Policies of Quality and Autonomy in Times of Economic Crisis: Governing the Sector of Early Childhood Education and Care[1]

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Abstract: This study focuses on the debate surrounding global policies and practices related to the sector of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC), utilizing the Greek policy context as an example. Drawing on the critical education policy studies literature, this paper interrogates the complex concepts of quality and autonomy, which are core in the global agenda. We do this by exploring how the international and national austerity measures, imposed in many countries – and especially in Greece, marked by a devastating economic crisis in the last decade – have affected their re-interpretation and translation.

Our empirical data suggest that municipal ECEC directors, interviewed in the context of our research, hold diverse views on quality, raising issues of inequality, limited participation and low attainment. The study generates reflections, suggesting that the idea of autonomy has been systematically associated with Greece's economic struggles and therefore understood and re-interpreted by the participants in a constrained way that limits their action. The way these notions are re-contextualized at the municipal level, and the consequences for ECEC provision, pose as key issues of this research.
Keywords: quality; autonomy; OECD; economic crisis; governance

Políticas de calidad y autonomía en tiempos de crisis económica: El gobierno del sector de la educación y la atención de la primera infancia

Resumen: Este estudio se centra en el debate en torno a las políticas y prácticas globales relacionadas con el sector de la Educación y Atención de la Primera Infancia (EAPI), utilizando como ejemplo el contexto político griego. Basándose en la literatura de estudios críticos de política educativa, este trabajo cuestiona los complejos conceptos de calidad y autonomía, que son fundamentales en la agenda global. Lo hacemos explorando cómo las medidas de austeridad internacionales y nacionales, impuestas en muchos países –y especialmente en Grecia, marcada por una crisis económica devastadora en la última década– han afectado a su reinterpretación y traducción. Nuestros datos empíricos sugieren que los directores municipales de EAPI, entrevistados en el contexto de nuestra investigación, tienen opiniones diversas sobre la calidad, planteando cuestiones de desigualdad, participación limitada y bajo rendimiento. El estudio genera reflexiones que sugieren que la idea de autonomía ha sido sistemáticamente asociada a las luchas económicas de Grecia y, por tanto, ha sido entendida y reinterpretada por los participantes de una manera constreñida que limita su acción. La forma en que estas nociones se re-contextualizan a nivel municipal, y las consecuencias para la provisión de EAPI, se plantean como cuestiones clave de esta investigación.
Palabras-clave: calidad; autonomía; OECD; crisis económica; gobernanza

Políticas de qualidade e autonomia em tempos de crise económica: Governar o sector da educação e cuidados da primeira infância

Resumo: Este estudo centra-se no debate em torno das políticas e práticas globais relacionadas com o sector da Educação e Cuidados da Primeira Infância (ECPI), utilizando o contexto político grego como exemplo. Baseando-se na literatura de estudos críticos sobre políticas educativas, este documento interroga-se sobre os complexos conceitos de qualidade e autonomia, que são centrais na agenda global. Fazemo-lo explorando a forma como as medidas de austeridade internacionais e nacionais, impostas em muitos países –e especialmente na Grécia, marcada por uma crise económica devastadora na última década– afectaram a sua re-interpretação e tradução. Os nossos dados empíricos sugerem que os directores municipais da ECPI, entrevistados no contexto da nossa investigação, têm opiniões diversas sobre a qualidade, levantando questões de desigualdade, participação limitada e baixo nível de realização. O estudo gera reflexões que sugerem que a ideia de autonomia tem sido sistematicamente associada às lutas económicas da Grécia e, portanto, compreendida e reinterpretada pelos participantes de uma forma restrita que limita a sua acção. A forma como estas noções são re-contextualizadas a nível municipal, e as consequências para a provisão ECPI, colocam como questões-chave desta investigação.
Palavras-chave: qualidade; autonomia; OECD; crise económica; governação

Policies of Quality and Autonomy in Times of Economic Crisis: Governing the Sector of Early Childhood Education and Care

In recent years, Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) services have been under variable and intensive government regulation (Hunkin, 2019). Governments through rules, rewards and sanctions seek to foster and guarantee quality standards. Consequently, there has been an increase of regulation regarding ECEC services in countries both in Europe and in many countries of the world (Vincent & Braun, 2011). However, educational researchers have expressed concerns regarding tendencies towards "a narrowing and normalizing of what constitutes quality to a prescribed technical list of outcomes and practices" and a "constraining of teachers' autonomy in their professional decision-making" (Fenech & Sumsion, 2007, p. 264). In the European region, the rise of a "transnational policy orthodoxy" (Jones, 2013, p. 1; Traianou & Jones, 2019) developed by the European Union (EU) and the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development ([OECD]; Grek, 2014), and expressed in regulation mechanisms of governance, steers the policies of member-states and leads to a constraining of policy makers and educators' autonomy.

The urge for quality assurance and efficiency has contributed to the dominance of ideas pushing towards a shift from bureaucratic to market mechanisms, thus downgrading education to a financial calculus. To be specific, the OECD's conception of skills draws on theories of human capital and presents education as a "primary site of policy intervention to improve both the well-being of individuals and the economic strength of nations" (Sellar & Lingard, 2013, p. 191). Such a neoliberal positioning of the purpose of education as the creation of Homo economicus perceives children as investments for the future, valuing them for the future prospect of them being "compliant, productive and employable citizens" (Sims & Waniganayake, 2015, p. 336). Moreover, by approaching education as human capital, rather than as being a crucial social institution "involved in both the production and social reproduction of capitalist societies," one fails to realize the fact that education also produces "social relations including class, race and gender, which mediate ongoing income and wealth inequalities" (Robertson, 2016, p. 824). The dimension of inequality, therefore, is significant when studying the changes in the modes of governance of ECEC.

The global education policies on quality, as competitive advantage, have dominated the Europeanized field of ECEC. Quality has been linked to a local autonomy movement of educational institutions, complemented by new, managerial mechanisms of accountability. So, in all sectors of education traditional command and control bureaucratic systems are being replaced by data systems and best practices. A compelling "positivistic, technical and instrumental" discourse of ECEC, inscribed with values such as "certainty and mastery, linear progress and predetermined outcomes," has become panacea for all socio-economic issues (Dahlberg & Moss, 2008, p. 22). The OECD's approach, as remarked by Verger et al. (2018, p. 158), perceives accountability and school autonomy reforms as inevitable, "since governments are inclined to strengthen the autonomy status of schools, if schools become more open to be regularly evaluated and monitored." However, as Paananen et al. (2015) underline, the content and meaning of the notion of quality could change in a new discursive, political and social context. The concept of quality in complex, challenging and diverse contexts cannot be grounded in a "false idea of consensus" on the purpose of education and the ways to accomplishing it (Moss & Urban, 2020, p. 169).

