Nordic childcare policies: Children, parents and politics

Paper to be presented at the Mid-term conference of NCoE Welfare REASSESS, Oslo May 18-20 2009

Very much draft paper – please do not quote

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This paper is part of the work of a project for the Icelandic Presidency of the Nordic Council of Ministers 2009. A comparative project on childcare policies is conducted by group of researchers from all five Nordic countries (Johanna Lammi-Taskula, Ann-Zofie Duvander and Berith Brandt under the lead of Ingólfur Gislason, University of Iceland)
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Abstract
Comprehensive childcare policies are one of the main characteristics of the Nordic welfare model (e.g. Hatland & Bradshaw, 2006; Lewis, 2007; Kangas & Rostgaard, 2007). The extensive support to parents of young children is claimed to be the main explanatory factor when the relatively high labour market participation of mothers, low poverty rates among families with children and high fertility rates are examined in the Nordic countries. Although all Nordic countries have developed extensive childcare policies, their approaches differ (Ellingsæter & Leira, 2006, Finch, 2006). The aim of this paper is to compare the childcare policies of the five Nordic countries in the middle of 2000s, relative to other EU and OECD countries, and evaluate these against the Nordic (and EU) policy goals of children’s well-being, gender equality and balancing of work and welfare. The findings suggest that it is on the basis of more quantitative policy indicators difficult to establish the existence of a distinct Nordic model. Although the Nordic countries all emphasize gender equality, but that in the policy goals of especially the ECEC schemes

Introduction
The term childcare policies applies to support provided to parents caring for young children, regardless of whether the support refers to paid parental leave or cash grants for care or Early Childhood Education Services (ECEC)¹ (Rostgaard & Fridberg, 1998).

As well as ensuring parental take-up of paid labour, the childcare policies aim at ensuring the best interest of the child and for the general well-being of the child. Paid parental leave is regarded to be important for the health of the child, e.g. lower child mortality, longer periods of breastfeeding and less maternal stress (Ruhm, 1998; 2000; Galtry, 2000; Tanaka, 2005; Berger, Hill, and Waldfogel, 2005; Gregg and Waldfogel, 2005 in Kamerman, 2006). The importance of children’s rights to parental care is highlighted in the Nordic legislation, e.g. the Icelandic law that states that the aim of the law is to ensure children’s access to both parents. Hence the parental leave is seen as important tool to ensure bonding between parents and children providing the base for their emotional relationship and trust.

Early Childhood Education and Care has also been organized to meet the needs of young children for environment that is adapted to their needs, as defined at each point in time. During past decades the importance of Early Childhood Education and Care has been emphasized both in research and in policies (e.g. Guldbrandsen, 2008). The ECEC is also believed to be of vital importance for the integration of children that have immigrated to the Nordic countries and disabled children. The quality of the preschools and the outcomes of children have gained increased attention and the educational as well as the pedagogical role of the ECEC is recognize and valued, thus relating directly to the field of educational policies (e.g. Esping Andersen, 2007). Furthermore, care policies in the Nordic countries have also been influenced by the increase in children’s legal rights that has set a clear mark on childcare policies, e.g. in

¹ ECEC is in this paper understood in accordance with the OECD definition as organized day career and pre-primary provisions “in centres and in group settings (including schools) and family day care (individuals who provide care to non-related children in the carer’s home)” (OECD 2001: 15).
emphasis on children’s voices and participation in decision making in day care and their legal claim to rights to day care from a certain age (Eydal and Satka, 2006; Kjörholt and Lidén, 2005).

In addition to the policies on ECEC, policies that have questioned the value of public day care for young children have got more attention. In 3 out of 5 of the Nordic countries the legislator has enacted laws on schemes of Home Care Allowances, which goal is to provide parents with a choice to stay home with their children or to pay a other persons, e.g. a relative, to take care of the child. Thus, while different in character all types of support regarding care of children under six is organized and based on ideas of the best interests of child.

As well documented by the literature, childcare policies have wider influences e.g. on labor market, gender equality, fertility and poverty. The extensive volumes of public day care is claimed to be the main explanatory factor for the relatively high labor market participation of women in Nordic countries (E.g. Gornick et al. 1997, Pérvier and O’Dorchai 2002, Uunk et al. 2005). Hence childcare policies are therefore an important component of Nordic labor market policies, and an important means for families to balance work and family life.

Furthermore, low poverty rates among families with children in Nordic countries have been explained by the fact that relatively few households are with only one earner (breadwinner). Thus, it is not only the benefit system of the Nordic welfare states that keeps families with children above the poverty line, but more importantly the welfare state support that parents receive in order to be both able to earn for their family (e.g. Hoelscher, 2004; Lelkes and Zólyomi, 2008; OECD, 2008).

The fact that fertility figures in the Nordic countries are relatively higher than is the case in most other European countries has among other things been explained by the fact that women in Nordic countries are able to earn and care, and do not have to choose either or (Hatland and Bradshaw, 2006).

Last but not least the Nordic countries have for decades worked explicitly on creating gender equality in both work and family, both in single country policies as well as in Nordic co-operation. In 1952, on the initiative of the Danish government, the Nordic Council (Nordurlandaräð) was established; i.e. a forum for an inter-parliamentary co-operation of all five Nordic governments (Arter, 1999). Since 1987, the ministers of gender equality in each respective Nordic country have participated in the Council of Gender Equality (Ministerradet for ligestilling). During the 1970s and 1980s, the Nordic gender-equality project encouraged women’s participation in the labour market in which all the countries developed extensive policies, including care policies in order to enable equality among both men and women (Kvinnor och män i Norden 1988). Mothers have increased their participation in paid work while studies show small changes in fathers’ participation in unpaid work including, caring for their children (e.g. Lewis 2006). In the program of the Council of Gender Equality in 2001-2005, one of the main goals was to create joint campaigns in an attempt to encourage men to use their entitlements to paternity and parental leaves as well as emphasize the importance of reconciliation between work and care for both parents (Nordisk likestillningssammarbeide 2001-2005).Thus, both child care policies are an important influential factor in policies on
gender equality, the latest example being the individual entitlements to paid parental/paternity leave for fathers, implemented in all the Nordic countries but in different volumes.

This paper will not address all these issues. Its focal point is to ask: Is there a Nordic model of child care policies? And how well do the Nordic countries perform when evaluated against the Nordic (and EU) policy goals of gender equality, children’s well-being and balancing of work and family life? In order to answer these questions, the paper compares the childcare policies of the five Nordic countries in the middle of 2000s, and investigates how the countries position themselves in regards to the overall policy goals, relative to other comparable OECD countries. Schemes and policies on paid parental leave, home care allowances and early childhood education and care are examined and compared.

