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# Swedish free school companies going global: Spatial imaginaries and movable pedagogical ideas

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**ABSTRACT**

Enabled by market-oriented policies implemented in the early 1990s, a nation-wide for-profit education industry has emerged and flourished in Sweden. As a more recent expansion strategy, Swedish school companies have begun exporting their school and early childhood education and care services internationally. In this article, three such companies and a selection of the foreign operations they have set up are studied to analyse how they describe the education services they are establishing in the new national settings. The findings show that the companies have developed and followed different edu-business models, using and transforming particular pedagogical ideas and connecting them to different spatial imaginaries. These include the Swedish/Scandinavian as both places and idealized spaces, infused with borderless global transformative spatial imaginaries on the creation of autonomous learners and futuristic education visions for global futures. Educational profiles and concepts from the Swedish context are both adjusted and marketed to the foreign settings, and entail stories on spaces and mobilities, encompassing pedagogy, teachers and students.

## Introduction and aim

A growing involvement of commercial actors in education is visible across the globe as well as in the Nordic countries and manifests itself in various ways, from direct selling of services and products to schools, to privatized education delivery (c.f. Ball & Youdell, 2007; Verger et al., 2016). Much of the existing literature on the global education industry (GEI) has focused on the large players, such as Pearson or Microsoft, but 'far less attention has been directed to the other end of the education market and the role of micro-, small-, and medium-sized edu-businesses' (Ball, 2019, p. 23). Building on empirical examples of such education companies originating in Sweden, this article contributes to addressing this gap.

Sweden as a national setting brings with it some interesting dimensions to issues of privatization in education. In the early 1990s, privately operated and fully tax-funded 'free schools' were introduced and allowed to operate for-profit, leading to a transformation of the education system (Alexiadou et al., 2019). The free school sector has undergone a rapid development towards private limited companies as the dominant mode of operation, with ownership concentration in large companies and school-chains. Furthermore, several Swedish companies have begun exporting their school and early childhood education and care (ECEC) services based on their experiences

of such provision in Sweden. At present, the three largest Swedish free school companies operate across Europe, Asia and the Middle East, offering preschool, compulsory and upper secondary level school services (Rönnberg, 2019).

In this article,[1] we examine these three for-profit education companies and how they brand the education and childcare they offer in different national contexts. The aim is to describe and analyse how Swedish education companies expanded internationally and how they present a selection of their education services abroad. This includes the ways these offerings are framed in the new national contexts as attractive education services and how pedagogical ideas are branded as they are moved from one geographical, political and cultural education space to another.

The Swedish school companies are, on the one hand, not unique in the GEI and there are indeed many other education delivery companies of different sizes and organization operating across the globe (Moeller, 2020; Parreira Do Amaral et al., 2019). On the other hand, these three companies have originated in Sweden with its unique privatization policy set-up that allows profit-making from public voucher funding, a background that underpins the framing of the services they offer abroad. In the following, we address issues relating to respatialisation (Gulson et al., 2017) in an increasingly commercialized

education context. Through the conceptualization of 'spatial imaginaries' (Watkins, 2015), the operations and international movements of Swedish 'edu-business' (Mahoney et al., 2004) and their pedagogical ideas can shed light on the spatial dimensions of education commercialization and privatization by these smaller, in a GEI perspective understudied, corporate actors.

After an outline of the approach and methodology, the article unfolds in two main parts: The first addresses the Swedish education companies' international set-up and asks: *What education services are offered by these companies and how have they expanded internationally?* The second part focuses on the export of these companies via a selection of the companies' foreign operations. The focus is how these commercialized education services are framed, adapted and portrayed as they are spatially relocated and adapted to suit a new national setting. The following questions are addressed in the second part: *In what ways are pedagogical profiles and/or work used to frame the offered services to the foreign audience, and to what extent are (idealized) spatial imaginaries made visible in these company representations?* The analysis of the material through these questions offers an empirical contribution specific to the examined companies, but also a conceptual enrichment of spatial imaginaries through an examination of their manifestations in the studied examples.

