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EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE PROGRAM DECISION-MAKING: A COMPARATIVE STUDY ON PROGRAM CHOICES AND SELECTION MECHANISMS

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Abstract:
Understanding parental ECEC choices and selection mechanisms receives increased attention at the research and policy level as ECEC decision-making has important implications both for policy development and program design. The present study aimed at exploring the processes and mechanisms adopted by parents in Cyprus and in the Netherlands while deciding on and selecting an ECEC program for their child. Research results revealed that participants have opted to enroll their child for professional, socialization, learning and development reasons. Social networks and the internet were the primary sources of information about available programs. Turning to the criteria that matter most, instructional and structural characteristics received higher ratings. Most of the aspects of the decision-making process have been affected by whether parents were natives or immigrants. Results highlight that the decision-making process is a complex phenomenon and that parents need to tradeoff intrinsic or extrinsic characteristics while selecting an ECEC program.

Keywords: parental choice; parental preferences; accommodations; program decisions; early childhood education and care

1. Introduction

Albeit policy recommendations for analyzing early childhood education and care (hereafter referred to as ECEC) supply and demand and for understanding and tackling the barriers parents meet in selecting an ECEC program (Council of the European Union, 2019), it is questionable the extent to which policies support parents in their multi-faceted and complex ECEC program decision-making process and subsequently the extent to which policy goals are achieved (Weber, 2011). This is so, as, according to Grogan (2011,

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p. 6) "*current policies are likely based on inaccurate and overly simplified estimations of parental knowledge, priorities and breadth of choices in regard to preschool*".

On the grounds of this realization, there is a widespread and growing interest in understanding and unveiling the factors that affect the parental choice of ECEC programs as well as the mechanisms that underlie that choice (Chaudry et al., 2010; Ferguson et al. 2022Kensinger Rose & Elicker, 2008;). Understanding these factors and mechanisms is of great importance as according to Forry et al. (2014, p. 995) this is "*the first step in raising the demand for high quality ECEC*".

Building on the policy recommendations and the need to respect and understand the parental choice, the present study aimed at mapping the ECEC program decision process adopted by Cypriot and Dutch parents, by identifying the criteria that matter most to them when they are selecting an ECEC program for their child as well as how they experience the selection process. Information on the scope, duration and sources that are used by parents have also been collected. An effort is also made to understand how selection criteria and the experience itself may differ by country and according to the characteristics of the families, the children, and the context.

2. The Intricacies of the ECEC Program Decision-Making Process

Deciding on whether to enroll a child in an ECEC program or not and selecting a program is amongst the most important decisions parents have to take for their children (Ferguson et al., 2022). Yet, those decisions are not only important for parents and their children but also difficult and complex as they are not taken in a vacuum. Rather such decisions are taken in conjunction with other family-related decisions, such as housing, employment and transportation (Weber, 2011), and are affected by the wider ecological context in which families operate. As a result, existing research highlights that there is a discrepancy between parental preferences and actual choices and that parents are trading-off some desired features in order to reconcile their needs as providers and as caregivers (Davidson et al., 2022; Kensinger Rose & Elicker 2010; Leslie et al., 2000). Meyers and Jordan (2006) describe these tradeoffs as 'accommodations' that parents need to make "*to family and employment demands, social and cultural expectations, available information, and financial, social, and other resources*" (53).

In order to understand and explain the complexity and multifacetedness of the phenomenon, various models and frameworks have been developed. Table 1 presents a synopsis of four models that have been identified by Chaudry et al. (2010) and the framework developed by Weber (2011).

Table 1: ECEC decision-making models

Model	**Main characteristics**
The Economic Consumer Choice Framework of Decision Making (Chaudry et al., 2010)	1. Emphasis on individual decision-making 2. "*Individuals make a decision that maximizes their satisfaction by considering the tradeoffs among the alternatives they face relative to their preferences*" (Chaudry et al., 2010, p. 4)

	3. Choices are subject to constraints. 4. Focus on the outcome rather than on the process of the ECEC decision.
Heuristics and Biases Framework (Chaudry et al., 2020)	1. Emphasis on rational decision-making 2. "*Ability of actors to engage in the kind of careful, reasoned decisions of the form suggested by an economic model of consumer choice*" (Chaudry et al., 2020, p. 10) 3. "*When making decisions, the calculus of tradeoffs is shaped by cognitive biases that influence the calculus itself*" (Chaudry et al., 2020, p. 10). 4. Emphasis on the decision-making process rather than the outcome
A Social Network Framework for Decision Making (Chaudry et al., 2020)	1. "*Emphasis on how individual decisions are shaped by social interactions and the resources embedded within them*" (Chaudry et al., 2010, p. 17). 2. Emphasis on the decision-making process rather than the outcome.
The Accommodation Model: An Integrative Perspective (Chaudry et al., 2020)	1. Used as a lens to unveil the complexity of the decision-making process and its multiple determinants. 2. Decision-making on ECEC programs is inter-dependent to other decisions related to work and family life. 3. Multiple constraints at the individual and structural levels limit parental choices. 4. Emphasis on both the process and the outcomes of decisions.
Weber's (2011) framework	1. Family and community characteristics form the decision-making context. 2. Out of these contextual factors, several parental preferences emerge. 3. Yet the actual decision is shaped by the opportunities, constraints, and barriers families face during the selection process. 4. At this stage policy effects are entering into the equation and shape parents' actual decisions. 5. The interaction of all these factors leads to the selection of arrangements.

