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Between market and mission: Early childhood education and care in the context of commodification and market practices

Abstract: An educational institution's mission is vital for creating shared understanding and guiding pedagogical practice. Grounded in democratic and humanistic values, the mission shapes pedagogical approaches, organisational culture and relationships within the institution. Privately founded early childhood education and care (ECEC) institutions often struggle to align such missions with market pressures. As such institutions operate outside the public funding system, they must balance visibility, competitiveness and parental expectations while safeguarding their pedagogical integrity. This study examined how directors of private ECEC institutions in Croatia define and communicate their pedagogical missions and adapt their institutional goals amid external demands. Grounded in critical theory and informed by Goffman's framework of impression management, the work conducted a qualitative thematic analysis of structured written interviews. Its findings show that the interviewed directors not only manage institutions but also construct public narratives shaped by neoliberal expectations of visibility and differentiation while striving to preserve pedagogical values. Aware of systemic inequalities, directors employ balancing as a conscious strategy to sustain professional integrity and children's well-being, identifying pedagogical values – not market logic – as their moral compass. The study's limitations include the constraints of written interviews and its reliance on thematic coding, which may overlook several linguistic nuances.

Keywords: ECEC directors; impression management; pedagogical mission; private ECEC institutions; market conditions

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Introduction

In the contemporary socioeconomic and political context, early childhood education and care (ECEC) institutions are deeply embedded in the economic, social and cultural transformations that shape modern society, influencing these institutions' practices and pedagogical orientations (Dahlberg and Moss 2004; Moss 2009, 2025; Moss and Urban 2010; Musatti et al. 2017). Some authors clearly state that: »Education is, first and foremost, political and ethical.« (Moss and Urban 2010, p. 31) When considered within this broader framework, the pedagogical mission of ECEC can be understood as inseparable from its social context and from the specific economic and social conditions in which families, labour markets, and patterns of diversity are shaped (Musatti et al. 2017). Because ECEC fulfils interconnected economic, educational and social roles, its pedagogical mission assumes a public dimension, often conceptualised, according to Moss (2025), as a *public good* and *a space of democratic encounter*.

This public dimension positions ECEC institutions as social institutions and as places of encounter between different cultures and experiences, in which diversity is viewed as a pedagogical resource rather than an obstacle. If ECEC carries a public dimension, it cannot be reduced to individual or market-based roles. In this way, ECEC moves beyond a supplementary role in family upbringing or preparation for school towards affirming the right of every child to early education as a public good. Within this framework, parents are not consumers of services but partners in the joint construction of the educational process, which redirects practice from a market-based model of competition towards a participatory and democratic model of shared decision-making (Musatti et al. 2017). As ECEC is conceived as democratic and public, so is the child regarded as active, holistic and competent. Biesta reminds us that: »Education always functions in relation to three domains of purpose – qualification, socialisation and subjectification – but it is the latter that connects education most strongly to the democratic project.« (Biesta 2010, p. 20) This understanding also shapes how childhood itself is perceived, viewing it not as a preparatory phase for future citizenship or schooling but as a valuable period of life in its own right and a

stage in which learning emerges through play, relationships and exploration. Such a perspective highlights the inseparability of physical, emotional, social and cognitive experience and emphasises learning that arises from play, interaction and enquiry rather than from the linear acquisition of predetermined outcomes (Merleau-Ponty 1964; Musatti et al. 2017; Tronto 1993; Vygotsky 1967). As Dewey (1980 p. 139) states: »Democracy has to be born anew every generation and education is its midwife.« However, this vision of ECEC as a public and democratic space has increasingly been challenged by contemporary neoliberal policy frameworks. Authors such as Moss (2009), Lloyd (2012), Musatti et al. (2017) and Roberts-Holmes and Moss (2021) warn about the risks associated with current neoliberal agendas, including the pressure of early *academisation* (Biesta 2010; Roberts-Holmes 2014), the instrumentalisation of ECEC as a means for producing *social and human capital* (Dahlberg and Moss 2004), where preschool education is »understood above all as a factor in the formation of the future labour force« and investment in children's education as »investment in human capital« (Hočevar and Kovač Šebart, 2017 p. 135) and the narrowing of its pedagogical mission to measurable outcomes and *metric fixation* (Biesta 2023; Bradbury and Roberts-Holmes 2017; Hočevar and Kovač Šebart 2018; Krek 2008; Roberts-Holmes and Moss 2021). These tendencies all lead to the so-called *schoolification* of ECEC and the suppression of education's public dimension (Lloyd 2012; Moss 2009; Musatti et al. 2017; Roberts-Holmes 2014). Biesta (2010, p. 112) notes: »Education for democracy is not the same as education through the market; democracy requires that we sustain spaces where people can encounter what and who is other.«

While neoliberal policy exerts pressure, there are also social and democratic ambitions at the EU level. At the European level, research- and policy-based documents, particularly those beginning from the early 2010s and continuing in later developments, frame ECEC as an instrument for promoting equality, social cohesion and active citizenship (Moss 2025; Urban 2012; Urban et al. 2011).