This paper explores two basic claims. The first claim is that ECEC is an interesting sector to investigate the links between policies of quality and autonomy and the (re)production of inequalities. This is because in contrast to other sectors of education, where strong forms of accountability dominate – data-based evidence of quality, high stakes testing and rankings – the field of ECEC is

regulated mainly by best practices that supranational and international agencies use comparatively to promote quality (OECD, 2018). The second claim is that ECEC sectors in the European south and particularly the Greek municipal ECEC, a field leaning towards care (Nikolaidis, 2017), provide an interesting political and social context to study this topic of research. The constant and overlapping crises of the last decade – first the economic crisis, still deeply affecting Greece, then the refugee crisis, and presently the COVID-19 pandemic – have produced unique conditions to explore the recontextualizations of the dominant discourse on quality. The latter constructs quality mainly as a workforce and care issue, regulated by best practices, policy recommendations and minimum standards, further deregulating the sector and intensifying concerns about the deepening of inequality. This paper therefore grapples with the complex notions of quality and autonomy, and in the subsequent sections, drawing on data from interviews with key policy makers/directors of selected municipalities in Greece, we approach the quality and autonomy conundrum against the backdrop of the still effective austerity measures, tracing its implications for the governance of the ECEC sector.

Literature Review

Since 2010 the Greek state has undergone strict fiscal consolidation through several Structural Adjustment Programs (SAP), also known as Memoranda of Understanding (MOU) (European Commission, 2015b). The macroeconomic adjustment policies –prerequisites for the provision of financial assistance right from the first MOU– have impacted negatively the exercise of socioeconomic rights of people in Greece (Schutter & Salomon, 2015). These have included a range of labor rights, the right to social security, the right to health and healthcare, the right to an adequate standard of living, the right to housing, and gender equality, among others (Zambeta, 2014). Research indicates that the structural adjustment measures affected particular groups disproportionately, including women, children, the young and pensioners (Zambeta, 2014). Inevitably the Greek public education and training sectors have been strongly affected as well by the very low and constantly decreasing public spending, since from the beginning of the MOUs implementation the ratio of education expenditure to GDP has been reduced by 25% (European Commission, 2015a).

Presently, there is no doubt that the Greek crisis was not only financial but also social and political, and in essence was a European crisis. In this context, the European policies emphasizing high standards for national education systems of member states were presented as a solution, a crucial factor in overcoming such multidimensional crises and in promoting societal progress more generally. Concerning ECEC, in particular, the European Commission (2019) has promoted the idea that quality education needs to start early, recognizing ECEC as a constitutive part of the education and training systems in Europe, on the rationale that it not only adds to children's well-being now and in the long term, but also to the foundation of skills and competences that are vital to achieving high learning outcomes later in life. Furthermore, the Council of the European Union (2019), through its Recommendation, emphasized the significance of this stage for laying the foundations of lifelong learning, and for preventing early skills gaps and thus inequalities particularly for children from underprivileged backgrounds.

The Greek Municipal ECEC

Greece has never been a top performer regarding childcare participation. To be particular, back in 2000 only 53.9% of 4-year-olds participated in ECEC (European Commission, 2009, p. 96). In 2005 there was a slight increase, but in 2013 Greece still remained among the bottom performer

countries despite the stable increase of ECEC participation percentages. To be specific, in 2013 only 15.9% of 3-year-olds participated in the Greek ECEC, while the Barcelona target (European Commission, 2019) set in 2002 was 33%. Furthermore, only 76.4% 4-year-olds participated in the Greek ECEC in 2013, while the EU average was 93.9%, and well below the Education and Training 2020 benchmark of 95% (European Commission, 2015a). It should be stressed that Greece showed a slight average improvement between 2010 and 2013, but ECEC participation was uneven in the different regions of the country. Considering Attiki, the region of the Greek capital, as an example, data show that despite expecting high numbers of ECEC participation, it was the only Greek region where "less than half of all 4-year-olds were in pre-primary education," and in Athens, the Greek capital, only 30.8% of 4-year-olds took part in ECEC, approximately one third of the EU average (European Commission, 2015a, p. 120). Such regional disparities, in terms of ECEC participation, reflect the limited availability of ECEC structures (Petrogiannis, 2013). Moreover, they reveal the significant role that the Greek family has traditionally assumed – the prevailing "family care regime" (Petrogiannis, 2013, p. 2; Svensson-Dianellou et al., 2010) – substituting for a deficit welfare state (Zambeta, 2014), and also pinpoint the significant socio-economic divides produced by the austerity measures imposed upon Greece and other European countries. Such disparities could also explain the rising participants' concerns, that we discuss later in this paper, regarding a potential decrease of the rate of participation due to the challenging Greek socio-economic environment.

Public early childhood education in Greece, the focus of our inquiry, is mainly offered in ECEC Centres under the auspices of local municipal authorities and the Ministry of Interior, where local municipal authorities fall under, and not under the Ministry of Education, which regulates primary (including kindergartens), secondary and higher education. The municipal day care centres provide their services to children from seven months and up to five years of age, and they are usually organized in mixed gender and different age groups (Petrogiannis, 2013). Traditionally their principal objective has been the provision of care (Nikolaidis, 2017) and helping working parents, while kindergartens – part of the formal education system – have been oriented towards educational and pedagogical goals (Rentzou, 2015). Municipal ECEC organizations are also "deemed" as autonomous to define pedagogical content and activities, and develop their own policies and practices. Their policymakers are mostly elected councillors – appointed by the mayor and usually not related to education – and their staff has been characterized as heterogeneous, consisting of University, Technological and Vocational level educators. The issue of quality has been less researched in Greece (Rentzou, 2012, 2015), especially when one considers the diversity of the sector. An important aspect of this paper is to produce accounts of quality and also to analyse the potential influences supranational and international processes exert on this field, given also the significant, in many cases, disparities in material and cultural resources among different municipalities.

Mixing Policy Toolkits and MOUS: Implications for Inequality

The literature suggests that family poverty reduces the likelihood of children's participation in ECEC (Bennett, 2013) or hampers their access to quality provision (Gambaro et al., 2013). Also, austerity, a neoliberal political response to globalizing processes, may lead to shrinking provision within childcare markets, since their "clientele" is affected by growing unemployment, which inevitably generates the risk of ECEC becoming out of reach (Lloyd & Penn, 2014) and of low quality for deprived children (Vandenbroeck & Lazzari, 2014). More generally, the literature indicates that the market pressures generated by austerity cause a deregulation of the field, evident in quality standards' relaxation proposals (Loyd & Penn, 2014). Such conditions could directly affect quality and may reflect the natural tendency of, quasi market, ECEC providers, which in many

ECEC national systems have a strong hold, to favor economically sound localities and maybe withdraw from disadvantaged areas. Additionally, as Robertson and Dale (2013) have analyzed, education could produce greater inequalities as a result of transformations in the mode of governing of a sector. And if we follow Robertson's (2016) views of education as a social and political process, then the above-described transformations of the Greek political, economic and social realms could prove detrimental for the public good of childcare.