**Nordic countries as the EU showcase – common grounds in child care policy goals**

The Nordic child care policies are overall characterised by the ambition to ensure gender equality, children's well-being and the balancing of work and family life. This resonates very well the current family policy approach of the EU Commission which places weight on all these three policy dimensions. E.g. the Nordic emphasis on the father's role in parental leave is in line with the EU Commission recommendations on encouraging an increased gender equality in take-up of parental leave, as “fewer men take parental leave or work part-time (7.4% compared to 32.6% for women) and women remain the main carers of children and other dependents” (European Commission 2006a: 5; Roadmap for equality of women and men (2006-2013). The Nordic model is also an often studied experimental case, serving to illustrate and elucidate what are the consequences of implementing quite extensive and generous child care policies. E.g. Member States are advised by the Commission to study closely other Member States “that have developed successful policies in this area, for instance the Swedish parental leave system and its father’s quota, and thus indirectly give direction” (Lindén, 2007:11).

Overall, the EU The EU Commission approach to child wellbeing focuses on children as family members where an increase in the wellbeing of children and young people is seen as a means of helping future generations to develop to their full potential and of enabling them to contribute more to society and to the economy (European Commission 2008a: 111). How may child care policies assist the increased well-being of children according to the Commission? The concern of the EU Commission is to help future generations to develop to their full potential and of enabling them to contribute more to society and to the economy (op. cit.) and the investment in good quality and affordable ECEC services can be seen as a direct means to achieve this. An increase in the quantity of day care services increases the parental employment opportunities, which is likely to result in an increase in a material wellbeing of children.

In terms of balancing work and family life, the increase in the provision of day care services is also regarded by the EU as a direct measure to improve work-life balance, addressed in the Barcelona European Council recommendation of a provision of day care for at least 90% of children between 3 and 6 years old and to at least 33% of children under 3 years old by 2010. Providing leave also assist parents in balancing of work and family life and the Commission
has provided suggestions for an increase of parental leave (European Commission 2007c), despite the fact that opponents of long leave schemes argue that they have an adverse effect on women’s careers and lifetime earnings. They attribute some of the gender wage gap to women’s more frequent use of parental leave (Pylkänen and Smith, 2003), and it is argued that employers may be more reluctant to hire women in some sectors because of generous leave schemes (Fagnani, 1999).

As is the case for many policy goals, the goals are interrelated, so one may also view the leave length as a dimension to be considered for the well-being of the child. Time with parents is essential for the early years development, but the other coin of the story is the claim that long parental leave can disadvantage the child as well. It has been argued, for example, that the availability of long leave periods further disadvantages children born into dysfunctional families or to second-language parents (Bennett, 2008).

The policy goals are in this way neither uni-dimensional, nor always uni-directional, but the Nordic policy goals in many ways reflect the EU policy goals, and the Nordic countries are often highlighted in many comparative studies. The question is what features, if any, make the Nordic model so uniquely different to childcare models in other comparable countries? In the following the Nordic child care policies will be compared, both within the Nordic countries but also in reference to other comparable countries, later to be evaluated in regards to the policy goals of child well-being, gender equality and balancing of work and family life.

Nordic weight on cash or care?
The Nordic welfare states are often considered to be service intensive (Anttonen and Sipilä, 1996) relative to other regime types. One, albeit somewhat crude, indication of whether the weight is on cash or care in regards to public provision for children is the social expenditure spent on these two items. The assumption is that public investment in leave and ECEC services, represented by the social expenditure levels in these two policy fields, will reflect the possibility for parents to choose between looking after the child at home or having the child looked after in formal day-care. A combination of high expenditure in both policy fields would very crudely indicate better possibilities to combine work and family life (not taking into account institutional variation in leave and ECEC arrangements across countries).

As a proportion of GDP the Nordic countries spend between 0.5-0.7 % of GDP on Early childhood education and care (ECEC) for the young children aged 0-2 years, lowest in Norway and highest in Denmark, Finland and Iceland, but relative to other EU and OECD countries, the Nordic countries all belong to the group of countries with standard deviation of $+\frac{1}{2}$, i.e. they are well above the average levels of other comparable countries included in Table. In comparison, OECD and EU-27 countries spend on average 0.3 % of GDP on day care for this age group.

In regards to the older children, aged 3-school age, the Nordic countries are more comparable to other OECD and EU-27 countries, although some of the Nordic countries (Denmark,
Finland and Iceland) belong to the high standard deviation group and thus spend relatively more than what all countries in the study do on average. These three countries spend 0.5 % of GDP on pre-primary day care. Sweden is positioned on the average level (0.4 %) whereas Norway spends less than average (0.3 %).

In comparison, all the Nordic countries spend more than what is the average on cash benefits such as maternity, paternity and parental leave (between 0.6-0.8 %) where the OECD and EU-27 average is 0.3 %.

The Nordic countries in terms of social expenditure are thus placing weight both on cash and day care. These countries are relative high spenders in both cash and day care, and in day care especially in regards to day care for the younger children, whereas in particular Norway and Sweden fall behind many other countries in regards to spending on the children aged 3-school age.

Table 1 leave-2.doc

Table 2 ECEC-2.doc

(Please open the files by moving the mouse on the pictures and click)
(Source: Lohmann, Rostgaard, and Spiess, 2009)

Nordic variation in leave policies
How similar are the Nordic countries then when specific policy elements are compared. This section outlines the institutional features of the leave schemes in the Nordic countries, before comparing these to other OECD countries.

Schemes pertaining to maternity support trace its roots about 100 years back in history. Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden have all made extensive reforms of their schemes during the immediate post war period. According to Gauthier (1996), they emerged as leaders among the OECD countries in this regard. However, historically the development in Iceland is in sharp contrast (Eydal and Gislason, 2008).

The Danish law on barselsorlov provides entitlement to total 52 weeks of paid parental leave. The mother is entitled to 4 weeks before birth, 14 weeks of maternity leave after the birth of the child and the father is entitled to two weeks paternity leave within the same period, but the 32 weeks period the parents can decide by themselves how to use (Lov nr. 566 from 09/06/2006). The amount paid is paid in accordance with pervious salaries and work hours. From 5th of January the maximum amount for each week is DK 3,625 (Din Barselsorlov, n.d.) However some parents are entitled to full salaries during their parental leave (NOSOSKO, 2007).
According to the Finnish law the total amount of parental leave was in 2009 44 weeks or 46 if fathers used the bonus weeks. Maternity leave is paid for 105 days. In 1991 Finnish fathers became entitled to one-week paternity leave and in 1993 this was expanded to three weeks. Furthermore, a so-called bonus leave for fathers was introduced in 2003: If the father, who uses at least the two weeks of the parental leave period, then the father is granted with two extra weeks with payment (Haatja 2004; Kela n.d.). This latter period must be taken all in one block of time within the six months period after the paid parental leave ends. In addition to the maternity and paternity leave there is a parental leave of 158 working days. The amount of benefit is normally linked to taxed earnings. There is a minimum flat rate benefit 22.40 Euro paid as a minimum to all (Kela, n.d.).