## Approach and Methodology

In 1989, Ohmae (1989) proposed the thesis of a 'borderless world', predicting the creation of an open market where ideas and mobility (certainly of financial capital but also of political ideas) would be (fairly) free and would challenge the territoriality of the state. Several years later, critics refined the concept of 'borders' as mediating social, cultural and political spaces and relations and as having ethical (Paasi, 2019) as well as strongly regulative and differentiating dimensions for the spaces they define (Agnew, 2005; Oke, 2009). Issues of borders and cross-national flows and transfers of policy and people have been the focus in education research in different ways, for instance, targeting the global actors who operate at the level of international organizations but also in the growing global education industry (Ball, 2019; Au & Ferrare, 2015; Ball, 2012; Junemann & Ball, 2013; Lingard & Sellar, 2013; Lubienski, 2007; Parreira Do Amaral et al., 2019; Robertson et al., 2012; Steiner-Khamsi, 2018; Verger et al., 2016). We thereby acknowledge the international flows of ideas and their national manifestations, carried and enabled by actors and organizations, including commercial actors and 'edu-preneurs' that are working to advance and

promote certain ideas and products. In addition, there is a relevant education literature on policy mobility, learning and circulation and the local embeddedness and adaptation of movable policies and practices (Alexiadou & Lundahl, 2019; Ozga & Jones, 2006; Steiner-Khamsi, 2016). These studies relate to and draw on resources developed in, for instance, policy transfer research (Dolowitz & Marsh, 1996; Meseguer, 2009), organizational studies and institutionalist frames on for instance, diffusion and travel (Czarniawska & Sevon, 2005; Røvik, 1996; Sahlin & Wedlin, 2008). There is also an increasing literature with a focus on 'place, space and scale' in the global circulation of models and policies (McCann & Ward, 2013, p. 2).

In our analysis, we use the notion of 'space' and its constitutive properties that mediate the practices of internationally mobile edu-business. We thus assume that these companies, having begun as Swedish school enterprises, adapt their business models, curricula and ways of operating to conform with different legal and regulative regimes, cultures of practice, patterns of social interaction, and expectations in each new country of operation. At the same time, this adaptation entails the need for commercial branding of a pedagogical idea, or even a 'spatial imaginary' circulated through 'language, images and texts' (Watkins, 2015, p. 508). The notion of spatial imaginaries refers to 'stories and ways of talking about places and spaces that transcend language as embodied performances by people in the material world' (Watkins, 2015, p. 509). In these stories, different expressions of 'othering' can be identified, and, for instance, ideas of hierarchy and 'difference' and other forms of value judgements are constructed and manifested within them. Spatial imaginaries work at different scales and across time; they incorporate both past, historical characteristics and arguments on what the future may/should look like, as well as what can be done to shape it. Imaginaries can create boundaries between groups, or try to dissolve them, but they are often connected to certain hopes for the future. In these narrations, social perceptions of places are produced and reproduced, and the imaginaries are performative – not merely representational. Spatial imaginaries work to form 'non-first hand' (Watkins, 2015, p. 509) conceptions of both places and spaces.

Watkins (2015) identifies three forms of imaginaries that tell different spatial stories and can be used by actors in different ways, related to a) places, b) idealized spaces, and/or, c) spatial transformations. *Place imaginaries* are connected to the perceived uniqueness or distinctiveness of a particular place (for instance, 'Sweden', or 'India') and they 'communicate ideas about a broad variety of phenomena supposedly characteristic of that place, "othering"

competing interpretations' (Watkins, 2015, p. 512). Second, *idealized spatial imaginaries* tell spatial stories of a more generalized kind, of universal perceived characteristics that often connotes either positively or negative, such as a 'developed country' or 'deprived neighbourhood'. The idealized spatial imaginaries are often used to point to the need for 'change' and the negative idealizations are subordinated to the more positive ones. Such idealizations bring with them particular interpretations, such as the 'global city' connoting positive urbanism and economic development. Finally, *spatial transformational imaginaries* are often manifested through 'narratives of how places have, should, or deterministically will evolve through generalized processes' (Watkins, 2015, p. 513), such as globalization. Speed, inevitability and naturalized truths are central in forming the narratives. It is important to note that these three types are not mutually exclusive but interconnected and sometimes also reinforcing each other. Still, there is analytical value in acknowledging that different types of spatial imaginaries are at play, with particular rationalities and effects. Like Brooks (2021), we have analysed the data at hand to infer the type of spatial imaginaries that were deployed from our reading of the empirical material.