The OECD's policy recommendations have exerted pressure on policymakers and bureaucracies to reshape their modes of governance. *Starting Strong III: A Quality Toolbox for Early Childhood Education and Care* (2012) is the OECD's knowledge-based regulation toolbox that produces and expands the OECD's agenda on ECEC quality through international comparison and a selected literature, which promote the policy themes of investment and equity. Such a conception of quality has operated as a "technology of normalization," a "technology of distance," and a technology of depoliticization of purely political choices via context-independent comparison, shaped by certain values, ideas and assumptions (Dahlberg & Moss, 2008, p. 22; Dahlberg et al., 2007). Although there are five *"Starting Strong"* publications in the OECD's series for ECEC, only *"Starting Strong III"* (2012) is a "Quality Toolbox" providing "practical solutions" for promoting quality in this field (OECD, 2012, p. 15). Interestingly enough, through this toolbox, the OECD targets not only bureaucracies and policymakers centrally, but also aims directly at individuals and organizations, reshaping their conception of skills and quality through epistemological assumptions based on international comparison of data and examples from other countries.

The OECD's toolbox emphasizes the need for an "explicit curriculum structure" for ECEC that views cognitive and social progress as of equal significance (OECD, 2012, p. 82). Furthermore, it introduces "critical learning areas" (including literacy, numeracy and ICT) and aims to shape, through best practices, a different stance towards assessment processes (OECD, 2012, p. 98 & 130). *"Starting Strong III"* also specifies data collection and monitoring devices (rating scales, observations, inspections, checklists, etc.) as the appropriate means for developing national policies, assisting parents' "informed decisions" and "promoting accountability" (OECD, 2012, p. 285). Such policies and best practices aim to enhance quality through greater autonomy of decision making at the local and institutional level as well as the specification of minimum standards of quality (OECD, 2012).

The influence of the *Starting Strong III* quality toolbox is evident in the OECD's more recent venture, the *International Early Learning and Child Well-Being Study* (IELS), which builds on the previously mentioned emphases and assumptions, and produces context-free representations of reality (Sofou & Jiménez-Ramírez, 2020). The "global testing culture" – the religion of data or "dataism" as Nóvoa (2018, p. 550) calls it – impacts educational policies globally, however the "social, historical, political and geographical contexts" are of major significance (Holloway et al., 2017, p. 11). The IELS project exemplifies OECD's established conception of quality, which is a "choice" and not a "necessity:" it embraces particular ideas and assumptions that produce a dominant "technical language" of performance evaluation, and neglecting notions such as "potentialities," "possibilities," "uncertainty," "interpretations" and "meaning-making" (Moss, 2016, pp. 8, 14). As indicated previously, the literature has pointed to both, the risk to produce greater levels of inequality, despite the discourses on quality promotion (Peters, 2012); and issues related to the (de)regulation of the field, triggered by the promotion of new forms of governance as the only acceptable administrative solution within the sector and in education more widely (Ozga, 2012; Verger et al., 2019).

Theoretical Underpinnings

Policymaking is a complex field, riddled with contradictions. The foundation of this study is critical policy analysis. Such a perspective emphasizes issues of power, the roots of policies and their emergence to the prevalence of "policy winners and losers," and implications on inequality (Diem et al., 2019, p. 6). Critical policy analysis is based on the conception that it is of significance to "understand the complex connections between education and the relations of dominance and subordination in the larger society" (Apple, 2019, p. 276). Our paper engages with the concept of quality in ECEC, which is a core element of dominant educational discourses promoted by supranational and international organizations, especially the OECD. The fabrication of an international educational "doxa" has been buttressed upon results and comparison able to exert pressure over those who make the decisions at a national level (Bulle, 2011, p. 503). Such narratives become dominant, construct meaning and actions shaping an inevitable, self-evident and objective Truth that turns assumptions and values invisible (Moss, 2018). Education has become "a site of crucial struggles over authority and identity," vis-a-vis "the very meaning of being educated and who should control it" (Apple, 2019, p. 277).

However, as many scholars of the ECEC sector point out, quality is a multifaceted and elusive notion encompassing structural and also dynamic elements (Fotopoulou & Ifanti, 2018; Rentzou, 2017). The OECD fosters a "techno-preneurial" approach to quality via "indicators standards and benchmarks" and via the "deployment of accountability and performativity audits as policy devices" of governance (Pasias & Roussakis, 2013, p. 29). Such conceptions are framed by human capital approaches that raise the need for the economy to become more knowledge-based and for education to be seen as an aspect of economic policy, thus an investment (Bøyum, 2014). The OECD's discourse has reduced ECEC quality to a future-proof commodity for the promotion of employability, failing to embrace processes and contexts situated outside the "western-dominated mainstream best practices and domains of early learning" (Urban, 2019, p 98).

When discussing the notion of quality, we emphasize the need to engage with social justice and the potential implications of the use of this term for inequality, especially considering Greece's ordeal with the economic crisis. Lingard et al., (2014, p. 724) have shown how social justice has been "reconstituted as equity through technologies of measurement, comparison and governance" associated with the OECD's regulation tools. OECD's focus on equity has been one-dimensional, since it often omits consideration of "structural inequality in society beyond schooling" (Sellar & Lingard, 2013, p. 723). Furthermore, as Robertson and Dale (2013, p. 428) have argued, solely distributional accounts of social justice fail to unveil the social justice implications; "the structures that produce these distributions, or their outcomes."

Standardization, big data and comparison have been associated with a shift to new forms of regulation. Educational transformations, demolishing centralized education bureaucracies have been occurring all over Europe for some time now. Their principal target, for example the new Autonomy initiative (Honig & Rainey, 2012, p. 467), has been to enhance autonomy at local government and institutional levels and to increase educational institutions' decision-making authority (Salokangas & Ainscow, 2017). Changes in governance, specifically the extent of devolution of power/control from the central state to lower levels and the way the actors involved in decision making at the local level perceive the autonomy granted, continue to be central issues in education policy research and a focal point in our inquiry.