Iceland did develop its first universal scheme of paid parental leave relatively later than the other Nordic countries and has been a laggard in comparison to the other countries. In 2000 new law on paid parental leave came into force that radically changed the previous scheme, the period went up from six to nine months, flat rate sum was no longer paid but 80% of pervious income, and the period was divided into three parts; one entitled to the mother, one to the father and one third the parents can divide as the like between themselves A lump sum is paid to those that have not held income prior to birth. The leave must be used before the child becomes 18 months old (Lög um fæðingarorlof nr. 95/2000).

Since 1993, parents in Norway are entitled to parental leave for a total of 42 weeks with a 100% wage replacement rate and the parents can choose between: (1) from 6 to 29 weeks in addition at lower compensation or (2) 52 weeks with an 80% wage replacement rate and between 6 and 39 weeks at lower compensation. This has been called the time-account scheme. An obligatory 3 weeks before parturition and 6 weeks after are reserved for the mother and in 2009 six weeks for the father. The Norwegian government aims at increasing the weeks for the fathers in coming years, further discussed in next section. In addition to the paid parental leave, Norwegian parents have the opportunity to take up to 3 years unpaid leave or to reduce their working hours in negotiation with their employer, and the parental benefit may be collected until the child reach the age of three (NAV, n.d.).

The Swedish law is based on the law from 1974 when a well-known reform of the schemes took place: All parents became entitled to a total of 6 months leave and the wage replacement percentage rose to 90%. Parents were free to choose when they used their rights to paid parental leave before the child’s eighth birthday (Björnberg and Eydal, 1995). The length of leave since 1974 has been expanded several times and in 1989 the period was extended to 12 months. The income replacement has been from 90-75% of previous salaries. In addition, 3 months were added with flat rate benefits, the same amount which non-working parents are entitled to throughout the whole period. From 1st of January 2002, Swedish parents are entitled to 480 days of paid parental leave. Each parent is allocated 60 days on a quota basis so that the mother and father each have 60 earmarked days. The remaining days are also equally divided between the parents but they can transfer the rights to each other if they like. The compensation level is 80 per cent of the previous salary (up to a standard ceiling) for one year after the birth of the child. For a further 90 days, those parents who continue to stay off work can receive a so-called guaranteed amount of SEK 180 per day. Parents with no previous income receive the guaranteed amount for all the 480 days. From 1st of July 2008 parents can earn and additional equality bonus up to highest 3000 SEK in tax deduction if they divide their
paid parental leave equally (Försäkringskassan, n.d.) Thus even though all the Nordic countries have relatively generous schemes of paid parental leave, there is a difference between the length of periods from 39 weeks total in Iceland, up to 69 weeks in Sweden.
Table 3. Parental leave in Nordic countries number of week, December 2007

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Denmark</th>
<th>Finland</th>
<th>Iceland</th>
<th>Norway</th>
<th>Sweden</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Maximum number of weeks</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>44-46</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>in which maternity/paternity/parental leave benefit is payable</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>


**Fathers and parental leave**

The emphasis on the active participation of fathers in care can be observed in family law in the Nordic countries, where the care role of both parents has been emphasized (Eydal and Gíslason, 2008). Thus, all the Nordic countries have emphasized strengthening the active role of fathers in caring through various polices (e.g. Bergman and Hobson, 2002; Björnberg and Dahlgren, 2008; Skevik, 2008). Ellingsæter (in Skevik 2003, p. 3) points out that, in the case of Norway, policy makers have put political fatherhood on the agenda and, “the caring father and the domestication of men is the new issue of the 1990s”. This has in turn influenced the approach that the Nordic countries have taken in their quest for gender equality, which in turn has affected the schemes of paid parental leave.

The Nordic countries provide quite different entitlements to fathers. Three of the countries have chosen to provide fathers with individual entitlements, Iceland 3 months, Sweden 2 months and Norway 6 weeks. Furthermore in 2008 Sweden enacted a special equality bonus payment in order to encourage parents to divide their paid parental leave equally. In spring 2009 the Norwegian parliament, Stortinget, enacted law on further increase in the quota of fathers and an addition to the total period of paid parental leave. Firstly, the quota will be increased from 6 to 10 weeks from 1st of July in 2009. In addition, the Government of Norway has proposed that the total leave will be extended to 48 weeks and the fathers’ quota to 14 weeks (Ot.prp. nr. 56, 2008–2009, Om lov om endringer i folketrygdloven (utvidelse av fedrekvoten mv.)). Lorentzen (2009, p. 4) a masculinity researcher interviewed in NIKK the journal of the Nordic gender institute states:

Time wise, Norway will become the best in the world, in the paternity leave quota is increase to 14 weeks. This means 3.5 months reserved for the father, which is more than Iceland. Thus Norway will get the best fatherhood policy internationally.

In Denmark a quota for fathers was established but abolished again. In 1999, a proposal, (already introduced in the Danish Parliament in 1984), was passed. It allowed for two weeks of independent paternity leave, that had to be taken after the parents had utilized 10 weeks of the parental leave (Rostgaard et al. 1999). Despite proposals from the Social Democrats and the Centre Party to extend the parental leave and the quota for fathers, the Liberal/Conservative government that came into office in 2002 had a different policy. The new government “…consolidated the tradition of open, negotiable leave schemes where the mother and father themselves decided who shall take leave: the maternity/parental birth leave was extended to 52 weeks of which 32 weeks could be shared between the mother and father and all plans of introducing the fathers quota were abolished” (Rostgaard 2002:6).
Thus, Denmark and Finland have chosen a different path both provide fathers with two weeks immediately after birth of the child and Finland additional two weeks in certain cases by the end of the parental leave period. Thus while some of the countries have made policies that actively influences the parental choices both Denmark and Finland leave it to the parents to decide how to divide the parental leave between them.

Table 4. Parental leave in Nordic countries number of weeks in total, only mothers and only fathers and the percentage of total number of benefit days used by fathers in 2005

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Denmark</th>
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<th>Norway</th>
<th>Sweden</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Maximum number of weeks in which maternity/paternity/parental leave benefit is payable</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>44-46</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Only mother</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Only father</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>(2)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Additional leave: Father together with mother immediately after birth</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Ca. 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Per cent of total benefit days used by fathers on average in the event of pregnancy, childbirth and adoption</td>
<td>6.2</td>
<td>6.1</td>
<td>32.6*</td>
<td>11.4</td>
<td>21.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: NOSOSKO, 2007  *Figure for Iceland from 2006

Table 4 shows that Nordic fathers are first and foremost using their personal entitlements and that mothers tend to use the lion’s share or all of the joint entitlements. The figures for both Norway, where fathers have rights to 6 weeks of paid parental leave and Sweden with 2 months allocated to father are higher than in Denmark and Finland. Furthermore, this is very clear in the case of Iceland; i.e. as the Icelandic fathers entitlements increases the higher the proportion of total benefit days used by fathers becomes (Eydal, 2008).