Critical theory as a theoretical framework

Democratic values shape ECEC, and authors of this paper acknowledge ECEC's vision as a public good and a democratic space. However, this vision is increasingly challenged by neoliberal tendencies that emphasise marketisation, privatisation and the reduction of educational aims to economic utility. Building on this understanding, the present study takes critical theory, which defines thought as a form of social practice oriented towards emancipation (Horkheimer 2002; Marojević and Milić 2017), as its theoretical foundation. It seeks to uncover how power and knowledge are maintained as natural orders and to create space for social change (Adorno 1991; Horkheimer 2002).

Adorno (1991) warns that the standardised culture industry transforms knowledge and experience into commodities, producing conformity instead of emancipation. Building on this tradition, Habermas (1984) distinguishes between *instrumental rationality* (a logic that prioritises efficiency, competition

and control) and *communicative rationality* (one that is grounded in dialogue, understanding and democratic participation), linking emancipation to open, democratic dialogue (Habermas 1984; Marojević 2014; Marojević and Milić 2017). Applying these ideas to ECEC allows us to explore the tensions between public and private discourses and between viewing education as a collective good instead of a market commodity. These theoretical lenses allow us to research how neoliberal forces, such as marketisation, privatisation and the normalisation of educational practices, reshape the pedagogical mission and the language of quality and evaluation (Dahlberg et al. 2007).

From this perspective, the commonly used idea of *quality* often acts as a tool of control and standardisation, reflecting a mindset focused on what can be measured – metric fixation – a term introduced by Muller (2018) and Roberts-Holmes and Moss (2021) and also used critically by Krek (2008) – rather than meaning (Dahlberg et al. 2007; Habermas 1984). In contrast, Dahlberg and colleagues propose a shift from measuring to meaning-making or seeing evaluation as a process of interpretation, reflection and dialogue (Dahlberg et al. 2007). From a critical perspective, neoliberal education policies therefore exemplify what Habermas (1984) terms *instrumental rationality*, a mode of governance that privileges efficiency, competition, control and measurement over dialogue, reflection and democratic participation. These tendencies also reinforce a future-oriented rationale in which the child is primarily valued for economic roles yet to come, shifting attention away from present well-being and positioning preschool as an instrument for optimising human capital rather than as a rights-based public good (Hočevar and Kovač Šebart 2017). Such dynamics have strongly shaped the field of ECEC, redefining its pedagogical mission and organisational structures in market-oriented terms.

Neoliberal context: marketisation, privatisation and commodification

In contrast to the public and democratic vision of education as a public good, neoliberal education policies promote market mechanisms, privatisation and outcome-based accountability. Within this framework, ECEC is redefined as an investment in *human capital*, while children and parents are increasingly positioned as economic resources and consumers (Penn 2011). These policies encourage and perpetuate the marketisation and commodification of ECEC. Empirical evidence from Iceland (Dýrfjörð et al. 2024) shows how the expansion of the private education industry through the proliferation of externally produced programmes, data systems and educational packages has intensified the marketisation of ECEC and reshaped pedagogical governance. The study demonstrates that private actors increasingly influence the organisation and delivery of preschool education, introducing business-oriented logics into pedagogical practice and reducing directors' autonomy (ibid.). An economic consequence of this is that access to and the quality of ECEC institutions increasingly depend on families' economic resources. Empirical reviews indicate that, given disparities in staff qualifications, working conditions and regulatory oversight (OECD 2006;

Penn 2011), for-profit ECEC providers may face greater challenges in achieving high structural and pedagogical quality than public or non-profit providers. Even within the publicly funded Finnish ECEC system, policies that promote parental choice have introduced market-oriented dynamics in which families act as consumers and institutions compete for enrolments, as »due to increased privatization and marketization, parents have become positioned as subjects ultimately responsible for ECEC choice and thus their choices become moral acts related to what is considered good parenting« (Ruutiainen et al. 2021, p. 2). This shift has produced selective participation patterns: Families with higher socioeconomic and cultural capital are likelier to exercise choice, while others remain bound to local options. As a result, the principle of universal accessibility, a cornerstone of Nordic welfare systems, has been compromised, giving rise to new forms of social and spatial stratification (Ruutiainen et al. 2021). Another challenge arising from this market-oriented shift is that public responsibility is being replaced by market regulation (Penn 2011), leading to system stratification and the deepening of social inequalities. This replacement is visible in the growing dependence of public preschools on privately developed management and pedagogical software, which has shifted regulatory control from public authorities to corporate providers and their data infrastructures (Dýrfjörð et al. 2024). Such processes blur the boundary between the public and private spheres of education, producing new forms of soft governance in which accountability and efficiency are monitored through digital tools rather than through democratic oversight.