An important aspect of this shift that needs to be addressed is the relationship between autonomy and control. The literature has suggested that this relationship is complex and "should not be read in a zero-sum fashion;" that is, as "if increases in control are necessarily inversely

proportionate to decreases in autonomy or vice versa" (Cribb & Gewirtz, 2007, p. 209). There is a number of ways in which autonomy and control overlap and, for example, the complexity of the link between autonomy and control has been demonstrated in the shift from government to governance (new modes of regulation) where control is exerted via the practices of autonomy at different levels (Ozga, 2009). Therefore, as autonomy can be seen as a form of control or policy steering, so control can strengthen the exercise of autonomy. This argument is based on the position that autonomy "cannot exist in a vacuum but is always exercised within systems of constraints and conventions, which at one and the same time both circumscribe action and make it possible" (Cribb & Gewirtz, 2007, p. 211).

As a final point, under conditions of globalization and the constant attempts at policy convergence, the autonomy of the education policy field appears to be rather reduced (Robertson, 2011; Robertson & Sorensen, 2018). However, the specifics of transformations; how local actors perceive and reinterpret policies of quality and autonomy at the different sectors of an education system in times of crises, are in need of systematic investigation. The notion of recontextualization (Bernstein, 1990, 1996) helps us describe the processes through which local agents develop discursive resources taken from different social contexts; here, the – dominant – meaning of the ideas of quality and autonomy. The thinking tools described in this section lay the groundwork for our analysis concerning the perceptions of quality in the Greek ECEC and the relevant processes and implications of new forms of governance, contextualized in a setting of constant crises.

Methodology

The impetus behind this research was the consideration that during times of European but also global economic crisis, notions such as quality and autonomy may be conceptualized in different ways with significant implications for the institutions and issues of equity and social justice. The fact that municipal ECEC organizations have not been considered as educational structures reveals the assumptions behind their regulative framework, which is non-existent or vague (Nikolaidis, 2017). This, in turn, has influenced policies (e.g., access, participation, choice of pedagogical content and activities, decisions on workforce and their in-service training etc.) and thus quality provision in general in the Greek municipal ECEC. The lack of regulation at the level of the local government was a significant reason why we chose to focus on the diverse and uneven municipal childhood education and care centers, and specifically to municipal ECEC directors. To be particular, all municipal ECEC centers follow general rules described in the standard operational framework (general objectives, admission and other relevant policies), however ECEC directors – who oversee ECEC sites in their municipalities – are autonomous to specify and develop their own policies and make important decisions regarding the operation of ECEC (e.g. the specifics about tuition fees, teacher-child ratio, opening new ECEC centres, quality policies, parental involvement etc.). However, it should be stated that when it comes to financial figures, relevant policies (e.g., staff recruiting) have to be ratified by the central state. At the same time, we decided not to include in this study the ECEC private sector, as this has –to a great extent– the freedom to design and develop its own policies. Therefore, our exploration has focused on the policy level, and particularly policy makers/directors, people in charge of the respective ECEC centres from different municipalities, in order to grasp their perceptions, stances and agency as dimensions of governance and regulation.

Data Sources

We conducted semi-structured interviews to produce qualitative data, during an interviewing process that took place in the midst of the economic crisis in Greece and was concluded on 2017.

Our location was Athens, and based on the proximity from the participants' locations, the first author conducted face-to-face and telephone interviews of an average duration of thirty minutes. The interviews specifically targeted the notions of quality and autonomy, asking questions about the way policy is formulated at the local level, the relationship and interactions of local policy makers with the central government and issues of staff employment and funding, their understanding of the mission of municipal ECEC, and how they perceive the relationship between care and education. Furthermore, we utilized the OECD's discourse and its promoted recommendations on ECEC quality, not to find out whether they try to implement what is promoted but as a way of producing responses (Sarakinioti et al., 2011) concerning goals/objectives, pedagogical activities/curriculum programs, provision for socially disadvantaged children/immigrants and refugees, and accountability mechanisms. The vast majority of the participants was not aware of the OECD's policy recommendations for enhancing ECEC quality, and only few of them – mainly from central municipalities – had clear knowledge of such initiatives. However, all of them were aware of the OECD's involvement in the Greek economic crisis through its reports, reviews and recommendations during the past decade. For a detailed presentation of the interview protocol, the readers should refer to Appendix A.

Our research sample consists of 15 policy makers/directors in charge of the respective ECEC centres from different Greek municipalities. Eleven participants from peripheral and four from central municipal ECEC organizations. We selected the participants from five Greek regions. To be particular, Greece consists of 13 regions, with certain regions having similar populations and characteristics (e.g., GDP per capita, urban and rural population, unemployment statistics etc.). Eastern and Western Macedonia in the northern part of the country are similar to Central Macedonia. Likewise, Thessalia and Western Greece have similar characteristics with Epirus, while Northern and Southern Aegean and the Ionian Islands have similar figures with Crete. On the other hand, the concentration of economic activity in Attica (where half of the country's GDP is produced) and Central Macedonia and their superiority in terms of per capita GDP (Caraveli & Tsionas, 2012), could not be overlooked. Therefore, the selected five regions were: Attica, Central Macedonia, Epirus, Peloponnese and Crete. From each of the above five regions, we selected 15 participants; three municipalities from each region.

An important consideration in determining the sample and part of the preparatory work was to explore municipalities that have the potential to provide us with rich data. After closely examining the profiles from their websites, we selected a diverse mixture of municipalities ranging from local and national trend/standard-setters that follow, explicitly or implicitly, several OECD's good practice recommendations regarding ECEC quality, to municipalities that receive children mainly from underprivileged backgrounds. The municipal ECEC has been a highly complex field, where organizations located in the capital or other big cities, usually have the means to get higher funding, compared to municipalities in the periphery, because they are densely populated or have the human resources to claim and benefit from the National Strategic Reference Framework (NSRF) funding. At the same time, despite the potential for higher funding, ECEC centers from the capital or other big cities have not remained immune from the pressures generated by the imposition of state austerity regimes and a major preoccupation regarding their ECEC provision involves the tackling of poverty and social exclusion.

A limitation of this study was that despite our intended purposive sampling (Cohen et al., 2018), due to the previously presented characteristics, in certain cases we had to resort to a convenience (Cohen et al., 2018) approach. Dealing with the local government level was an ongoing challenge, especially when a researcher refers to the OECD and discusses notions such as quality, assessment and autonomy in a context of crisis. Evidently, there was constant communication and a

great deal of negotiations (Silverman, 2010) during the planning process, with certain prospective interviewees who were hesitant to participate in our research, despite our reassurance for anonymity. In case of denial, we chose a different municipality from the region. Our commitment to the participants' anonymity is the reason behind not including more contextual information for the interviewees, and referring to them as participants from metropolitan centers or from the periphery. At this point we need to emphasize that our aim was not to generalize but to get a deeper understanding of the problem addressed in this research. We sought to achieve a relative balance between participants from metropolitan centers and peripheries, in order to have richer insights on policy and practice implications of the contextual complexities affecting different Greek municipalities. Especially, considering the relatively small sample size, by no means did we seek to uncover an ultimate truth about the field. We also need to highlight that each of the selected themes – the notions of quality and autonomy – could have been the entire focus of our research, thus offering us the opportunity for a more in-depth exploration.