**Nordicness in length of leave?**

The Nordic countries thus display remarkable internal differences in regards to the length of the leave schemes, reflecting high Nordic variation in policy goals, especially in regards to the role of the father and the weeks of the parental leave set of for him (Rostgaard, 2001), but also in regards to the emphasis on the imperative that women return quickly to the labour market. How do the Nordic countries then compare to other OECD countries? Table 1 shows length of maternity, paternity and parental leave across a number of comparable countries, and it is clear also from this that there is no Nordic model in terms of length of leave.

In comparison to other countries (see Table 1) Denmark, Sweden and Finland offer weeks of maternity leave similar to the overall average for the other countries (between 15-18 weeks), whereas Norway and Iceland offers less than average (9 and 13 weeks respectively).

In regards to paternity leave (including fathers quotas), there is even greater variation, reflecting that most of the Nordic countries, apart from Denmark and Finland, have installed father quotas with days of leave set of for the father as a use-it-or loose-it condition. Where Denmark and Finland offer 2 and 3 weeks of paternity leave, which is similar to the average of other OECD (2.8 weeks) and EU-27 countries (1.9 weeks), all other Nordic countries offer considerable more (Norway 9 weeks, Iceland 13 weeks and Sweden 15 weeks).
In comparison to other countries in the study, apart from Sweden all the Nordic countries do, however, offer less-than-average length of parental leaves, but with great variation, ranging from 13 weeks (Iceland) to 42 weeks (Norway, just under the average level). With 51 weeks of parental leave Sweden is on par with the overall average for all countries in the study. Overall, the OECD countries offer on average 69.4 weeks and EU-27 82.4 weeks. Taking into account the entire weeks available for the mother and father, the total leave period thus appears relatively short particularly in Denmark; Norway and Finland. In Finland and Norway, a Home care allowance (see later section) is, however, available which can be used by parents to stay at home and care for the child as is the case in Finland, and also for organising alternative day care as is the case in Norway. The quick-return-to-work imperative thus seems to be especially important in Denmark.

**Leave compensation – generous Nordic countries?**

An important component of the understanding of the importance of the leave schemes is the compensation during leave. Again there is intra-Nordic variation. Measured as a proportion of an Average Production Worker’s (APW) salary, the Nordic countries provide between 65-100% of in compensation during maternity leave, highest in Denmark (100%) and lowest in Finland (65%). Whereas Sweden, Norway and Iceland (all 80%) pay maternity leave compensation which is similar to the overall average of all countries in the study, Denmark is positioned in the higher SD group and Finland in the lower.

In regards to the payment during paternity leave Denmark (100%) and Iceland, Norway and Sweden (80-83.6%) pay similar levels as for the maternity leave whereas Finland pay somewhat higher levels (100%) and is thus on par along with Denmark with the country average for all countries in the study.

Finland, however, pays relative less during parental leave (65% and -½ SD of the average), whereas the other Nordic countries pay more than the average, between 80-100% of former wages. Across the EU countries, the average compensation rate during parental leave is 39.9%, and across the OECD countries 45.3%. Also for the Nordic countries, compensation rates during parental leave are lower than during maternity or paternity leave.

**Effective leave - understanding the incentives**

The length of leave and the compensation during leave can be summarised in the effective leave. This takes into account that the entitlement to several weeks of leave is most useful if accompanied by a sufficiently large benefit. The effective leave is computed by weighting the duration of the length of parental leave by the level of payment, that is, weeks are multiplied by the % payment benefit in FTE (full-time equivalent) payments (Gornick and Meyers, 2003; Plantenga & Siegel, 2004; Moss & Wall, 2007). Countries may thus provide a generous period of leave, but if it is not accompanied by a good compensation rate, the indicator will accordingly be of low numerical value. Thus, 40 weeks with a wage replacement of 100% has a coefficient of 40; at a wage replacement of 50%, a coefficient of 20.

In regards to the effective leave, the most generous system among all the countries inside as well as outside the Nordic countries is found in Norway, where relatively long periods of leave are accompanied by a high compensation rate (100%). All the other Nordic countries have
levels of effective leave which are within the average standard deviation range, with values from 31.2-56.6.

On average, the effective leave is reported to be 45.5 in EU-27 and 37.1 in the OECD countries. Although compensation rates are somewhat higher in the Nordic countries, this is levelled out when the relative short length of leaves is taken into account also. The implications are, however, important in that very different incentives are created. High compensation levels to a higher degree facilitate that also men take up parental since their earnings often make an important contribution to the family budget (Gíslason, 2008) and short leave spells ensure that women return relatively more quickly to the labour market.

**Gender equality in leave**

Gender equality is often highlighted as a feature of the Nordic countries, whether in relation to female representation in boards or parliaments, distribution of household chores or policy incentives (Hausman, Tyson and Zahidi, 2007). The gender equality dimension inherent in the leave schemes can be measured using a weighted gender equality index indicator, which summarises how national leave policies have incorporated issues of gender equality. The indicator consists of a fifteen-point scale, with nine possible points for the portion of leave available to fathers or provided exclusively to fathers, five possible points for the level of wage replacement during leave, and one possible point (positive or negative) for incentives for fathers to either take their permitted leave or transfer it to the mother (Ray et al. 2008). Scoring high on this indicator is an expression of full equality of workplace and caregiving benefits to men and women. The value of the total index indicator is given in the table, as are disaggregated indicator values.

In relation to the gender equality, Sweden scores highest (13 points) among all the countries in Table 1, indicating that gender equality in leave schemes is highest there, when paternity leave, paternity compensation, and policy incentives to encourage paternal caregiving are taken together. The other Nordic countries, except for Denmark (8), also display above average levels of leave scheme gender equality, with values at 12. The EU-27 countries reported under the gender equality index score on average 9.6 in comparison to the OECD countries, with the score 8.4. This indicates that apart from Denmark, gender equality is a central feature of the Nordic countries, but then again also Belgium, Greece and Portugal are among the group of countries with gender equality in leave schemes, all due to their portion of leave set of for the father. Gender equality in leave, and especially the father’s quota, is thus no more necessarily only a Nordic feature.