Consequently, the democratic dimension of education is marginalised within this economic, neoliberal discourse. Such policy logics have far-reaching conceptual and structural consequences. They reshape not only the aims of ECEC but also the very meanings attached to the *quality*, *equity* and *public character* of ECEC.

The broader purpose of ECEC has been reduced to its economic utility, transforming early education into an instrument of social engineering aimed at *producing* children ready for school and the labour market (Biesta 2014; Vandenbroeck and Peeters 2013). This economisation of purpose also redefines the notion of *education quality*, which is measured primarily through quantifiable outcomes and standardised indicators, while the processual, relational and ethical dimensions of practice are pushed into the background (Biesta 2010; Musatti et al. 2017; Penn 2011). As Moss and Urban argue, this market-driven logic fundamentally misunderstands the public nature of education:

> »So why not leave it to the market to sort out? Why not let the preferences and decisions of many individual consumers – parents needing education for their children – decide all aspects of education, in an exercise in consumer sovereignty? Because we understand education to be important not only as a private benefit for individual children and parents, but also as a public good, with collective interests at stake. The wider society and local communities – the population at large – have an interest in and a responsibility for the education of children. The market is unable to encompass these externalities of public interest, common responsibility and collective benefit.« (Moss and Urban 2010, p. 16)

The market, as they point out, fails to recognise the externalities of education: the moral, social and civic benefits that extend beyond individual gain. Empirical research on care markets further demonstrates that mixed systems of public and private institutions coexistence generate structural disparities in working conditions, access to resources and geographical availability, leading to spatial and social stratification (Campbell-Barr 2013; Lloyd 2012). Consequently, ECEC cannot function as both a market commodity and a public good simultaneously. The imposition of market logic can reconfigure its collective role as a shared space of learning and care accessible to all (Lloyd 2012; Moss 2009, 2025; Musatti et al. 2017; Penn 2011).

The pedagogical mission as a reflective tool: From the competent individual to the competent system

The notion of competence in ECEC is deeply political in the neoliberal context, where pedagogical work is defined through measurable outcomes and managerial accountability. Contemporary perspectives challenge this narrow, individualised view by redefining competence as *a collective and systemic capacity* arising from interactions among individuals, teams, institutions and policy frameworks (Urban et al. 2012). Professionalism thus arises from collective enquiry and reflection and not from compliance with prescribed standards. The key ethical question in this discussion is not »*Do I do things right?*« but »*Do I do the right things?*« – a question that situates pedagogical action within democratic and participatory values (Vandenbroeck 2020). Biesta (2023) extends this argument by showing how neoliberal discourses replace the normative question »*What is good education?*« with the technical question »*What works?*«, narrowing education to measurable outcomes and sidelining its ethical, relational and democratic dimensions. His concept of *learnification*, defined as the substitution of the language of education with the language of learning, illustrates how education loses its public and civic purpose when reduced to individual achievement. Professional competence and pedagogical quality, therefore, depend not on competition but on supportive structural and ethical conditions such as fair pay, workforce stability and public investment, since »quality cannot be built on insecurity« (Urban et al. 2012). The pedagogical mission is thus a reflective, ethical and collective process as well as a shared negotiation of meaning and purpose through dialogue, documentation and collaboration with families and communities.

Building on this theoretical foundation, in which Moss (2009) and Biesta (2010, 2023) frame ECEC as a democratic public sphere under threat from neoliberalism, this study explores how directors of private ECEC institutions in Croatia interpret and communicate their pedagogical missions within a field shaped by both public values and market pressures.

Operational implications of the pedagogical mission

Building on the democratic and reflective conception of ECEC outlined above, the authors of this paper examine how such a pedagogical mission can be sustained in everyday institutional practice. To resist the pressures of standardisation, the curriculum must operate as a framework of shared values rather than as a checklist of outcomes, thereby enabling adults and children to learn

together through dialogue, enquiry and reflection (Musatti et al. 2017). Such work requires time for observation, documentation and joint planning and must be supported by communities of practice and pedagogical, rather than purely administrative, leadership. Student's parents are included as partners in decision-making, and diversity is recognised as a pedagogical resource rather than a challenge (Biesta 2010; Musatti et al. 2017).