Data Analysis

For this study, we read, re-read and analyzed each interview in its entirety. We focused on certain themes that emerged from the thorough reading of the OECD's toolbox and the relevant critical policy literature. In that way we were aiming to explore patterns indicating the changes of the dominant – in the globally promoted discourse – meaning of the ideas of quality and autonomy. We created several main and subordinate (Miles et al., 2013) codes based on the participants' perceptions of quality, autonomy and governance of the municipal field of ECEC. To be specific, for the main code "perceptions of quality in the Greek ECEC," there were many sub-category codes including "care or education," "curricula and skills" and "the OECD in ECEC." The main code "viewpoints on autonomy," was the basic code over many subordinate codes such as "autonomy in practice" and "governance implications." Finally, a significant layer of the generating analytical process (Cohen et al., 2018) was the impact of the economic crisis and how the economic momentum affected the recontextualization of the notions of quality and autonomy in the Greek ECEC. In the next section, via the extensive utilization of participants' quotes, we present the way quality and autonomy are understood and rearticulated in conditions of economic crisis. We also showcase the implications of the challenging context of crisis in producing inequality and shaping the participants' positions on different modes of governing and regulating the field of the municipal ECEC.

Discussion of the Findings

This paper explores both dimensions of the problem identified in the literature, and how they are played out in an ECEC field operating in conditions of a persistent economic crisis. Addressing this problem is of great importance to European educational research since, as is well known, Greece was not the only country that experienced the effects of the recent economic crisis; and in addition, because Europe, as a supranational entity, has been going through a series of crises. The results of the empirical study presented below strengthen the position that viewing education – and particularly ECEC– as a market, creates risks exacerbated by economic austerity measures.

Perceptions of Quality in the Greek ECEC

A basic aim of the study is to produce accounts of quality and to explore the penetration of the dominant discourse in the Greek ECEC sector. The 15 interviewees who are responsible for their respective municipal ECEC centers expressed their views regarding quality in the domain of ECEC. During the interview process we explored their perceptions of ECEC quality and we

followed up with probing questions concerning the explicitness of goal setting and their ideas about care and education for determining quality in the Greek municipal ECEC field. The findings indicate diverse accounts of quality ranging from pedagogical-dynamic ones, to structural-technocratic, and to perceptions linking quality with equity and care. However, the vast majority of the participants perceive quality in ECEC as a vague and elusive notion, and approach it as a combination of several significant – according to them – aspects, which however are not always tangible and explicit. Several of them refer to the provision of care and education in very general terms, seeing both of these aspects as key to quality services in the ECEC domain. While, only a limited number of participants describe quality in more specific and explicit ways. Hence, the two sets of illustrations bellow point to an emerging differentiation concerning perceptions of quality in the Greek ECEC sector (participants are identified by their number and affiliation with peripheral (PM) or central (CM) municipal organizations).

PM02 perceived quality as the "...potential to achieve your goals...We set our goals at the beginning of the school year and we do not necessarily follow them up during the year... If we manage to achieve a high percentage of our goals, then I can say that we are successful...." Moreover, in the response of PM14, care equals education, and that is quality:

> When it comes to quality, the teacher/children ratio is vital... Quality is about having clean facilities... one cleaning lady is not enough... the kitchen should be clean and that is quality... Of course, there is also educational quality... the same goes for our facilities, some of them are below standard... there is no distinction between education and care... these two are inseparable, when you care you educate.

PM15 stressed structural characteristics of quality and invoked the value of equal rights to ECEC provision:

> Quality is about having qualified staff with a high level of training, quality facilities, no limitation to hiring staff, educational material and new facilities that will allow parents and children to enjoy equal rights to ECEC provision... Our ECEC centers are fundamentally educational centers and I believe education and care are inseparable notions.

Finally, PM08 described a holistic approach on ECEC quality:

> Quality in ECEC means that from the moment a child enters our facilities, the ECEC center has to provide the best services and that has to do with everything... safekeeping, the way the educators behave, because we should not forget that the ECEC center is the place where socialization happens... the child learns new stuff and has to be prepared for the next steps... all the above are quality in ECEC...

The second set of illustrations begins with CM09 who refers to the importance of skills in terms of children's preparation for compulsory education and appears to recognize the multifaceted nature of ECEC quality, as shown in the following extract: "Our objective is to integrate children as early as possible to ECEC, we also seek to provide our services to parents... I infer [that there is] quality from what parents tell me... When there are no complaints then it means you are good...." CM12 combined a pedagogical perspective with an explicit approach on goal setting and teacher professionalism:

> This is a challenging question... Caring is one of our significant goals... After a lot of thought let's say that education and care are inseparable terms... […] Unfortunately ECEC was primarily related to welfare... offering working mothers the opportunity

> to work... however education and pedagogy moved forward... there should be
> explicit goals... We do not have an explicit ECEC curriculum and we do not want
> one... we believe that it is wrong to have an explicit curriculum in ECEC... Quality is
> multidimensional.

Participants in the study express views that raise important aspects of ECEC quality, including dynamic-pedagogical characteristics, which however have been raised in an inexplicit and fuzzy way. The absence of evaluation/follow-up processes and the emphasis on rather generic terms reinforces the views expressed in the literature about the elusive nature of quality (Petrogiannis, 2013; Rentzou, 2017). Despite certain voices arguing for a balanced approach between care and education, and even for an emphasis on the educational dimensions of ECEC services, the data indicate that care tends to be the focal practice for many, both peripheral and central, municipalities. As it becomes apparent in the illustrations, only a limited number of participants articulate the dominant discourse by linking quality to explicit goals and argue for the importance of collecting data on operational aspects such as teacher/child ratio. These participants are mainly from central municipalities and are informed about the OECD and the EC's policy initiatives and recommendations on ECEC. They reproduce elements of the globally promoted discourse (OECD, 2012), and in certain cases act as standard setters in the uneven Greek ECEC field. On the other hand, certain participants mainly from peripheral municipalities, have vague or limited quality goals. They do not view explicit frameworks and evaluation of the pedagogical process as solutions for improvement, while they fall short of proposals for dealing with problems identified in the childcare centers under their responsibility, so limiting themselves to the official operational standards (Petrogiannis, 2013).