**Use of leave**

How does the variation in length of leave, compensation rates and gender equality then affect the use of leave across the Nordic countries in comparison to other countries? Using data from the European Labour Force Survey (ELFS), table 1 provides the proportion of employed parents with a child under the age of one on leave. Data is unfortunately only available for Finland among the Nordic countries, but here take-up rates are considerably higher than in other countries, at 79.9 % of mothers and 4.23 % of fathers with a child under 1 year, compared to an average OECD level at 45.9 % for mothers and 0.7 % for fathers and an EU-27 average of 46.5 of mothers and 0.85 of fathers.
Home care allowances
In addition to the EEC and paid parental leave schemes, the Nordic countries have all developed schemes of cash grants for childcare. These schemes have not been part of the discourse of the Nordic welfare model, and are usually not highlighted in comparative research where the characteristics of the Nordic model are claimed to be paid parental leave that enables mothers to return to labour market and high volumes of ECEC. There are thus no international comparative studies that compare and evaluate the Nordic home care allowance schemes, and the following section provides an overview of the Nordic institutional features only, in addition to providing an interpretation of the politics of these schemes.

Finland
When day care of young children became an issue in Finland in the 1960s, it was emphasised that parents would have the possibility to choose, between care in the home and care in day care institutions (Valtioneuvosto in Rantalaiho, 2009b). In reality this meant that the mothers should be able to choose since Finnish fathers did not in general take a leave of absence from work in order to stay home with young children. The Finnish Home care allowance scheme (HCA) came into force gradually from 1985-1990. Furthermore from 1996 the municipalities are obliged to arrange day care for a child at the end of maternal, paternal and parental leave, but if the entitlement is not used, the parents are entitled to home care allowance (Salmi, 2006). Thus from this point in time the choice between care forms was ensured by law.

The HCA is paid to parents of children, three years and younger, if the child is not using day care. The parent can choose to stay home with the child or use the benefit to pay a private child minder or a relative to care for the child. The benefits are residence based but the parent can be active in labour market while receiving the HCA. This benefit is paid for children whose parents do not use the entitlements to public day care services (Salmi, 2006). The benefit 1st of May 2009 was 314.28 for Euros per month for one child, an additional 94.09 Euros for every other child under three, and 60.46 Euros for other child over three but under seven years of age. Benefit can be complemented by and additional sum of a maximum of 168.19 Euros per month, the level depending on the size and income of the family (Kela, n.d.). Some municipalities pay extra home care allowance for parents who do not use their entitlements to day care. Thus, the actual level of home care benefits varies (Salmi, 2006).

According to Rantalaiho (2009) the municipalities have different requirements for families that apply for the additional benefits, in most cases that all children in the family under 6 are cared for at home and that the care taking parent has care leave from a permanent job. HCA are subject to tax and regarded as outside source of income when student financial aid is determined. Furthermore the HCA may be denuded from unemployment benefits (Kela, n.d.)

In addition to the HCA there is an additional program called the Private Day Care Allowance (PDCA). The PDCA is support to payments for private childcare until children start school. The PDCA is twofold, a flat rate amount of 160 Euros and an income and family size related payment up to 134.55 Euros. Important difference between HCA and PDCA is that the latter
one is always paid to directly to the provider of the services (*Kela*, n.d.). The take up ratios of both the HCA and PDCA is higher among parents of younger children.

*Table 5. Finland: Home care allowances 2006*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Total n of families</th>
<th>N of fathers receiving HCA</th>
<th>Fathers as % of total n of families</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Under 7 months</td>
<td>13,296</td>
<td>740</td>
<td>5.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7-12 months</td>
<td>11,250</td>
<td>722</td>
<td>6.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13-24 months</td>
<td>13,848</td>
<td>888</td>
<td>6.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24 months or more</td>
<td>10,268</td>
<td>482</td>
<td>4.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>48,860</td>
<td>2,832</td>
<td>5.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(*Statistical Yearbook of the Social Insurance Institution, 2007*)

**Denmark**

In Denmark there is not state scheme on home care allowances for children. In 1992 in relation with high unemployment a scheme was enacted to enable parents of young children to take leave of absence from labour market and stay home with their young children for a period of 26-52 weeks. The idea behind the scheme that was a part of labour market policies was to provide space for other workers with not care obligations in the labour market. The payments were originally 80% of unemployment benefits but were decreased to 60% in 1998. In 2002 the scheme was abolished (Rostgaard and Fridberg, 1998; Rostgaard, 2002)

**Norway**

In 1988 Norway adopted into legislation the entitlement of *kontantstøtte*, cash grants for the care (CGC), of children under three; i.e. if the children are not participating in a full time ECEC. If the child attends part-time, the parents are entitled to a proportion of the grant equal to the number of hours the child is placed in care (*Lov om kontantstøtte til smabarnsføreldre nr. 73/1997-8*). The major argument of the government when introducing the scheme was that it provided parents with the option of staying home with their young children. Furthermore it was pointed out that the grants may also used to pay for private day care and one of the main arguments for introducing the scheme of CGC was to increase parents’ choices regarding childcare. The third aim of the scheme was to create equality among those families who received state support by using public day care and those who did not (*St.prp.nr.53, 1997-98:1, in Rantalaiho, 2009b.)*

The CGC may be granted for children between one and three years of age, and for adopted children who have not started school. The benefit can be provided for a maximum of 23 months and the child must not have a full-time place at a publicly maintained day care institution. If the child has place in part time day care the CGC is paid in accordance with time spent in day care. The CGC is tax-free.
### Table 6. Amount of the Cash Grant for Childcare in Norway 2009

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hours spent in Day Care</th>
<th>Amount in NOK</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>3.303</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1-8</td>
<td>2.642</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9-16</td>
<td>1.982</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17-24</td>
<td>1.321</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25-32</td>
<td>661</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33 and more</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(NAV, n.d.)

**Sweden**

Home care allowance scheme was enacted in 1993 by the government of the Conservatives and the Christian Democrats. The scheme provided parents of children age 1-3 with entitlements to flat rate sum of benefits for 24 months. The scheme was abolished as soon as the Social Democrats returned to power in 1994 (Björnberg and Eydal, 1995).

A coalition government of parties right of the centre came to power in Sweden in 2008. 1st of July 2008 the government presented its policies on home care allowance (Vårdnadsbidraget) as a alternative to public day-care. The main argumentation of the government is the importance of families to be able to choose. It has been pointed out that it seems as a contradictory that at the same occasion the Swedish government introduced a “equality bonus” in relation to the scheme of paid parental leave.

The Swedish home care allowance scheme is an option for the municipalities, they can decide if they want to enact the scheme or not. The law is based on the idea of the self-autonomy of the municipalities, thus local authorities in each municipality are those who know best the conditions and needs in their municipality.