Slunjski (2018) emphasises that leadership that sustains this mission relies on mutual trust, collaboration and shared responsibility, shifting leadership from an individual function of the director to a collective process of joint learning and change. The director's role within this framework is not to control but to connect, ultimately linking team processes with institutional goals and the wider community so that reflection and dialogue guide practice (Heikka 2014). When such collaborations are well structured, distributed leadership with clearly defined roles and responsibilities strengthens coherence and continuity of practice. Conversely, when responsibilities remain vague, leadership risks dissolving into what Heikka (ibid.) calls a »fog of directions«. The relational dynamics of leadership are further shaped by the institutional culture in which they operate. In highly feminised contexts, a prevailing *culture of politeness* may discourage open disagreement, which masks micropolitics and reduces accountability (Hard and Jónsdóttir 2013). Hence, effective leadership must cultivate a professional ethos that legitimises dialogue and constructive conflict as foundations for collective decision-making and pedagogical integrity.

In this sense, democratic experimentalism distinguishes ethical–political leadership, which is grounded in dialogue and reflection, from managerial leadership, which is rooted in market logic (Moss 2009). Where market-oriented models risk fragmenting practice and undermining equality, pedagogical leadership is a stabilising force, creating spaces for participation and shared learning that preserve the public and democratic character of ECEC (Campbell-Barr 2013; Heikka 2014; Moss 2009). When considered from a critical perspective, education cannot be reduced to a technical process; it must be understood as a social and ethical practice of communication and emancipation (Habermas 1984; Marojević 2014). ECEC leadership and pedagogy are therefore inherently dialogical, requiring spaces for reflection, participation and democratic interaction.

Goffman's dramaturgical framework: Impression management and presentation strategies

To connect macro-level frameworks with the micro-level frameworks of everyday ECEC institutional life, this study applies Erving Goffman's dramaturgical approach, which views social interaction as a form of performance through which individuals manage impressions before different audiences (Goffman 1956). Impression management involves controlling information about oneself to influence others' perceptions, these impressions unfold between the »front stage« of public presentation and the »back stage« of preparation and reflection (Goffman 1956; Lemert and Branaman 1997). In this view, identity is dynamic and dependent on context.

Within this framework, actors employ both assertive strategies, such as promoting professionalism, ethics and innovation and defensive strategies, which protect reputation through justification or rationalisation (Bolino et al. 2008; Goffman 1956). In the context of ECEC, directors may use assertive strategies to legitimise their institution's pedagogical mission before parents, staff and founders, while defensive strategies help them account for constraints stemming from market pressures or limited resources.

Goffman's perspective extends critical theory by revealing how macro-level ideologies and power structures are enacted through everyday language, behaviour and symbolic practices. Goffman sheds light on how these forces materialise in directors' »performances« of leadership, ethics and professionalism. This paper therefore focuses not only on what directors say about their pedagogical mission, but also on how they construct and communicate it through terms, narratives and symbols that balance pedagogical values with market realities (ibid.).

Taken together, these frameworks conceptualise ECEC as a public good and a forum for democratic practice, with its mission safeguarded through pedagogical, distributed and ethical–political leadership (Biesta 2010; Moss 2009; Musatti et al. 2017; Urban et al. 2012). Critical theory provides a lens for analysing structural and ideological pressures, while Goffman's dramaturgical approach offers a method for interpreting the discursive and performative strategies that directors use to navigate the contradictions of operating within a marketised system. This theoretical and methodological synthesis forms the foundation for the qualitative thematic analysis that follows, which examines how directors of private ECEC institutions in Croatia define, communicate and adapt their pedagogical mission in response to diverse expectations and constraints.

Methodology

This study combines critical theory and Goffman's dramaturgical approach to examine how neoliberal structures shape educational leadership in ECEC. Critical theory provides a lens for analysing how power, knowledge and ideology operate through institutions, while Goffman's (1956) concept of impression management connects these macro-level dynamics to the micro-level dynamics of everyday interactions, where directors perform and negotiate their professional identities.

The study adopts a qualitative research design grounded in interpretative and critical traditions. It aims to explore how directors of private ECEC institutions construct, communicate and adapt their pedagogical missions under market-oriented conditions.

The research is guided by the following three interrelated questions:

1. How do directors use assertive impression management strategies, such as self-promotion, highlighting pedagogical values and emphasising partnerships with parents, to shape and present their institutional mission?
2. How do directors use defensive strategies, including justifications, excuses and appeals to contextual limitations, to explain challenges and adaptations in their mission?

3. How do directors balance pedagogical and market demands in everyday decision-making?

Research participants

Directors of private ECEC institutions in Croatia were interviewed for this study. The contact details of potential participants were collected from the official registry of ECEC institutions published on the website of the Ministry of Science, Education and Youth of the Republic of Croatia[1] in February 2025. After filtering out participants that were not privately founded, invitations to participate were sent to 205 institutions via email. The invitation process was conducted in three rounds, each of which spaced two weeks apart. A total of 25 valid responses were received and analysed, representing a response rate of approximately 12.2%.