Our theoretical approach has several methodological implications. First, in order to understand the operation of international edu-business, we focus on the ways the companies expand their operations to international contexts. In the crossing of national boundaries, we observe and describe practices and discourses of respatialisation in the form of spatial imaginaries manifested in companies' self-representations on how they adapt to the new operational settings. Such practices have material and structural realities (new buildings and the hiring of teachers, school leaders and auxiliary staff, etc.), often high costs and high financial returns. Second, as the companies adapt to local conditions, the flow of resources (material and discursive) and the social and power relations enacted through routine interactions result in a process of constituting the spaces of which these edu-businesses are a part (Gulson et al., 2017). Our methodology reflects these principles and aims at a rich description of these companies' operations and self-representations in their new national and cultural spaces.

## Empirical data and analysis

The research focuses on three Swedish school companies: Kunskapsskolan Education (the 'Knowledge School'[2]); Internationella Engelska Skolan (IES, the 'International English School') and AcadeMedia. All these companies are large and dominant actors in the Swedish domestic school market, where they operate for profit but are financed by public funds. These three large education companies have had the most ambitious export agenda compared to other free school companies and this is why they have been selected for this study. Furthermore, the selected foreign sites of operation, i.e. India (Kunskapsskolan), Germany (AcadeMedia and its preschool company Espira) and Spain (IES), are countries in which these companies have recently intensified expansion efforts, thus enabling us to study the commercial activities and respatialisation involved in these moves.

For each foreign operation, we study the companies' self-representations by analysing data collected from company websites and curricular documents, as well as data on the Swedish parts of the companies through, for instance, websites and official Swedish registers. We also collected the companies' annual financial reports, self-presentations in social media and marketing materials, considering multi-modal expressions including uses of pictures and videos. Company and school websites and self-descriptions in brochures and other media are particularly central to our analysis since they display the image of themselves and their educational offer they want to convey to their external audience and stakeholders. The focus is to analyse company self-representations, and thus external communication from the companies to their surrounding environment via 'storefront' materials as outlined above, were suitable sources of data.

A team of two or more researchers in the project group analysed each company and its foreign operation, enabling discussion and validation of findings within and across the operations. We analysed the empirical sources via a thematic content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005), to (i) discern how the companies expanded abroad and how they generally portray their foreign operations (findings section 1, research question 1). We have also (ii) identified and located the role of pedagogical ideas and work in these self-representations; and (iii) related these self-representations to spatial imaginaries (c.f. Watkins, 2015) (findings section 2, research question 2). These themes have been divided into additional sub-themes. Under (ii), we include aspects on the positioning of a) the teacher and the student, and b) the organization and profile of curricula and content. These sub-themes will appear in the findings in the second empirical section. Under (iii), the previous themes were revisited to unveil the framing of a) places, referring to a particular uniqueness of a geography, b) idealized spaces, including for instance, 'Swedishness'/'Scandinavian-ness' and related hierarchical positionings of spaces, and c) spatial transformations, referring to narratives of globalization and educational futures/skills for children and students as they are embedded in the self-

representations. This analytical step is visible in the second empirical section as well as in the concluding part.

## Part I: swedish education companies and their international expansion

There are different ways to conceptualize privatization (c.f. Ball & Youdell, 2007) but a core aspect concerns the 'transfer of ownership of assets and production of goods and services from the government to the private sector' (Starr et al., 1989). This definition clearly fits the profile of Swedish school companies that, within the national context, provide tax-funded education services on a for-profit basis. In their international operations, these edu-businesses operate in mixed and multiple spaces at the same time, creating 'third spaces' that take into account the regulatory regimes of the countries in which they operate, but, as Hartmann (2021) suggests, 'never in their totality' (p. 368). Through their marketing, positioning and respatialisation, they differentiate their educational offer and create a 'transnational infrastructure that cuts across the distinction between the national and the international' (Hartmann, 2021, p. 368).

### Kunskapsskolan

Kunskapsskolan is the second largest independent school company in Sweden. It was founded in 2000 by Peje Emilsson who owns the business as a subsidiary of the family company Magnora Group AB. In 2018, Kunskapsskolan Sverige AB reported sales of almost EUR 120 million (Allabolag, 2020). The company operates 29 lower secondary schools, and seven upper secondary schools, with a total of about 13,000 Swedish students. Kunskapsskolan has developed a pedagogical model with personally designed education, the KED program, based on individual-based teaching where the students themselves (together with their teacher/mentor and parents) set and follow goals for their studies.