Parents with children 1-3 year old can apply for the allowances. Full payment is 3000 SEK (325 Euro) but if the child in question participates in public ECEC the payments are lower in accordance with time used. The parents can choose to use the payments to pay others for care. The benefit is taxfree. The HCA does not in itself provide entitlements for pension, but all parents of children under four year old do accumulate pension points while caring for their child. A parent that decides to stay home full time to care for his/hers child has the right to take a leave of absence from work and the SGI, the base that previous work period and amount of salaries have created for entitlements to social insurances, is kept unchanged. Similarly a period that a parent is receiving HCA does not affect the parent’s possibility of unemployment insurances until the child reach the age of three. However the HCA is not paid to parents that receive unemployment benefits, paid parental leave, assistance for asylum seekers, sick benefits or old age pension (Förslag till lag om kommunalt vårdnadsbidrag, Prop. 2007/08:91; Lag om kommunalt vårdnadsbidrag, 2008:307).

In November 2008 41 municipality, the biggest one being Stockholm, had enacted a scheme of HCA. In May 2008 the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions asked the municipalities about their future plans on HCA and 238 answered. Of these 99 said that they planned to enact the HCA, 91 did not and 48 had not decided (Sveriges kommuner och landsting, n.d.). According to the law the municipalities are obligated to provide information
on usage every half year to the Statistic Sweden from 1st of July 2009 (Regeringskansliet, n.d.). Thus, there are still no official statistics on the take up rates of the HCA in Sweden.

Iceland

One of the characteristics of Icelandic childcare polices is that, beside parental leave, there have been no other state-funded cash grants for care. Thus, when the relatively short period of parental leave ends parents have to make private arrangements to bridge the gap between paid parental leave and day care (Eydal, 2008). However, in autumn 2006, three Icelandic municipalities started to pay cash grants for childcare in those instances when the children are not enrolled in day care. These schemes are quite different in character. One of the arguments for implementing such schemes on a local level was that the municipality in question was forced to make such arrangements while waiting for the state to extend the parental leave to one year (Einarsdóttir and Ólafsdóttir, 2007). In 2008, Reykjavik, by far the biggest municipality in Iceland, started paying cash grants for parents waiting for day care in autumn 2008, but the payment is only available until the children are offered placement in day care centres (Eydal, 2008). Furthermore the scheme of benefits in Reykjavik demands that parents share the allowance period in line with the ideology of the Act on paid parental leave. The main argumentation for the scheme in Reykjavik was to create equality among the parents that have received place in ECEC for their children and those waiting for place, this is reflected in the rules of entitlements as well as the name of the scheme, Service Insurance (þjónustutrygging).

Nordic HCA?

Hence the Nordic schemes are quite different in character as following table from Rantalaiho, (2009a) shows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>NATIONAL CFCC</th>
<th>MUNICIPAL CFCC</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>FIN</strong></td>
<td><strong>Rules:</strong>&lt; 3 yrs old 314€&lt; 3 yrs old sibling 94€&lt; 7 yrs old sibling 60€</td>
<td>Supplements to statutory allowances Cover 80% of &lt;3 yrs old (2006) Average allowance: 136€ (2007)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Child not in any public day care. Access to supplement CFCC depends on family size and income (i.e., means tested).</td>
<td>Municipalities can have further eligibility rules (e.g., all children in the family are in home care; parent receiving allowance has a permanent working contract)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>NO</strong></td>
<td><strong>Rules:</strong>&lt; 3 yrs old 373€ Partial CFCC</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Child not in full-time public day care.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>SWE</strong></td>
<td>**Rules:**A choice for municipalities. General rules: child not in full time public day care; only for “working families”.</td>
<td>&lt; 3 yrs old 268€ Municipality can pay less, but not more; can also establish additional rules.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>ICE</strong></td>
<td>**Rules:**No law</td>
<td>Municipalities have started CFCC schemes. Different rules in different municipalities</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Table by Rantalaiho, (2009a) Iceland added with ther kind permission)
‘Nordicness’ in Early Childhood Education and Care for the young especially
Where the home care allowance may be a hidden story of the Nordic childcare policies, this is far from the case of the Nordic ECEC systems, which are often reviewed - and admired. What is then the commonness of the Nordic ECEC model? The features of the social services in the Nordic countries which are often highlighted in international comparisons are the high level of universalism where access to services are based on need rather than means or income, rights are individual and not based on family entitlement, the tax-based financing, a decentralised structure of service organisation and financing and delivery, and mainly public provision of services (Anttonen and Sipilä, 1996; Rauch,*). These features are also evident for the policy area of Early Childhood Education and Care.

From outside, the Nordic countries also show remarkable similarities in ideology, policy and practice of day care for children. As Wagner notes (200, p. 291) the Nordic countries seem to share a common ideology of the good childhood for all children that constitutes a strong driving force behind public policy and daily practise in the Nordic day care centres, as well as in the schools and local communities. The concept of the good childhood rests on the ideals of democracy, egalitarianism, freedom, emancipation, cooperation and solidarity.

It is based on an ideal model of childhood based on a romantic view of children, where children should be happy and free, learning from experience, without any intrusive adult supervision (Einarsdottir, 2006, p. 172). Children seen as subjects and not objects in the sense that children’s own perspectives must be integrated in to all aspects of educational planning and implementation, There is no longer focus on the notion of the ‘cooperation with the child’ but rather on giving children actual influence and possibility to participate in the planning of educational processes (Brøstrøm, 2006, p. 230).

The right to ECEC
This emphasis on the central role of the child could also be interpreted to be the main cause behind the introduction of a legal claim for day care. In most Nordic countries there is today a legal right to day care, and this is rarely found in other comparable countries (See Table 2). Except for Iceland, all the Nordic countries provide legal entitlement to daycare for younger children aged 0-2 years as a day care guarantee (see Table 2). Eg since 1996, Finnish parents have enjoyed an unconditional right to day care for children under six years of age in municipal day care. In Norway, a new government consisting of a red-green alliance coalition in 2005 resulted in a policy shift, where the daycare volumes came in focus at the same time as the Cash for care scheme was limited to 1-2 year-olds (Platform for regeringssamarbeidet mellom Arbeiderpartiet, Socialistisk Venstreparti og Senterpartiet, 2005). From 1st of January 2009 children in Norway now have a legal right to day care from the age of 1 year (Lov om endringer i barnehageloven (rett til plass i barnehage) 2008-08-08 nr. 73).

Such an entitlement is not always to be interpreted as a right for the child, however, as it may be based on parental employment, such as is the case in Denmark. In Sweden, however, all children over 4 years have since 2003 had an individual right of 15 weekly hours of day care. The day care guarantee can be interpreted as a way of practising universalism in that every citizen in principle should have access to day care. In practise, it has often also been a means
for the national government to ensure that municipalities provided the necessary levels of services, ie as in Denmark, by allowing municipalities to raise the parental share of the total costs, if municipalities in return introduced a day care guarantee.