ECEC institutions founded by religious organisations and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) were excluded from the sample, as they do not operate under the same economic and organisational conditions as privately founded institutions. Unlike private-for-profit providers, religious and NGO-based ECEC institutions in Croatia are typically non-competitive in the open market and are not primarily financed through market mechanisms; therefore, they do not face the same market pressures and accountability structures that made up the focus of this study. These criteria were applied to ensure analytical consistency and to maintain the comparability of data across institutions functioning within similar financial and managerial frameworks.

Data collection

Data for this study were collected through structured written interviews containing 10 open-ended questions designed to explore how directors conceptualise, communicate and enact their pedagogical mission in market-oriented conditions. The interviews were distributed via emails that included a link to a Google Forms questionnaire. The participants' responses were automatically collected and securely stored on the researcher's Google Drive storage.

Data analysis

Data were analysed through deductive, top-down thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step framework and guided by three categories from Goffman's (1956) dramaturgical model: assertive, defensive and balancing strategies. Codes and themes were treated as interpretive constructions produced through iterative engagement with the data and the authors' analytic lens. A hybrid human–AI approach was adopted, combining manual coding by two researchers with the use of ChatGPT (OpenAI) as an auxiliary tool in accordance with current methodological guidelines (Bijker et al. 2024; Zhang et al. 2023). Anonymised transcript excerpts were fed into ChatGPT, which then provided suggestions on preliminary codes and illustrative quotations. Furthermore, all outputs were reviewed, discussed and validated by the researchers

1 Available at: http://mzos.hr/dbApp/pregled.aspx?appName=Vrtici

before inclusion. This process improved analytic efficiency while ensuring that interpretive authority remained with the human team. The authors' professional experience in ECEC was treated as both a potential bias and a source of insight that was addressed through analytic memos, peer debriefing and consensus coding. The authors jointly revised the coding matrix, examined assumptions and resolved divergences through reflective dialogue. Through iterative reading and reflection, nine main codes and 92 subcodes were established across the three main themes (see Table 1). All responses were written in Croatian and translated into English, with attention paid to semantic equivalence and tone.

Research ethics

The study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Education, University of Osijek. Participation was voluntary and all participants provided their informed consent. Participants were briefed on the study's purpose, confidentiality and their right to withdraw. All data were anonymised, securely stored and used solely for academic purposes in accordance with the EU General Data Protection Regulation. The written interview format was chosen to minimise the researchers' influence on the responses and to encourage participants to provide reflective information.

Limitations and research validity

While the study provides valuable insights into how private ECEC directors in Croatia construct and communicate their pedagogical missions, several of the work's methodological limitations should be acknowledged. Data were collected through online written interviews, which, although practical, restricted opportunities for deeper probing and emotional nuance. Some deflective or sparse answers might indicate that the data collection tool did not allow the participants to fully express their challenges or deeper dilemmas. In addition, the study's overreliance on thematic coding may have led the researchers to miss out on nuances, contradictions or emotional tensions that do not neatly fit into predefined categories. Self-selection bias may have been present in the work, as the participants were likely among those who were more reflective or confident about their mission. The sample, though geographically diverse, was not representative. The study prioritised depth over generalisability. Accordingly, the authors' findings speak to ECEC directors' discursive repertoires and legitimation work under market conditions, rather than to measurable effects on children's outcomes or to the objective quality of provision. Researchers' professional backgrounds inevitably shaped interpretation, with reflexivity maintained as a key methodological stance. Finally, while integrating ChatGPT (OpenAI) enhanced analytic efficiency and transparency, its limited contextual understanding required ongoing human oversight and AI outputs were treated solely as supportive analytic aids.

Findings and discussion

Coding framework and analytical structure

The coding process resulted in three main analytical themes connected to the strategic positioning of private ECEC institutions: (1) Assertive strategies, (2) defensive strategies and (3) strategies that balance market and pedagogical demands. These themes were further structured into codes and subcodes derived inductively from the participants' responses. Table 1 presents an overview of this structure.