2.1 Composing the Puzzle of the ECEC Program Decision-Making Process

Research results on the selection criteria that matter and on the scope of the decision-making process are at times inconsistent. Overall, parents seem to prioritize either intrinsic characteristics of the program that affect the child or extrinsic characteristics that affect themselves (Leslie et al., 2000). Adopting the categorization used by Grogan (2011, p. 3), Table 2 summarizes the criteria that according to the literature review matter the most to parents when they select an ECEC program.

Table 2: Selection Criteria that Matter

Characteristic	Source
Practical	
Program hours	Leslie et al., 2000; Kensinger Rose & Elicker, 2008; Kim & Fram, 2009; Forry et al., 2011
Location	Leslie et al., 2000; Forry et al., 2013; Raikes et al., 2005; Kensinger Rose & Elicker, 2008; Weber, 2011; Kim & Fram, 2009; Forry et al., 2011
Cost	Leslie et al., 2000; Forry et al., 2013; Raikes et al., 2005; Kensinger Rose & Elicker, 2008; Weber, 2011; Kim & Fram, 2009; Forry et al., 2011
Sick policies	Gamble et al., 2009
Structural	
Teacher-child ratio and group size	Leslie et al., 2000; Forry et al., 2013; Raikes et al., 2005; Kensinger Rose & Elicker, 2008; Shlay, 2010; Kim & Fram, 2009
Teacher training, education and experience	Leslie et al., 2000; Forry et al., 2013; Kensinger Rose & Elicker, 2008; Shlay, 2010
Comprehensive services	Barbarin et al., 2006
Safety	Gamble et al., 2009; Shlay, 2010; Forry et al., 2011
Facilities	Raikes et al., 2005; Kensinger Rose & Elicker, 2008
Credentials	Raikes et al., 2005; Shlay, 2010
Process	
Teacher warmth	Raikes et al., 2005; Kensinger Rose & Elicker, 2008; Weber, 2011; Shlay, 2010
Trust, know caregiver	Raikes et al., 2005; Kensinger Rose & Elicker, 2008; Forry et al., 2011
Teacher-child relationship	Forry et al., 2013
Peer relationships	Gamble et al., 2009; Kim & Fram, 2009
Home-school collaboration	Leslie et al., 2000; Forry et al., 2013; Barbarin et al., 2006
Emotional climate	Barbarin et al., 2006
Teacher attributes	Barbarin et al., 2006; Kensinger Rose & Elicker, 2008
Diversity	Raikes et al., 2005; Gamble et al., 2009
Cultural fit	Raikes et al., 2005; Forry et al., 2011
Reputation	Leslie et al., 2000; Raikes et al., 2005
Similar values	Raikes et al., 2005
Instructional	
Child-centered orientation	Kensinger Rose & Elicker, 2008; Gamble et al., 2009
Academic emphasis – structured activities	Forry et al., 2013; Kensinger Rose & Elicker, 2008; Barbarin et al., 2006; Weber, 2011; Shlay, 2010
School readiness component	Leslie et al., 2000; Kensinger Rose & Elicker, 2008; Gamble et al., 2009
Play-based curriculum	Kensinger Rose & Elicker, 2008
Traditional approach	Leslie et al., 2000
Stimulating activities	Raikes et al., 2005; Kim & Fram, 2009

Yet, these criteria are not universally important to all parents and a number of child, parent, family and community characteristics affect the factors that matter the most (Forry et al., 2013). Parent and family demographics that have been found to be correlated with the criteria parents use to select an ECEC program include but are not limited to family structure, number of children in the household, parents' gender, maternal and family income, employment status, mother's educational level, race/ethnicity, maternal ideas and values and parental social status (Barbarin et al., 2006; Gamble et al., 2009; Forry

et al., 2014; 2013; Kensinger Rose & Elicker, 2008; Kim & Fram, 2009; Leslie et al., 2000; Raikes et al.., 2005). On the other hand, child characteristics that influence the selection criteria include children's age, temperament and whether the child has special needs (Forry et al. 2011; 2013; Kensinger Rose & Elicker, 2008; Kim & Fram, 2009; Weber, 2011). Turning to community characteristics, these include availability and cost of services (Forry et al., 2014), as well as assistance or subsidy (Forry et al., 2011).