A daycare guarantee for older children aged 3-6 years is more common also outside the Nordic countries, except in countries such as Australia, Austria, Canada, Korea, and the US (other countries may or may not have a daycare guarantee, but no data is available).

**Use of ECEC**
The provision of extensive day care for the smaller children is a unique Nordic feature, perhaps not surprisingly, given the day care guarantee for the young children in these countries. Looking at the enrolment in day care and educational services for children, which encompasses arrangements under welfare as well as educational authorities, and private as well as public service, except for Finland (22.4 %), the Nordic countries provide above average for the young children aged 0-2 years, but with variation (between 39.5 %-61.7 %). Overall enrolment is 22.4% on average for children aged 0-2 years in the OECD countries and 19.6% in the EU-27, and thus far from the 33% of the EU Lisbon target.

Although the provision of day care for the young children is in the Nordic countries well above the OECD and EU averages, the timing of the use of day care can differ extensively in the Nordic countries. I.e. while it is common for Danish children to attend day care from the end of the parental leave, Icelandic children mostly start in day care when they are 2 years old (Eydal, 2008).

For the older children aged 3 to school age, the leading position of the Nordic countries is no longer apparent. All Nordic countries, except Finland, do however provide above the average SD range (providing between 86.1 % - 94.7 % of the age group) and thus not always above the Lisbon target of 90 %, but this is not very different to the average of 77.6% in the EU-27 and 74% in the OECD countries.

**Full-time day care**
At least Finland and Denmark among the Nordic countries also have in common that day care for the smaller children aged 0-2 years is predominantly provided as full-time day care, ie there are no week days where the parents must organise alternative day care and day care is mainly provided during the afternoon also. In Denmark, 90 % of the children aged 0-2 years attending day care, are enrolled in full-time care, and in Finland, this is 81 %, both well above the average for all countries in table 2. (There is no data for the remaining Nordic countries). On average in the EU countries, 60.5% of young children attend full-time care, slightly lower among the OECD countries (57.1%).

Also older children aged 3-school age tend to attend day care on a full-time basis in the Nordic countries, 83 % in Denmark and 73 % in Finland, again above average. This is, however, similar to the situation in many other comparable countries. On average in the EU countries, 77.6% attend full-time and on average among the OECD countries, 74%. The prevalence of full-time day care for older children can therefore not be claimed to be a special Nordic feature.
The costs of ECEC

Is affordability then a unique Nordic feature? The Nordic countries are in comparison to many other countries heavily tax-based, so public funding might constitute a larger share of the total cost for day care than in other countries from the belief that it should not be the price which prevents parents from using day care for their children. E.g. in Sweden, a max-taxa reform was installed in 2003 so not to exclude any families from using day care because of the parental costs. The max-taxa reform instituted a maximum fee (about 100 Euro) per month for the first child, with decreasing fees for subsequent children in the family.

Comparing the Nordic countries with other countries, however, shows that Nordic parents to a more or less similar degree to other countries bear the responsibility of financing the day care services. Public funding for ECEC in the Nordic countries covers between 75-85 % of total costs for both the 0-2 and 3-school age groups, i.e. leaving 15-25% of costs to be covered by parents. Public funding for ECEC for 0-2 year olds covers on average 82% of total costs in EU countries, and also 82% in OECD countries.

And for the 3-school age children the public share is lower in the Nordic countries (75-85 %) than for the countries on average in the study. For older children, aged 3-6 years, among the EU and the OECD countries, public funding on average covers 94%. In many countries, public funding covers 100% of expenditure, with the lowest level covered by the public in Denmark (75%). This difference is due to the fact that many countries provide care for children above the age of 3 within the educational auspices, often in day care centres more oriented towards learning, and where there is no parental fee. These centres may on the other hand only be open a few hours a day, or be closed one day during the week.

Quality of ECEC

As well as considering the price of day care, quality is likely to be an issue of importance for parents when they choose whether and where their child should be looked after. Quality can be measured in many ways, but a quantifiable measure often used is the child:staff ratio, which outlines how many adults work with a given group of children. There is little comparable data available, and often when data is available the age groups vary. Table 2 provides information on a few countries.

Average child:staff ratios are in general higher for the younger children aged 0-2 years. Among all the countries in the study the child:staff ratios for this age group using day care programmes, is lowest in Denmark, with 3.3 children per staff member, but also in Finland is the average child:staff ratio for the 0-2 year olds comparatively low, ie there are comparatively many adults per child. In Norway, the number of adults is only given for the age group aged 3-6 years, and here the number of staff is lower than the average for all countries, so with the UK, Norway has the highest number of children per staff member for this age group.

As Kristjansson (2006) notes, there is Nordic similarity found in the required educational level for preschool teachers which overall is high as it is believed that good staff training can foster high-quality social care provision. Less emphasis might, however, today be placed on the special needs of the young children. As Johansson (2006) notes reforms of the teacher
education in Sweden and Denmark within the last 10-15 years has marked an end to the separate and distinctive education of pre-school teachers, whereas in Finland and Iceland, and to a lesser extent Norway, the traditional education of preschool teachers remains intact. In Denmark and Sweden, the preschool teacher education is merged with the overall teacher education, with little focus on the special philosophies and practises of the teaching of the young child.

It is also common practise in the Nordic countries to hire staff with lower or no qualifications, and in Finland and Norway there is a growing trend in allowing untrained and semi-skilled staff to perform tasks and responsibilities on their own, and not as before necessarily under the supervision of professional preschool teachers (ref*).

Nevertheless, according to OECD data, in Finland, Iceland and Sweden 80 % or more of staff members have received some level of training. In addition, in Denmark, Iceland and Sweden, 50% or more staff members have finished tertiary education. Einarsdottir (2006, p. 161), however, note that in 2004 only 28 % of the educational personnel in pre schools were certified preschool teachers, and consequently the highest educated preschool teachers work in administrative positions, while the least educated work with children.

Curriculum

What seems to be genuinely unique for the Nordic countries is the emphasis on play vs. learning. As Kristjansson (2006) notes throughout the Nordic countries free play enjoys an especially privileged status in policies on day care. Children play for the sake of playing but are also supposed to learn though play.

The emphasis on in- and out-door play may be well embedded on the day-to-day practise as an Icelandic ethnographic study showed (Einarsdottir, 2005). Preschool teachers in this study made sure to create a supportive environment for play by providing ample space, time, material and equipment, while there was more variation in whether the teachers were actively involved in the activities or whether they practised a hands-off approach. When it came to outdoor activities, all pre school teachers, however, agreed that children should be free from adult involvement and interference when playing outside. Day schedules in Nordic children’s day centres are thus heavily dominated by more or less obviously child-initiated peer activities, taking place in an in-door or out-door setting.

