other forms of day-care than “pre-schools” (private or public) by for instance being paid a certain sum for kids not being put into “day care”. Apart from the possibility to put the children in day care (public or private) parents could chose to stay home with their kids, or hire someone to take care of their kids.¹ Again this was implemented as part of a more a liberal agenda, arguing that those who did not want to put their kids into collective day care should not be punished economically – and thus out of fairness had the right for economic support. This

[#]Corresponding author. E-mail: nathalie.lebouteillec@wanadoo.fr

¹Another law which was implemented at the same time was a law that aimed at encouraging couples to more equally share the parental leave between the father and the mother by including a subsidy, or rather a tax deduction, for those who more equally shared their parental leave.

shows a general change in the ideas governing child care in a country where collective day care always has been promoted.

Thus, as stated above, our main question is how these changing policies have affected the supply of the service of pre-school day care. We know that on a national level the number of places available at the caring facilities for pre-school children is close to the level of demand at the national level. But at the local level such an equilibrium between demand and supply is more vulnerable and it is far from always that the demand can be met. Thus we aim to study how the supply and the quality of pre-school childcare has changed at the local level as a result of the implementation of these laws.

There are several reasons why this should be studied using local data. Most importantly is that it is the local government who is responsible for the day care. This applies even if the laws and regulations governing pre-school child care are dictated on the national level. One example is that every child at the age of one year has the right to a place at a day care and there exist an obligation for the local government (*Kommun*) to supply the children with a place at a day care facility within four months from the demand of the parents. This obligation is imposed to the *Kommun* from the State. As a consequence, even if the supply in the day care places on a national scale is quite developed in an international comparison, on the local scale there are tensions, waiting lists and differences in the quality not least when it comes to the number of staff per child. This as each local government (*Kommun*) has to adjust in accordance with the demand and the annual fertility rate. Such adjustments have consequences on the quality of the service. There is also another problem, that effects the homogeneity of the supply of the service, and that is the economic situation for the different local governments, which can vary significantly.

Second, the more recent law on the possibility to chose between using collective day care or receive a subsidy for taking care of once own children or hiring someone to do it, is decided by the local government, i.e. that the national assembly have given the region the right to do so if they want to. This in itself makes it interesting to study which local governments that found it important to adopt this change and what political or economical reasons that may lie behind the decision to adopt it or not. In short, we think that socio-economic factors, both on the macro and the micro level may well explain why traditional public day care is used, or is replaced by parental care of their own children in pre-school age, or the choice to hire a babysitter. And that local governments who for ideological reasons would not support a more individualistic child care may very well do so because of socio-economic reasons, such as parents' unemployment, income, educational level, age and so on.

Thus that such a policy, that may have been implemented at the national level based on some ideological grounds may well have unanticipated effects – and that it is far from given that the ones' who comes to use these new laws are those who chooses to do so for ideological reasons.

To study how and why the supply and quality of pre-school child care has changed on the local level we will use data from statistics Sweden where there is a database on individual level concerning socio economic data from the early 1990s. We will use this data together with data on day care (*förskolor*) from the association for local governments (*Statenskommuner och landsting SKL*) to study the local management of the day care system, the degree of autonomy on the local level, and to test the homogeneity of day care supply to pre-school kids in Sweden in different regions.