Theme	Codes	Subcodes
Assertive strategies	Self-promotion	institutional pride and recognisability; describing a kindergarten through core pedagogical values; the environment offered by the kindergarten as an advantage; describing the kindergarten through organisational culture and leadership; values the kindergarten offers as an advantage; programme content offered by the kindergarten as an advantage; values that signal the institution's professionalism; relationships with parents offered as an advantage; management and organisation offered by the kindergarten as an advantage; competitive aspects offered by the kindergarten as an advantage; describing the kindergarten through child- and family-oriented core values; describing the kindergarten through family-oriented core values; positive differentiation; organisational principles framed as a pedagogical value; pedagogical conditions as an advantage; personal commitment; individual initiative in founding the kindergarten; a clear vision and mission as the kindergarten's identity; investment in professional development; highlighting the team as a value; describing the kindergarten through child-oriented core values; describing the kindergarten through values oriented towards parents and the community; describing the kindergarten through employee-oriented values; using quantitative indicators to demonstrate value (number of applications/ enrolments, user satisfaction)
	Ingratiation	communication as a tool of emotional and symbolic closeness with parents; actively accommodating parents' expectations and needs; promotional and image-building strategies directed at parents; building the kindergarten's image through staff and values; the overarching narrative of parent relationships as an advantage; parental satisfaction; community involvement; trust-building; family-like environment; inclusive environment; social media presence
	Language	language of professional responsibility and pedagogical expertise; of child-centred well-being and developmental flourishing; emotional and affective language of care and security; language of inclusion, multiculturalism and children's rights; of belonging, community and family-like atmosphere; of cooperation, partnership and participatory engagement with parents; of participatory leadership, shared reflection and collective evaluation; of organisational quality, order and effective resource management; rhetoric of institutional identity, mission/vision and positive differentiation; of reputational defence and countering stigma around private ECEC; of digital openness and contemporary pedagogical orientation; of advocacy for accessibility and public co-funding
	Exemplification	examples of responsible and participatory decision-making; of concrete adaptation to users; of high-quality organisation and investment; programme content and pedagogical value positioning; examples from practice as an argumentative strategy; child-centred well-being, rights and ethical positioning; external evaluation and accountability references

Defensive strategies	Justifications	externalisation and contextualisation of problems; resource-based rationalisation and financial justifications; structural and systemic injustices affecting the private sector; defensive management of accountability (e.g. distancing, mitigating responsibility, lack of a clear hierarchy of priorities, shifting responsibility to other actors or the system); normalisation, minimisation and denial of problems; legitimation through roles, effort and internal solutions; moral and ethical justifications for decisions; system overload as justification for limited professional support
	Excuses	blame shifting and causal externalisation (state/system/other stakeholders); parent pressure; labour market pressure; service demand; waiting lists; finances/staffing/ space as non-negotiable constraints
	Apologies	contextualising responsibility through apology; apologising while attributing the issue to public perception/stigma regarding ECEC; effort-based apology (emphasising trying and good intentions); labour market pressure; apologising by citing system overload (limited professional support)
Balancing market and pedagogical demands	Market Negotiation	flexibility as a strategic tool and not a reactive adjustment schedule (opening hours flexibility); enrolment process; competitive positioning; competitive advantage; market differentiation; tuition fees; fee structure
	Transparency Strategies	transparency; pricing transparency; documentation practices; project-based approach; pedagogical improvement
	Pedagogical–Market Compromise	mission statement; institutional values; pedagogical dilemmas; ethical dilemmas; parent collaboration/negotiation as both a pedagogical and market value; regulatory negotiation

Table 1: Coding framework and analytical structure used in data analysis

Assertive strategies: Constructing professional identity through moral and affective discourse

The first overarching theme identified in the analysis reveals how directors reveals of private ECEC institutions construct professional and institutional identity through positive self-presentation, moral positioning and appeals to pedagogical legitimacy. A total of 62 subcodes were identified within this theme. These subcodes were grouped around several key patterns of assertive impression management: self-promotion through institutional identity, emphasising partnerships with parents, presenting pedagogical values as a market advantage, showcasing organisational culture and professional development as markers of quality, assertive ingratiation with parents, building image through staff, emotional positioning through language, and referencing concrete examples from practice.

The participants described their kindergartens as warm, close-knit communities built on emotional investment, teamwork and care. One director stated: *»Our kindergarten has been thriving for ten years despite all the challenges – because we truly work as one family,«* (P7) while another (P9) added: *»We are a small kindergarten, but we function as a close-knit home where everyone knows and supports each other.«*

Such statements illustrate how emotional language and collective metaphors such as *love*, *belonging* and *collaboration* are used to humanise the image of private ECEC and to distance it from perceptions of private ECEC institutions

as purely commercial enterprises. These narratives suggest that the directors employed *assertive impression management* to position their institutions as morally grounded and pedagogically distinctive spaces. The directors also engaged in *self-promotion through institutional identity*, highlighting ethical commitment and pedagogical excellence as central features of their professional image. Partnerships with parents were presented as both relational and strategic assets, demonstrating responsiveness and transparency. Pedagogical values such as creativity, inclusion and autonomy were often framed as *market advantages* that distinguish the institution within a competitive field. Organisational culture and professional development were used symbolically to project institutional stability and quality, while staff accomplishments were presented as reflections of strong leadership. By highlighting flexibility, partnership with parents and responsiveness to children's needs, the directors presented their institutions as both pedagogically progressive and socially responsible.

Through these forms of assertive communication, they legitimised their roles as both educators and entrepreneurs who reconcile market participation with social and pedagogical responsibility.