The pedagogical principles behind the day care centres in the are very much inspired by the German Froebel kindergartens, so that according to Johansson (2006, p. 44), the Nordic day care model is characterised by 1) a focus on care instead of school learning, 2) aesthetics and creative arts instead of analytical facts, 3) thematic approach instead school subject matter organisation of the curriculum and 4) on an non-confessional ecumenical orientation where corporate punishment is not permitted.

Despite the emphasis on free play, the trend toward incorporating more teaching in the day care centres is evident across the Nordic countries, not least after the OECD PISA studies made it possible to compare the educational outcome for children in primary school and results from this study indicated that children who participated in kindergarten or pre-school education achieve better results (Bennet, 2008). The term Educare has been coined and is used
eg in Finland toe describe “an ECEC model of a Nordic welfare state, where care, education and instruction have been combined to form an integrated whole and where play is a central tool of pedagogical activities” (Finnish national report in the OECD study Starting Strong, 2001*).

Structured and formal learning is today part also of the day care activities, e.g. organised as learning the alphabet as is the practise in the Danish kindergarten. But overall the day care and the primary school is in most Nordic countries. Another element, bringing the day care and the school system closer together, is the weight on continuity in services. Across institutions there is a weight on cooperation between teachers and day care workers. E.g. recent reforms of the Finnish educational system was intended to improve the continuity of the day care services, especially servicing the transition between kindergarten and primary school.

**Conclusion**

Although all Nordic countries have developed extensive childcare policies, their approaches differ. The aim of this paper has been to compare the childcare policies of the five Nordic countries in the middle of 2000s, relative to other EU and OECD countries. By looking at the Nordic countries from outside they make up a family of nations. This is in regards to the political emphasis on the balance of work and family for the many dual earner families, gender equality in society as well as in the family, and children’s rights to parental care as well as to high quality day care as part of overall child well-being.

Comparison with other countries, however, reveals that the Nordic countries classify as a group on many indicators of child care policies, but far from all, reflected in differences in the promotion of the father, the dual worker couple, involvement of the state in private matters, as well as in the differences in ideal models of early childhood: parent based care versus a parent/institutional care mix.

Looking across all the countries, the Nordic countries seem unique in having a simultaneously weight on cash as well as day care services for the pre-school children, when this is measured in the social expenditure investments to these two policy fields. Relative to other countries, a Nordic similarity is the relatively high expenditure levels for the young children between 0-2 years, reflected also in the high take-up rates of ECEC services by this age group.

It is also much more common for young children in the Nordic countries to participate in nursery or family day care, than young children in other countries, and this pattern is ensured, except for Iceland, by a legal right to provision which is unknown in most countries outside the Nordic countries. Balancing of work and family life also for families with younger children seems feasible in these countries, with an extensive provision of full-time ECEC services for the younger child. The ‘normal’ childhood for this age group thus consists of measures of parental leave and extra-family care. The combination of day care and paid parental leave is believed to encourage the dual breadwinner model which is also widespread in the Nordic countries and ensure the well-being of the child, but the measures are not the same across the Nordic countries.
The period of time where young Finnish and Norwegian children can spend with their parents is considerably longer than is the case for young Danish children, not least when the Home care allowance schemes are included in the analysis. The existence of the HCA schemes have been claimed to be in sharp contrast policy wise, and these schemes seem to be in conflict with both the facilitation of a dual earner couple model, and gender equality, as the free choice in most cases results in the mother making use of these schemes. The existence of the scheme also seem to be in some contrast to the father’s quotas in parental leave, which attempt to ensure that more fathers take part in the caring of their young children. Here, the choice of which parent should care for the child is annulled. The lack of choice then again is believed to contribute to gender equality in the leave schemes, this is at least according to the indicator on gender equality in leave schemes, where Sweden scores highest, and where only Denmark is below average compared to other Nordic and overall OECD countries.

There is less of a Nordic model what concerns the provisions of ECEC services for the older children aged 3-school age. Here, the level of the Nordic countries is on par with other OECD and EU countries, also what regards the level of full-time provisions. We cannot find a Nordic model either in regards to the division of public and private responsibility for financing ECEC services. Nordic parents even pay a higher proportion of total costs for ECEC services for the older children than in many other EU/OECD countries.

The approach to ECEC may, however, be more distinctive Nordic, with the emphasis still predominantly on play rather than education, in the lack of adult involvement, and in the integrative approach between different day care schemes. In regards to measures of quality such as child:staff ratios and educational qualifications, there is variation across the Nordic countries, and no unique high quality approach is found to be common for the countries.

What are then the consequences of the childcare policies in the Nordic countries for gender equality, children’s well-being and the balancing of work and family life, relative to other countries? Overall, parents seem to have more choice between leave and ECEC services for the younger children, which may cause less stress when combining paid employment with setting up a family. That ECEC services are of comparable quality no doubt ensures parents in their choice to make use of such services in their balancing of work and family life; they must on the other hand pay relatively more, at least for the services for the older children.

The difference in the weight associated with the right of the child to parental care during its first years, with relatively short leaves and no HCA scheme in at least Denmark, is to be considered when the well-being of the child is to be taken into consideration. The well-being of all the children is no doubt affected by the Nordic phenomena of dual breadwinner couples, which explains the relatively level of children living in poverty. One may pose the question of whether the well-being of Danish children is affected by the day care regime of early entry into extra-familial care? On the other hand, as it is pointed out in the paper, the day care institutions are also considered to have an important integrative function for children with migrant background, and the ECEC provisions are for all children considered to function as an important preparation for school. Nevertheless, the crucial issue – and always debated – is what is the right age for a child to start in day care?
In terms of gender equality, the Nordic countries, except Denmark, score high on gender equality in leave schemes, amongst other because of the father’s quote - which is however, no longer only a Nordic phenomenon. As pointed out by Mandel & Semyonov (2006), the relatively family-friendly welfare states belonging to the Social-democratic welfare regimes, however, also display a high proportion of women who work part-time (except for Finland), greater occupational segregation with more women in female-typed occupations, and restricted opportunities for women to enter into managerial work. Despite the Nordic tradition for including goals of gender equality in general policy making, and in particular in the childcare policies, the same policies may thus contribute to increased gender inequality, in allowing women time of for the care of children, with the end result of mothers assuming the primacy of the familial responsibilities and lowering their occupational achievements at the same time.
Literature (incomplete)


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Lög um fæðingar- og foreldraorlof nr. 95/2000.

Lov om endringer i barnehageloven (rett til plass i barnehage) 2008-08-08 nr. 73.