The first steps towards establishing schools abroad were taken in 2005. Currently, Kunskapsskolan operates in England, the Netherlands, India, the USA and Saudi Arabia, which, including the schools in Sweden, adds up to more than 100 schools, 25,000 students and 2,500 teachers. The international expansion has taken different forms and formats depending on the target country. In the Netherlands, for example, the company sells and provides knowledge/consultancy on the KED program. In India and Saudi Arabia, the company runs and builds new schools with local operators and investors as co-owners and local partners. As in Sweden, the activities stem from the core basics laid out in the pedagogical concept of the KED program, which is then adapted and revised to suit each country's curriculum and examination methods.

India has a huge market for private schools. The Indian government has invested heavily in improving public schools but since they still have poor reputations, many parents choose to place their children in one of the country's many private schools (Kingdon, 2017). The Indian government has also invited and facilitated private actors to enter India and contribute to education in various ways. Previous research has mapped both important networks and central policy actors and entrepreneurs, and how they have worked in the Indian national setting (Ball, 2019; Nambissan & Ball, 2010).

### AcadeMedia

AcadeMedia AB is a Swedish-owned corporate group established in 1996 with a multi-brand strategy that gathers several schools and ECEC providers as subsidiary companies and brands in a chain (AcadeMedia, 2021f). Since 2016, AcadeMedia AB has been listed on Nasdaq Stockholm, and the largest owner is a Swedish-based investment company (AcadeMedia, 2021e). According to its website, AcadeMedia is the largest education company in Northern Europe, providing schooling from ECEC to adult education in over 660 schools and ECEC centres with over 180 000 children and students and almost 18 000 teachers and staff (AcadeMedia, 2021b). AcadeMedia´s international engagement concerns its ECEC segment, with operations in Norway and Germany.

AcadeMedia´s first international acquisition was the Norwegian company Espira in 2014, that was operating around 100 ECEC centres. This facilitated the launch of a Scandinavian preschool model in Germany, where AcadeMedia opened their first Espira ECEC centre in 2018. Before this, the company had acquired three German ECEC operators (AcadeMedia, 2019). Until recently, it had primarily been acquiring existing brands and ECEC centres but is now growing organically, as well (c.f. AcadeMedia, 2021d) mainly via the Stepke and Espira brands. In late 2020, AcadeMedia owned 53 ECEC centres (AcadeMedia, , 2021a). The company's total turnover was more than EUR 1.2 billion in 2019–2020, with the international preschools contributing 20% of this figure (AcadeMedia, 2020).

Germany is said to need an additional 350,000 ECEC places, especially in former West Germany and in metropolitan areas. Federal law states that every child has a legal right to childcare from the age of 1, and this has led to a demand for ECEC places. The federal government has directed funding to the states to help increase the quality and number

of such places and to reduce parental fees (Eurydice, 2021). Public funding and investment support has also in some cases included private ECEC deliverers. As a result, AcadeMedia views the German ECEC market as especially promising (AcadeMedia, 2021c).

### Internationella Engelska Skolan (IES)

IES is the largest education company delivering primary and lower secondary education in Sweden, with some 28,000 students in 39 schools. IES' pedagogical profile emphasizes command of the English language, a safe and orderly school environment, and high academic expectations and aspirations (IES, 2021a). The company was founded in 1993 by former US teacher Barbara Bergström and was introduced on the stock exchange in 2016. In 2020, a Luxembourg-based consortium announced a mandatory public offer, which more than 99% of the stakeholders accepted. IES then became an unlisted subsidiary with Peutinger AB as the main owner via two investment funds, together with the Hans and Barbara Bergström Foundation (IES, 2021b). The international expansion of IES began in 2012, targeting the school market in England. The company currently runs one IES Academy school in England in partnership with the Sabres Educational Trust. In 2016, the company moved its focus to Spain and a joint venture with a Spanish school group, while in 2019, it changed its strategy to full ownership, meaning that all IES schools in Spain are now subsidiaries of IES via the company International Education Partnership (IEP; 2020a, IES, 2020b).

In 1996, a bilingual project was initiated by the Spanish Ministry of Education and the British Council (British Council, 2020a), prompting a rise in the number of schools offering instruction in both Spanish and English (British Council, 2020b). In total, IES estimates that there are 8.2 million Spanish students, and currently about 200,000 of them are enrolled in fee-paying private schools with a bilingual orientation – the target market for IEP (IES, 2020b). IES owns seven schools in Spain with more than 4,800 students (IEP, 2021a), and claim to be the sixth largest non-religious private school actor in the country (IES, 2020b). In 2019/2020, the total turnover in Sweden was EUR 283 million and the corresponding figure for Spain was EUR 53 million (IES, 2020b).