This strategic self-representation reflects what Moss (2009) terms *democratic professionalism* – a form of professional identity that preserves the ethical and dialogical dimensions of educational work within a marketised system. Similarly, Biesta's (2010) notion of *subjectification* is echoed in these narratives: education is portrayed not as a means to produce measurable outcomes but as a process of becoming, belonging and participating. Through their performances of moral and pedagogical identity, the interviewed directors constructed legitimacy not through competition but through relational ethics, shared values and a sense of collective purpose.

Defensive strategies: Negotiating accountability and structural inequality

The second theme, *defensive strategies*, captures how the directors justified, explained or neutralised tensions between pedagogical ideals and market realities. Twelve subcodes were identified within this theme, encompassing several recurring patterns of defensive communication: justifications based on external circumstances, excuses for or apologies regarding responsibility shifting, appeals to personal or professional position, internal justifications within organisational context, ethical and value-based justifications and the normalisation or relativisation of problems.

The directors referred to unequal subsidies, inconsistent local funding and limited public recognition as sources of systemic disadvantage. One participant explained: *»We do everything we can, but the local government's subsidies are inconsistent – it's a constant struggle to keep fees affordable.«* (P4) Another emphasised fairness and dedication despite limited resources: *»We face the same standards as public kindergartens – sometimes even higher standards – but receive less support. It's not easy, but we persist because of the children.«* (P15)

These statements function as a discursive negotiation of accountability. The participants framed themselves as responsible yet constrained actors operating

within systems that requires constant justification. Through moral appeals effort, fairness and professional integrity, they sought to affirm legitimacy in the absence of structural equality.

This dynamic mirrors Foucault's concept of *governmentality*, wherein individuals internalise systems of accountability and self-surveillance. The directors' discourse reveals how neoliberal governance extends into the moral and emotional fabric of leadership, compelling these directors to continuously reconcile pedagogical ideals with external expectations. When the participants emphasised that they *»do the same or more with fewer resources«,* they engaged in a moral economy of professionalism or an attempt to sustain ethical coherence within unequal conditions.

Defensive strategies thus illustrate how accountability is not merely a policy mechanism but also a lived and narrated experience. The directors interpreted their struggles not as failures but as moral perseverance, and they maintained a commitment to educational quality despite systemic constraints.

Balancing strategies: Negotiating market pressures and pedagogical integrity

The third overarching theme, balancing strategies, examines how directors manage their public image and pedagogical mission while navigating institutional and market constraints. Within this code, 18 subcodes were identified and grouped around several recurring patterns: pedagogical mission as a core orientation despite market pressures; flexibility as a strategic tool rather than a reactive adjustment; assertive branding of pedagogical quality; parent collaboration as both a pedagogical and market value; and defensive articulation of structural constraints.

Participants described the decision-making process as being one of continuous ethical negotiation, Guided by a mission they often characterised as a moral compass, the participants described the decision-making process as being one of continuous ethical negotiation. One director claimed: *»Whenever we have to choose, the well-being of children always comes first – even if it means postponing some financial goals.«* (P2) Another provided the following reflection: *»We adjust the programme when necessary – for example, changing working hours or adding activities – but always ensure it remains in line with our pedagogical mission.«* (P10)

Through these reflections, the participants presented the pedagogical mission as a *living ethical framework* – a guide for aligning economic realities with child-centred and democratic principles. This balancing act reveals a tension between idealism and pragmatism: maintaining pedagogical integrity is both an ethical commitment and a form of resistance to neoliberal rationalities.

These findings resonate with those of Urban et al. (2012), who argue that leaders in early childhood education operate in *hybrid spaces* in which public responsibility intersects with market logic. The participants' narratives precisely demonstrate this hybridity: while the directors accepted the realities of competition and accountability, they reframed their mission as a relational and moral project that protects education from full commodification.

The emphasis on moral purpose also connects with Moss's (2014) view of early childhood institutions as *public forums* – spaces that can nurture dialogue,

plurality and shared responsibility. By describing their institutions as *»communities of care«* and *»spaces of belonging«,* the participants implicitly redefined the private ECEC setting as a narrated public space that is not public in its ownership but in its ethical and democratic orientation.

In doing so, the directors mediated between pedagogical ethics and market rationality, reaffirming education as a humanistic practice within a competitive context. Their accounts illuminate how leadership in private ECEC is both constrained by market conditions and empowered by moral purpose, revealing an ongoing effort to sustain coherence, authenticity and democratic values in standardised environments.

Conclusion

This study explored how directors of privately founded ECEC institutions in Croatia defined, communicated and adapted their pedagogical missions within market-oriented conditions. Grounded in critical theory and Goffman's dramaturgical perspective, it examined how broader ideological and economic structures are reflected and negotiated in the everyday practices of institutional leadership. The work's findings are based on transcribed interviews, which should be understood as participants' subjective constructions of meaning rather than objective accounts of institutional functioning. Their narratives reflect interpretive sense-making shaped by personal, institutional and social contexts. What participants choose to emphasise (community, fairness or dedication) and what they omit offers insight into the discursive repertoire available to ECEC leaders in Croatia – one that combines moral commitment, professional pride and cautious adaptation within a marketised educational field.