In other words, there is an emerging differentiation in approaches among those responsible for municipal ECEC centers, which might lead to a further diversification of the Greek ECEC field. The differences in the discourses articulated in the discussions concern not only the nature of ECEC, but also understandings of quality in ECEC provision in the country. Indeed, while one of the shifts of the EU and the OECD's policies is to place ECEC in the portfolio of education, the data of this research point to an intensification of care concerns, which, somehow, are accepted as legitimate given that Greek municipal ECEC is not under the Ministry of Education. The recontextualization of the "techno-preneurial" (Pasias & Roussakis, 2013, p. 6) dominant discourse on quality, mainly, as care, indicates the limits of such a narrative (Moss, 2018), and the exclusive (referring to the Global or, in our case, the European South) nature of such definitions (Grotlüschen, 2018). This finding is consistent with the international literature, which points to the ambiguous position and the complexity of the ECEC sector (Gibson et al., 2015).

From Quality to Inequality: The impact of the Economic Crisis

Processes of increasing deregulation, evident in the lack of ECEC structures and insufficient staffing, driven by the economic crisis, collide with the urge for regulation of the rather chaotic field of the Greek ECEC provision, and raise issues about the ways the economic crisis affects the governance of ECEC and eventually the whole sector. Related issues have emerged from the analysis of our interview data. To be particular, the deepest concerns of the participants are concentrated on the limitations that the SAPs (or the MOUs as most Greeks know them) have imposed on ECEC provision. These limitations shape a field based on market principles and particularly economic efficiency and strict decision making. This is a reality mentioned by all those involved in this research. To illustrate:

> Different areas call for different approaches in our municipality; there are ECEC
> centers which really help parents and children in need... in certain areas during

wintertime you can see poor children wearing flip flops… barefoot 2 year old children when outside is freezing… at the same time in another area of our municipality there could be a whole different story, a different cultural and educational capital…economically sound areas make a difference, create different needs; […]The welfare part is of significance and not ECEC provision anymore…(CM12).

According to PM08, "there is a ban on recruitment due to the MOUs … that is a huge problem, which we are trying to address…." Similarly, PM01 noted: "When it comes to recruitment, there are limitations due to the Memoranda." Several other participants underscored similar concerns: "The MOUs have impacted significantly the Greek ECEC… if there weren't any MOUs, we would have been able to hire more people, to cover our vacancies by hiring permanent staff and finally be able to accept more children… things are really tight for everyone" (PM03). "We are on the verge of collapse regarding funding" (PM10).

      PM07 and PM08 also referred to alternative funding mechanisms that are used in order to overcome the recruitment restrictions, and raised their concerns for such short-term policies:

> We are not allowed to hire anyone due to the financial crisis and we are trying to address this issue via the European Structural and Investment Funds, which provides us with enough liquidity to operate our ECEC centers… Lately the funds are reduced but we still manage to survive…"(PM08); "If the European Union chooses otherwise and shifts their funding from ECEC to something else we will 'freeze'… there is going to be a huge problem" (PM07).

Similarly, participants from both peripheral and central organizations highlighted significant recruiting limitations that hinder ECEC operation: "Last year we employed a psychologist, but this year there is neither psychologist nor doctor… Our funding was limited, so we could not hire them" (PM14). "Last year there was a social worker and a psychologist, but only for a few months… there is no doctor, but there is a speech and language therapy center, for the municipality as a whole and not specifically for ECEC, which is free of charge…" (CM06). "There are huge difficulties because due to the MOUs there is no recruitment of staff… funding is limited… we can barely make it" (PM15).

      It appears that the austerity measures implemented from 2010 onwards have deeply affected the Greek ECEC domain. Due to the limitations on staff hiring in the public sector and the inadequate funding allocated to the decentralized administration, the autonomy of the participants and therefore their capacity to make crucial decisions has been restricted. Because of the limited funding, they tend to relax the quality standards in order to deal with everyday problems caused by austerity measures and poverty, which is a common reality in many municipalities. Hence, it appears that deregulation processes within an already unregulated field, are being advanced. These entail a shrinking of provision, limiting the participation of children in ECEC due to the limited availability of municipal ECEC centers or positions within them, and also the inadequate operation of the existing ECEC centers that continue to operate (Svensson-Dianellou et al., 2010). Furthermore, our findings suggest that the market pressures that the financial crisis triggers, might lead to the closure or the underperforming of ECEC centers in disadvantaged areas. It is correct to say once again that the outcomes of market-efficient models, especially in times of severe economic turmoil, range from social equity and state solidarity risks to lurking privatisation effects (Peters, 2012; Diem et al., 2019). Consequently, it appears that the dominant discourse on ECEC quality, founded on the realities of privileged countries and regions, do not reflect the voices and challenges of countries deeply

impacted by the economic crisis; a reality that shifts the participants' gaze from quality and reinforces inequalities.

Governing the ECEC field: It's all Greek to… Autonomy

We use the section title idiom with respect to the complex, contradictory and paradoxical nature of the notion of autonomy in the Greek public ECEC. The ECEC sector is officially decentralized and autonomous –since control lies in the hands of local authorities– on par with the dominant discourse that promotes the devolution of power for the enhancement of quality, efficiency, performance management and decision-making authority (Honig & Rainey, 2012). At the same time, it appears that the central government is very much an active part of governance as it approves or disapproves financial figures and even tightens control regarding hiring of staff. Therefore, the Greek municipalities do not really have the capacity to act autonomously. What actually seems to take place is a constant negotiation between the local and central state agencies, precisely around the space the former have to act autonomously; an overlapping of state control and local autonomy as Gewirtz et al., (2007) described it.

To begin with, in terms of political interferences from the state and also regarding educational policies, the interviewees claim that they are rather autonomous. They highlight that they design and implement their own policy agenda concerning the operation of ECEC (e.g., the tuition fees, diet plans, educational objectives, etc.). Particularly, CM09 noted: "Yes we are autonomous... there are no central political interferences... not just for us but for the municipal ECEC in general... The municipality is 100% responsible...;" Similarly, other participants mention: "We are fully autonomous... there are no interferences, since we are a legal entity that is fully responsible for ECEC provision... We have our own policies, which of course are altered according to the circumstances..." (PM08). "We are autonomous, we are a legal entity... all the choices are made by us..." (PM01). PM03 also highlighted: "The Ministry of education deals with the kindergartens, so I would say that we are fully autonomous when it comes to our educational policies…."

However, the majority of the participants express their concerns and even objections regarding the extent of their autonomy, or lack of any real autonomy, concerning critical issues that relate to financial matters in the operation of the ECEC organizations. To illustrate, CM09 elaborated:

> However as far as the selection of the personnel is concerned, we 'follow orders' depending on what the state provides... the Ministry could say 'you have 100 permanent employees and you are asking for 30 temporary employees in order to cover 10 ECEC centers, well I think that you are asking a lot'... so there is a probability of not getting what we ask for […] Let's compromise.

PM14 referred to the period before the decentralization processes took place, and underlined:

> Back in the days, when ECEC centers were under the authority of the central state and did not belong to the municipality, we had money, we could do anything... Back then ECEC centers were autonomous... In our case 4 educators retired and after that ... came the MOUs and that was it...