### Part II: Respatialisation and linking to new national contexts

In the previous section, we showed that the organization of the companies, the services offered, and their strategies in international expansion have varied. Kunskapsskolan starts and builds schools abroad

under its own brand and name, but also sells the KED concept internationally, by providing a pedagogical product via the KED digital Learning Portal in the form of consultancy. AcadeMedia expands through acquisitions and organic growth, buying existing ECEC brands and companies and exporting these to other national contexts. The same applies to IES via its IEP group, accompanied by an active re-branding of acquired existing operations to a version of the Swedish company trademark. Next, we analyse how these companies embed their work into the new spatial contexts. Specifically, we examine how they frame what they bring to these spaces and how their pedagogical ideas and services are constructed and portrayed in the new national settings.

### Kunskapsskolan in India

Kunskapsskolan has kept and uses its Swedish name in India, and the school buildings are designed according to the model the company has for its Swedish schools (KS India, 2021a). The majority of Kunskapsskolan's students and teachers are Indian but instruction is in English with Hindi as an optional language. The teaching is based on Kunskapsskolan's educational concept, the KED program, but the four Kunskapsskolan schools in India follow the country's national curriculum and its defined content and degree scheme.

Kunskapsskolan's self-representation emphasizes 'building a future ready generation' and KED is claimed to be more than an approach to the curriculum – an 'educational philosophy' designed to create responsible future citizens who take ownership of their process of learning (KS India, 2021a, 2021d). The presentation of the school's mission and purpose is framed by a discourse of modernization and globalization that makes this KED philosophy necessary to prepare students for the fast pace change in economy, working life and technology. What the company presents as unique to the Indian context is having a coherent approach to personalization 'for the new century' (KS India, 2021b). This education model was developed by the company in Sweden and implemented as a result of the privatization policies in Sweden in the 1990s (KS India, 2021b). Thus, there is a distinct imaginary of an original place (Watkins, 2015) to convey a Swedish origin as both relevant and unique to the Indian national context.

The mission of the school is portrayed as a radical departure from the mass-education model of conventional schooling and a movement towards preparing students for 'personal responsibility and collaboration, globalisation, technology and a career of lifelong learning' (KS India, 2021c). It draws on elements of transformative spatial imaginaries, where accelerated (unavoidable) progress and globalization positions

the education offer as particularly important in order to 'keep up'. In accordance with the highly personalized approach of the KED philosophy, there is a strong discourse of breaking away from conventional timetables that organize students' time and pedagogical experience in 'traditional' ways. Framing and contrasting of the 'conventional' and 'new/the KED alternative', constructs an imaginary of hierarchical orderings in which the discourses of the 'the innovative' Swedish ideas the company brings to India are positioned in relation to the stereotyped 'traditional' of the Indian national setting (Watkins, 2015; see also KS India, 2016). In these imaginaries, teachers and students are positioned in particular ways.

Students are described as independent individuals, supported to become 'empowered', 'responsible', 'confident', 'reflective', 'creative', 'collaborative', and able to develop critical thinking skills. Together with the family, the student is to identify their long-term educational goals and construct an individual study plan. Through this process, students are expected to construct a strategy for their learning that includes a choice of lectures and assignments and to be able to assess their own strengths and progress. Students are responsible for how they spend their time and their program of lectures, workshops and other activities (India, KS , 2021f).

Throughout the school's documentation and websites, teachers are rarely referred to as 'teachers', rather they are presented as personal coaches for students. Their role is to act as mentors and guide students towards their goals in weekly coaching sessions (KS India, 2021e). Verbs used to describe the role of teachers include 'guiding', 'mentoring', 'reviewing', 'assessing', 'coaching', 'counselling', 'serving as a role model', and 'serving as a support resource' and 'partner' (KS India, 2021e). A core part of the KED program significant in defining the role of the teacher is the Learning Portal, acting as a repository of resources that releases teachers from the need to prepare lessons, allowing them to spend more time with students (KS India, 2021g). Parents are offered reassurances that the Portal contains the 'best materials' and that what is practiced in the school 'is not solely a prerogative of an individual teacher' (KS India, 2021g), said to ensure that the KED pedagogy and contents are taught as intended.