The work's analysis revealed that ECEC directors employ assertive, defensive and balancing strategies to construct and sustain institutional identity in a complex and often contradictory environment. Through assertive strategies, the participants positioned themselves as moral and professional agents who used affective and relational language to present their kindergartens as communities of care, belonging and pedagogical distinction, thereby affirming legitimacy and counteracting market stereotypes. The defensive strategies employed by the directors reflected their efforts to justify structural inequalities, limited recognition and financial precarity, with the directors framing their work as a moral endeavour constrained by systemic conditions, appealing to fairness and responsibility rather than competition. The directors' balancing strategies demonstrated the ongoing negotiation between pedagogical integrity and market survival, with the directors describing their mission as a moral compass guiding ethical decision-making and coherence amid external pressures.

Taken together, these narratives portray private ECEC leadership as a reflexive, value-driven practice that mediates between pedagogical ideals and neoliberal rationalities. Rather than rejecting market realities, the directors reinterpreted them through ethical and relational discourses that preserve a sense of democratic professionalism (Moss 2009) and moral agency. Their testimonies reveal the ECEC institution as a narrated public space where educators strive

to sustain dialogue, care and shared responsibility even within a commodified system.

The study demonstrates the value of written reflective interviews and hybrid human–AI analytical approaches for capturing professionals' meaning-making while maintaining a reflexive awareness of positionality. Several of the study's limitations should be noted: Its small, self-selected sample and potential social desirability bias may have led the participants to present idealised narratives while limiting the acquisition of deeper causal insight. In addition, the written interview format and reliance on thematic coding constrained opportunities to probe emotional nuance or complexity beyond predefined categories.

Future research could extend this study's enquiry to include educators, parents and policy actors, thereby further illuminating how pedagogical missions are co-constructed across institutional and policy contexts. Ultimately, the findings affirm that within Croatia's evolving educational landscape, the pedagogical mission endures as a living ethical project – a means through which ECEC leaders articulate resistance to marketisation and reaffirm education's democratic and humanistic purpose.

Statement on access to research data

Data are accessible with restrictions (legal/ethical restrictions)

The research data used in this article are not publicly available due to restrictions related to personal data protection (in accordance with General Data Protection Regulation). Access to anonymized or restricted versions of the data is possible upon reasonable request to the authors of the article.

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MED TRGOM IN POSLANSTVOM: ZASEBNI VRTCI V KONTEKSTU POBLAGOVLJENJA IN TRŽNIH PRAKS

Povzetek: Poslanstvo vzgojno-izobraževalne ustanove je ključno za oblikovanje skupnega razumevanja in usmerjanje pedagoške prakse. Utemeljeno v demokratičnih in humanističnih vrednotah oblikuje pedagoške pristope, organizacijsko kulturo in odnose znotraj ustanove. Na področju zgodnje vzgoje in izobraževanja (ZVI) se zasebne ustanove pogosto soočajo s težavo usklajevanja takšnega poslanstva s tržnimi pritiski. Ker delujejo zunaj sistema javnega financiranja, morajo uravnotežiti prepoznavnost, konkurenčnost in pričakovanja staršev, hkrati pa varovati pedagoško integriteto. Študija je preučevala, kako ravnatelji zasebnih institucij ZVI na Hrvaškem opredeljujejo in komunicirajo svoje pedagoško poslanstvo ter kako prilagajajo institucionalne cilje ob zunanjih zahtevah. Izhajajoč iz kritične teorije in ob upoštevanju Goffmanovega okvira upravljanja vtisov, je bila uporabljena kvalitativna tematska analiza strukturiranih pisnih intervjujev. Ugotovitve kažejo, da ravnatelji ne le vodijo ustanove, temveč tudi oblikujejo javne narative, ki jih zaznamujejo neoliberalna pričakovanja glede prepoznavnosti in diferenciacije, ob tem pa si prizadevajo ohraniti pedagoške vrednote. Ker se zavedajo sistemskih neenakosti, uravnoteženje uporabljajo kot zavestno strategijo za ohranjanje strokovne integritete in dobrega počutja otrok, pri čemer pedagoške vrednote, ne tržno logiko, prepoznavajo kot svoje moralno vodilo. Omejitve študije vključujejo omejitve pisnih intervjujev in zanašanje na tematsko kodiranje, pri čemer so lahko jezikovne nianse spregledane.

Ključne besede: ravnatelji ustanov ZVI, upravljanje vtisov, pedagoško poslanstvo, zasebne ustanove ZVI, tržne razmere

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