CM12 favored a more managerial and meritocratic approach. The quotations below illustrate the case:

> I will let you decide... Can you be autonomous when your budget needs to be approved from the observatory of the Ministry? Which means that you cannot design and implement your policies... I might believe that our policy for ECEC is to

be able to select and employ certain educators with certain CVs, I need from my educators to have top-level qualifications, but I cannot do that… […] I do not necessarily need the cheaper one, I need the best… Therefore, in economic terms we are not autonomous… Moreover, in terms of personnel selection we are not autonomous and there is a lack of certain regulations, which should provide an explicit regulatory context.

As suggested earlier, the link between autonomy and control is complex and in some cases control (regulations promoting ECEC quality) can be enabling and enhance autonomy (see Cribb & Gewirtz, 2007; Ozga, 2009). In this case, despite the formal autonomy they enjoy due to the decentralised administrative system and the devolution of power to the local state, participants in the study question the degree to which they have real decision-making powers to perform their work, especially as regards the operation of ECEC organisations. Directors attribute this misalignment, between formal autonomy and real autonomy, to the regulations and restrictions resulting from the strict austerity measures imposed upon the entire public sector. Such measures are disabling them and limit their autonomy. Autonomy refers to relations of power, and although the participants have local autonomy, they cannot have local control, since they do not have the means to exercise their autonomy (e.g. the central state still retains strong control over critical aspects of ECEC operation such as the policies of staff recruiting). It appears that when it comes to the Greek ECEC provision, the notion of autonomy has been systematically associated with Greece's economic struggles and therefore understood and re-interpreted by the actors in the field in a constrained way that inhibits the development of educational policies on ECEC. So it could be argued that the Greek case reveals, in a most clear way, the complexities and contradictions inherent in the notion of autonomy, which in the terms of advanced liberalism is defined as "taking control of our undertakings, defining our goals and planning to achieve our needs through our own powers" (Rose, 1996, p. 154). The idiom used in this section's title is meant to capture such contradictions.

From Governance to Government?

The international trend and the policies advanced are towards the decentralization of powers on the argument that such changes would deepen democratic processes, allowing better political representation and decision making and also would create conditions of flexibility necessary for responding appropriately to emerging or complex issues (Salokangas & Ainscow, 2017). Contrary to this trend, an important governance issue that arises from this study is the possibility of integrating ECEC provision to compulsory education and thus to a centralized system under the Ministry of Education, seeking a more structured and thus regulated approach. Furthermore, according to the interviewees, such a shift will enhance quality and will help to tackle the multidimensional and constantly growing problems of ECEC provision in Greece.

PM02 highlighted the need to mitigate the dichotomy between kindergartens and ECEC structures:

I strongly believe that ECEC should be undivided… Kindergartens and ECEC structures should have been in the same uniform organization, under the auspices of one operational body… I believe placing them under the Ministry of Interior was a wrong move… It appears that they do not admit that what takes place in ECEC is education…

Other participants who stand in favor of this shift, approach in a holistic way the educational aspect of such a move, specifically curriculum, pedagogy and assessment processes:

> I am of the opinion that ECEC provision should be part of the Ministry of
> Education... I strongly believe that it needs to happen... The Ministry of Education
> cares more about the educational aspect... There could be more qualified staff and it
> would be better for the children's progress... There could be better guidance in terms
> of the curriculum and they could use our current facilities for the full-day
> kindergartens... (PM03)

Similarly, other participants emphasized: "I say yes to a move under the Ministry of Education... Such a move would require different, higher standards... currently each municipality seeks to promote its own agenda, but under the Ministry of Education there would be a 'national curriculum', now everything is optional..." (PM04). "Being under the Ministry of Education would be great, because there is accountability, seminars and training for the educators..." (CM06). Finally, CM12 underlined the necessity for more regulation to achieve ECEC quality:

> The Ministry of Interior has not ever put together a body/ a structure to regulate
> ECEC, a structure that would employ qualified people in order for them to actively
> engage with ECEC... There needs to be a certain Ministry involved... fall under the
> Ministry of Education and not the Ministry of Interior.

A number of interviewees note that the devolution of powers to municipalities was wrong, since the Ministry of Interior lacked mechanisms of regulation and specialized agencies that could promote ECEC quality provision. According to these participants, decentralization has reinforced long-standing views, which understand ECEC primarily as care and not as education. Hence, placing ECEC under the auspices of the Ministry of Education would signify that it is primarily education, which amounts to higher standards and clear regulatory frameworks.

However, there are also voices – especially from peripheral ECEC organizations – against the change in the locus of control just mentioned. The main impetus behind such voices is that a shift to the Ministry of Education is expected to further diminish the autonomy they enjoy. According to these participants, ECEC is not only about education but requires a holistic approach better promoted by municipalities under the Ministry of Interior. Specifically, PM01 explained:

> Falling under the Ministry of Education, would not help us at all, because they are
> full of clichés in terms of education and structures... we are free to act on our own,
> to improvise... those things do not happen in kindergartens... that is why I do not
> want any link to the Ministry of Education, because our role will be downgraded...

Likewise, with PM05 and PM10: "I think that falling under the Ministry of Education is not necessary, given that ECEC is not purely about education... this is why kindergartens exist and this is why municipal ECEC is not compulsory... ECEC is more like a social [welfare] structure..." (PM05); "I believe that we should stay under the Ministry of Interior, what we do is not education, it is more like adapting to societal needs and expectations..." (PM10).

The quotations above point to a division which exists between municipal ECEC and kindergartens, brought forth again recently as an issue by scholars in the field (Rentzou, 2015; Rentzou & Sakellariou, 2011). The emerging debate, on the one hand, raises a concern about the "schoolification of ECEC" (Rentzou, 2017, p. 10) which is on the rise internationally, mainly due to the agenda defined and promoted systematically by the OECD. On the other hand, it takes issue with the indecisiveness of the government regarding what is seen as a need to weaken the sharp dichotomy between education and care, and which puts the Greek ECEC provision in a "critical crossroad" (Rentzou, 2017, p. 10), as has been identified also by participants in the present study.

Such a division demonstrates the complexity of the link between control and autonomy (Cribb & Gewirtz, 2007), which in the Greek municipal ECEC case could be demonstrated in a potential future shift from governance to government.