### Espira in Germany

AcadeMedia opened its first Espira ECEC centre in 2018 and currently has 11 such centres in Bayern and Baden-Württemberg. While Espira abides by Germany's broad federal and state ECEC goals as laid out in Social Code VIII (SGB Viii, n.d.). Espira's self-representation is centred around being the Scandinavian option, with a 'holistic pedagogy based on the Scandinavian model' (Espira, 2021c), also described as 'a cosmopolitan ECEC concept of Scandinavian origin' (Espira, 2021f, 2021c). This Scandinavian dimension does not merely refer to a place. It is also framed as an idealized space through articulations such as the 'development of the child', 'individualisation', being 'inclusive and equal', promoting 'democracy and participation' and 'environmentalism and nature'. The inclusive, egalitarian and intercultural ethos, located in an idealized Scandinavianness, is manifested in presentations such as: 'We warmly welcome all children, families and carers to our facilities and offer them equal opportunities, education and guaranteed quality, regardless of individual characteristics such as gender, social affiliation, economic conditions, origin, language, religion or special needs' (Espira, 2021a).

In addition, the Scandinavian model is also linked to a 'healthy mind and body' narrative, a guiding principle of the Espira pedagogy, with daily exercise and a high proportion of outdoor activities, regardless of weather. The ECEC centres are described as having 'spacious gardens' and indoor and outdoor areas that encourage movement and 'allow climbing, crawling and pulling up' (Espira, 2021f). The Scandinavian-framed environmentalism and outdoor pedagogy for discovery, exploration, and movement is further strengthened by images on the website of children outdoors, physically active, next to images of growing plants. In addition, environmentalism is represented through the provision of healthy meals and the use of natural material for the interior design, equipment and toys.

Espira's self-representation in Germany as the Scandinavian egalitarian, green, and outdoor alternative stands in contrast to the company's branding in Norway where the logo is red, not green, and where the German Espira seedling is not part of the logo. The Norwegian website puts stronger emphasis on knowledge and teaching. In the Norwegian context, the centres are called 'Kunnskapsbarnehage', which means 'kindergarten for knowledge', and the websites display images of children with safety glasses and test tubes doing experiments (Espira, , 2021g). This self-representation stands in contrast to the idealized Scandinavian imaginary selected for promotion in the German context.

Along with outdoor pedagogy, other imaginaries include social participation and democracy, manifested in articulations of an agentic role of children who 'actively and autonomously shape their everyday life', 'take responsibility' and 'learn from and with one another', with their wishes and suggestions being heard (Espira, 2021b). The Espira self-representation thus emphasize each child's individuality and personality (Espira, 2021a), in developing skills such as self-confidence', 'flexibility', 'intercultural

sensitivity', 'social and ecological responsibility', 'creativity', and 'resilience' (Espira, 2021a, 2021d).

In line with children being represented as co-designers and active participants in everyday life, the educators working in the Espira centres are described as 'initiators', 'advisors', and 'role models' (Espira, 2021b) providing 'emotional security', 'attentiveness', 'reliability', 'love' and 'encouragement' (Espira, 2021a). The expectation is that educators 'create play and learning situations every day according to the needs and wishes of the group or individual children' (Espira, 2021e). Despite the emphasis on educators being guides and advisors, and children the active co-designers, educators need 'a clear framework' and children 'concrete guidance' that follow Espiras educational goals. This is provided by the Espira Activity Cards, developed in Norway and adapted to the German context. The cards are divided into seven educational areas, and the 150 activity cards 'offer our employees well-thought-out suggestions' for their work (Espira, 2021b). The activity cards can be seen to represent the Scandinavian ECEC model of combining learning and knowledge with the goals of care. The work of the educators is controlled and governed through these activity cards to ensure a proper Scandinavian model.

### International Education Partnership (IEP) in Spain

The seven IEP schools in Spain are all bilingual private schools that follow the Spanish and/or English curriculum (IES, 2020b). They enrol children from approximately the age of 2 or 3 up to 16–18 and are spread across Spain. IEP focuses its self-representation on being an education group in which 'the pupil is at the heart of the learning process', characterized by 'active learning methods which encourage discovery, critical thinking, curiosity and independence' (IEP, 2021a). A prominent feature is the bilingual orientation in teaching and curriculum delivery. IEP and IES are confident in their ability to run bilingual schools: 'With 27 years of experience we are experts at operating high-quality bilingual schools, and we can take much of what we have learnt in Sweden into our Spanish schools. We are also happy to see a flow of knowledge and ideas from Spain to Sweden, which is proof that there is strength in numbers' (IES, 2020b, pp. 8–9). In addition, and drawing on further imaginaries of Sweden as a particular place, IEP visually portrays its link to the Swedish IES with a map marking all the schools' geographical locations in Sweden under the heading 'Our extended family' (IEP, 2021a).

The self-representation thus connects the 'Swedish experience' to the benefits of the education offered in Spain, making some of the key parts of the education offered in Sweden and Spain interconnected and education as a service movable across spaces. IES states that the operations in Spain are 'largely based on the same principles such as IES in Sweden' (IES, 2020b, p. 37), with the focus being on a safe and orderly school environment, the command of English, and high academic expectations and aspirations (IEP, 2021a). In this way, core pedagogical ideas are moved and marketed in both national contexts. Still, national adaption to suit the Spanish setting is necessary and new regulatory frames must be adhered to. The move therefore involves not just adaptations but also the need for adaption and certification from both Spanish and UK authorities (IES, 2020b).

Students are described as 'confident communicators', with emphasis placed on the mastering of English, Spanish and a third language, as 'independent thinkers' with creative problem-solving skills and as 'socially responsible' equipping students to 'believe that they can make a difference in the world' for future study and work opportunities (IEP, 2021c). The corresponding image for the teacher is that of a modern, flexible and adaptable actor aiming to meet the needs of different students. Teaching is described as personalized and child-centred, with teachers having 'high expectations of all their students', 'identifying each individual's talents and encouraging them to be the best they can be' (IEP, 2021d). The teaching methods used to achieve these aims are portrayed as 'modern methodologies' that aid students in questioning and exploring as learning also 'continues outside the classroom' (IEP, 2021b). IEP further frames its schools as with IES in Sweden, as places where 'teachers can teach and students can learn' (IEP, 2021b), and students can reach their full potential, both now and in the future (IEP, 2021b).

For IEP and IES, the marketing of bilingual education and especially 'English proficiency' are important imaginaries used discursively to amplify and legitimize the pedagogical ideas and education services in both Sweden and Spain. Thus, even though there is little explicit idealizing of Swedishness or Spanishness in these self-representations, the national spaces become embedded in a wider context of stories of spatial transformation in which national boundaries are transcended and mastering 'English' is particularly crucial.

### Conclusion

This study contributes knowledge on the operation of Swedish private actors in the process of their international export activities. In particular, it has provided empirical illustrations on how such commercial actors and their actions matter for the packaging and selling of education ideas, and the

construction of narratives on what is (seen as) old and new, traditional and modern, in the education spaces they operate in. We wish to highlight two important points raised in the research. First, even though the notion that nation states matter in a globalized world is not new in education research (c.f. Normand, 2020; Jones & Traianou, 2019; Hall et al., 2015), this study highlights a particular form of *how* it matters in a commercialized education context. It does so by identifying the ways in which the 'national' is important as a substantial material basis, and as a projected and respatialised self-representation. It matters for both the original development of the companies' financial assets (mediated through national Swedish policy), their modus operandi and pedagogical identities that are commercialized and exported. All three companies develop their international operations from a strong national basis and experiences they gained while setting up and running schools, preschools and education products (such as KED) in Sweden. Educational profiles and concepts from the Swedish experience are both adjusted and marketed to the new foreign settings where the companies set up operations. National Swedish education policies that have provided the right financial and political contexts for the development of these edu-businesses and for their exporting activities. The 'national' is also significant in the transfer of these operations to other national contexts where, despite the different business models the companies use, they all need to adapt to the regulatory frameworks and practices in the countries of their operation. This means that in the reception countries, the nation state is significant in how it regulates or facilitates the practices and pedagogical possibilities for these foreign edu-business, and here our results suggest variability. The companies navigate the new national requirements and construct new hybrid spaces where their education offer is re-spatialized in various ways. Through series of policy and regulatory filters, education profiles and concepts from the Swedish experience are adjusted, and marketed to the new foreign settings, often containing stories of (imaginary) spaces, teachers, students, and mobile pedagogies.