Implications

The findings of the study document an increasing diversity regarding not only the participants' understanding of the nature of ECEC, but also the notions of quality in ECEC provision. To be particular, only few participants had explicit relevant knowledge and referred to explicit quality standards, expressing their views on them. From our data we surmise that other participants have a rather vague idea about quality policies promoted at the international or European Union level, probably through their dissemination within the ECEC sector. Accordingly, the recontextualizations of such ideas vary, crucially depending on the specificities of participants' local contexts and the problems they encountered, especially in the midst of the economic crisis. Moreover, while the dominant international trend, shaped both by the OECD and the EU policies, has been to place ECEC in the portfolio of education, our research provides evidence of an intensification of care concerns, facilitated by the fact that the Greek municipal ECEC is not under the responsibility of the Ministry of Education. The deepest quality concerns, shared by the respondents to the questions posed in the interviews, are focused on the limitations that the SAPs have imposed on the public sector and particularly ECEC provision. Those limitations shape the ECEC policies of the municipalities, orientating them towards market principles and particularly economic efficiency. The budgetary cuts reduce ECEC as a public good to an operation guided by economic rationality. Our findings suggest that the economic momentum limits the scope in the operation of ECEC structures and impacts ECEC participation directly. Hence, the OECD's dominant quality discourse in conditions of crisis is recontextualized, and shifted from comparing best practices to providing mainly care and helping those in need. This raises concerns about the unequal distribution of provision and the inequality consequences of austerity regimes for children from lower socio-economic backgrounds who are less likely to participate in ECEC.

In terms of the autonomy of those involved in the design and implementation of education policies, the participants' discourse describes a tug-of-war situation around issues of control, pointing to the limitations posed by central state policies related to ECEC. Indeed, autonomy is a "polysemic concept whose meaning can only be determined in its use" (Thompson et al., 2021), and in the Greek ECEC case despite the devolution of powers and the anticipated devolution of financial control to the local state, the locus of control still remains with the central government which holds the power over critical aspects of ECEC operation and restrains the exercise of the municipalities' authority regarding the use of their resources. It appears that when it comes to the Greek ECEC provision, the notion of autonomy is recontextualized and systematically associated with Greece's economic struggles and therefore understood and re-interpreted by the actors in the field in a constrained way that inhibits the design and development of municipal policies on ECEC.

The economic crisis also acts as a catalyst for the shifts in the governing of the Greek municipal ECEC sector. An important governance implication that arises from this research is the possibility of integrating ECEC provision to school education, under the responsibility of the Ministry of Education. Our findings indicate that governance – as a regime where, at a minimum, decision making is delegated to the authorities of the local state – potentially leads to new forms of government because the vast majority of the participants seek more regulation by the central state. What is interesting and paradoxical here is that it is not the central government that seeks to increase its control over the affairs of the municipalities, ECEC in particular. On the contrary, it is the local

government policy makers that are asking from the central government to increase its authoritative control over this sector and are expressing the need for a more structured regulatory framework to help them achieve and enhance quality ECEC provision. Future research can build on the previously discussed implications, especially considering the COVID-19 crisis and its repercussions on the governance of the ECEC field in general, and in the European South in particular. Additionally, more research is needed to explore how the pandemic and particularly the rise of distance learning have affected the notions of quality and autonomy for those involved in ECEC.

To conclude, we should emphasize that we do not perceive the OECD's policy agenda on ECEC as a neutral, fixed reality. International and Supranational Organizations have utilized the notion of quality – an empty/floating signifier (Laclau, 1996) – as a key term in the articulation of the global discourse on education, mobilizing consent and achieving hegemony. However, ECEC, in principle, is not a technical but a "political and ethical practice" (Moss, 2016, p. 12). The OECD's paradigmatic quality narrative fails to delve into complexity and uncertainty, and refutes other conversations between the global and the local (Urban, 2019). Therefore, by contextualizing the notion of quality in a setting of overlapping crises, we highlight the need to contest the dominant policy discourse on ECEC quality (Moss, 2018), and to envisage alternatives which, going beyond the maximizing future returns narrative of ECEC, expand the vocabulary needed to address inequality, limited participation and low attainment.

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Appendix

Interview Protocol: Leading Questions and examples of Probes

1. How is quality in ECEC provision understood and realized in your Municipality?

Probe: When talking about quality, do you refer to care or education as well?

2. In your municipal centers the orientation is on care or on education? Has your municipal organization any clear policies and/ or specific guidelines on this matter?
Probe: If there is a certain emphasis, where is it placed and why?

3. Do your municipal centers follow a concrete, explicit ECEC curriculum?
Probe: According to the OECD's Starting Strong III, explicit curricula could promote quality in ECEC. What is your organization's position on it? And if you have a curriculum policy for ECEC, how do you communicate it to stakeholders (pedagogic staff, parents etc.)?

4. How is quality in the ECEC centers of your municipalities assessed? Has your municipal organization implemented any system of accountability?
Probe: Is the operation of the centers assessed? What about the pedagogic staff? What kind of procedures are there used to give feedback to educators and other staff about their performance?

5. Are there any policies on minimum standards?
Probes: The OECD refers to the minimum standards that a municipality should set in ECEC. Minimum standards refer to staff-child ratio, hygiene, safety, health, fire regulations etc.)? Do ECEC centers in your municipality meet such standards?

6. Are there any specific provisions in place for disadvantaged children (children from low-income families, children from immigrant backgrounds or children of refugee families)?

7. Does your municipal organization formulate specific goals and objectives for the provision of ECEC in the centers of your responsibility?
Probes: Like, social policy goals, employment policy goals or educational policy goals? If there are explicit objectives, how are they decided? If not, in what other ways are priorities set?

8. According to the legislation, local authorities have sole responsibility for organizing and operating the municipal ECEC centers. Do you think that this framework gives you enough space to make your own decisions?
Probes: For example, do you have freedom about setting up or closing down centers, employing teaching and auxiliary staff, or other specialized professionals (e.g., psychologists, social workers)?
Probes: And what is the relationship between your municipality and the central government concerning specifically the ECEC centers? What kind of cooperation is there between you and the central government?

9. Does the central government intervene in any way in the formulation and implementation of the municipal ECEC policy?
Probes: Are there any clear lines of communication between your municipal organization and central government agents? Do you consult them when you are making important decisions regarding the ECEC centers in your municipality?

Probes: Do you feel that the local government has autonomy or is there interference from the central government in the running of the municipal centers (policies, objectives etc.)? Have you encountered any obstacles, put in your way by central government, in the formulation and implementation of policies for ECEC centers under your responsibility? Could you give some examples?
Probe: Possible ways forward to tackle such issues?

10. How are the municipal centers funded? Do you get funds from the central government? Do you have any other sources for funding (e.g., do you get extra funding for staff development purposes, ECEC programs or other expenses? From what sources?)
Probe: How is the budget for ECEC provision being allocated?

11. Which are the special features that distinguish your municipal ECEC centers from neighboring municipal ECEC centers?

12. To what extent do you think that your municipal ECEC centers achieve the European standards for ECEC provision?

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