Second, the transferability and mobility of ideas and pedagogies by commercial actors takes shape in the specific interactions between such actors and various spaces of origin and export. Watkins (2015) three types of spatial imaginaries helped us to unpack and contrast the companies' self-representations and their educational offers. The operations in India, Germany and Spain encompass spatial imaginaries integrated and used in the framing and branding of education services in different ways. Imaginaries relating to 'place' (Watkins, 2015) link, for instance, to the Swedish base and origin where the education services were developed. In Kunskapsskolan and IES there is an articulated continuity of the pedagogical ideas that form the core of their commercial identity, between the original Swedish company and the company in its international context. These ideas have been both transferable and exportable, they fit well into the privatization logic that 'worked' in Sweden, and 'works' in India and Spain and are also represented in that way to appeal to prospective parents and users. For Espira, a particular Scandinavian identity was designed for the German operations, accompanied by a revised branding to attract its intended audience.

Such narrations also entail 'idealised spatial imaginaries' (Watkins, 2015). In India, Kunskapsskolan offers competing (Swedish) interpretations to the traditional (Indian) way of doing education through processes of 'othering' (Watkins, 2015, p. 512). There are several references by the company to the roots of the school, the benefits of the Swedish privatization model for education, discursively framing 'Swedishness' as imbued with the properties and values of freedom and choice. The idealizing of national spaces entail a hierarchical order in which the 'developed/"innovative" and "less developed"/'traditional' are ranked to the benefit of the specific educational approach that is advertised and sold in the Indian setting. Espira also embedded spatial imaginaries in the uses of 'the Scandinavian' and its (attributed) positive connotations of democracy, nature and environmentalism. In this imaginary, the generalized and abstracted properties of 'Scandinavianess' frame ECEC as connected to values to be provided in the German national context to the benefit of both children and parents. IEP and IES represent 'English' in similar ways, as connoting educational and pedagogical values of excellence and self-discipline, combined with a strong imaginary of a child-centred approach. The latter is a story that is visible across all three companies and their self-representations, and one that also holds implications for both teaching/care and the role of teachers/educators as well as children/students.

Hence, teachers become positioned in and assigned certain roles in these new hybrid pedagogical spaces. All three studied operations target and represent teachers and their profession in line with the core values of the company, from the KED Portal and its pre-prepared lesson plans to the Espira activity cards and IEP's commitment to bilingual teaching. In these framings, teachers are both trained and expected to deliver education in directed ways and through specific means and methodologies. This works to discursively represent the work of teachers who are expected to

commit to the new approaches, often in contrast to the perceived 'traditional' ways of teaching in those countries.

When it comes to children/students, all three studied operations share an articulation of a strong child-centred narrative with a futuristic ambition to form young learners into cosmopolitan citizens. We see these expressions of the ideal learners as a form of imaginary that often incorporates 'ideas of inevitability, "othering" different ideas about what has been, is, or may come' (Watkins, 2015, p. 513). The generalized story of the autonomous learner, with multilingual abilities and multicultural skills, educated for 'tomorrow' is a reoccurring theme in the companies' materials. What we observe from these three sets of self-representations is that they conceptualize, in very similar ways, 'pupils as independent learners' and 'teachers as support workers' within a futuristic modernized school. These ideas of course are not new, as for instance, international organizations have mobilized them for at least three decades as part of the wider transformation of education, where discourses of commodification go hand in hand with the ideas of quality, improvement and autonomy (Ball, 2012; Parreira Do Amaral et al., 2019; Verger et al., 2016). The findings presented here highlights how Swedish commercial actors contribute to the global movement of these ideas, how they selectively use them to construct a legitimizing vision of a desirable future, and how different forms of spatial imaginaries are manifested in the processes. Our findings also invite further discussion on the ways in which commercial actors and rationales prompt national–international interactions in Nordic education and beyond. It is thus important to continue to study the commercialization of educational profiles and ideas empirically, as well as to conceptually capture and situate the important role that business and private logics play in branding, shaping and providing education and childcare.

## Notes

1. This article is a part of the wider research project 'Going Global: Swedish school companies and their international operations' is funded by the Swedish Research Council (grant no 2018–04897) maps and analyses Swedish private corporate actors in the Global Education Industry (c.f. Rönnberg et al., 2021).
2. We retain the Swedish name of 'Kunskapsskolan' throughout and it should be noted that Kunskapsskolan has kept and uses its Swedish company name abroad, for instance, in India.

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