3. The Present Study

Although existing research has contributed significantly into 'deepening and expanding' (Ferguson et al., 2022) our knowledge of the dynamic process of ECEC program selection and the multitude of factors that affect and shape that selection, there is a unanimous agreement among researchers that there are still many gaps in our understanding of the decision-making and selection mechanisms (e.g. Chaudry et al., 2010; Davidson et al., 2022; Ferguson et al., 2022; Forry et al., 2014; Kim & Fram, 2009). For example, Davidson et al. (2022) highlight that little is known about how parents weigh various factors during the decision-making process, whereas Forry et al. (2014, p. 996) indicate that although we have explored the factors that affect decision-making, scarce is the research that attempts to explore the scope (e.g., number of providers considered), duration (e.g., length of search process), and sources of information considered during ECEC decision making. Kim & Fram (2009) from their side maintain that further research is needed that aims at unveiling the extent to which the available options respond to parents' priorities, resources and needs. Finally, Kensinger Rose & Elicker (2008) highlight the need for further research on the processes parents use to select an ECEC program and on the factors which are willing to tradeoff with others.

The present mixed-methods comparative research study aims to fill some of the above-mentioned gaps and to expand current thinking about ECEC program decision-making by exploring the processes and mechanisms adopted by parents in Cyprus and in the Netherlands while deciding on and selecting an ECEC program for their child. Building on existing knowledge and employing the accommodation model proposed by Chaudry et al. (2010) as a theoretical foundation, the study focuses on the following constructs: the decision-making process (scope, duration, sources of information, number of settings considered), selection criteria that matter, availability of services and information, the difficulty of the process, levels of satisfaction with the selected program, and factors that have been tradeoff. Several demographic features of children, parents/family and the community are also used to explore variations in the mechanisms and processes.

4. Methodology

4.1 Parents', Family's and Child's Characteristics

Data for the present study were collected between summer 2018 and summer 2021. Due to the exploratory nature of the study, the author employed snowball and convenience sampling techniques. The total number of participants was 100, with 58 of them living in Cyprus and 41 in the Netherlands. Adopting Kensinger Rose & Elicker's (2008) approach, in cases, participants had more than one child the respondents were asked to appoint a focal child and reply to the questions by having in their mind their younger child who attends an ECEC program. Table 3 presents the demographic information of the parents and the focal child.

Table 3: Participants' Demographic Information

Variable		**Percentage and Means**
Country of residence	Cyprus	58%
	The Netherlands	41%
Country of origin	Same as country of residence	40%
	Different than the country of residence	60%
Relationship with the child	Mother	94%
	Father	6%
Respondents' age range	35-44 years old	57%
	25-34 years old	39%
	Other	4%
Respondents' highest education level	Masters	46%
	University/college	32%
	PhD	15%
	Other	7%
Partners' highest education level	Masters	35.1%
	University/college	34%
	Senior high school	13.4%
	Other	17.5%
Respondents' employment status	Full time	60.2%
	Part time	27.6%
	Unemployed	7.1%
	Other	5.1%
Partners' employment status	Full time	84.7%
	Part time	11.2%
	Unemployed	2%
	Other	2%
Family status	Married	85.9%
Number of children in the family	1	53%
	2	41%
	3	6%
Focal child age	Cyprus	3.20 (1.85)
	The Netherlands	2.59 (1.03)
Focal child gender: boys	Cyprus	48.2%
	The Netherlands	56.4%

Focal child type of program	Daycare center Kindergarten	46.9% 49%
Focal child: Private setting	Cyprus The Netherlands	83.6% 63.4%
Monthly fee in Euros	Cyprus The Netherlands	269 1.082
Receiving financial help (subsidy)	Cyprus The Netherlands	1.9% 87.8%
A friend/relative helps with the child	Cyprus The Netherlands	62.1% 12.2%
Daily help from the friend/relative	Cyprus The Netherlands	50% 20%
Help offered sometimes per month	Cyprus The Netherlands	11.1% 60%

When asked how long their child is enrolled in the program, most of the participants (38.9%) responded 12-24 months and 22.1% responded 7-11 months. Most of the children (43.3%) are staying at the ECEC program for 7-8 hours per day, whereas 28.9% for 5-6 hours. According to 61.5% of the respondents their child has attended only one more ECEC program apart from the one that attends now and 30.8% reported that their child has attended two other programs.

4.2 Measures and Procedures

To map the characteristics that matter most to parents when they are selecting an ECEC program for their children and the selection mechanisms they adopt, the researcher developed a questionnaire. In developing the questionnaire, the accommodation model proposed by Chaudry et al. (2010) has been adopted. To unveil and explore the constructs that underpin the model, the developed questionnaire combined and extended a variety of items from existing surveys.

The developed questionnaire consists of six sections, with both open-ended and closed questions. Section one includes eighteen questions about parents' and family's demographics. Section two includes eleven questions on the demographics of the child for whom the questionnaire is completed as well as on children's ECEC experience (e.g. how long does the child is enrolled in the setting, how many hours per day is staying at the program, etc.) and the reasons why parents have opted to enroll their child to an ECEC program. Section three includes six questions on the characteristics of the ECEC program that the child attends. Section four includes thirteen questions on the ECEC program selection process (e.g. which resources did parents use to select the program, how many programs did they visit, how easy is the process of selecting a program, etc.). Section five includes two questions on the selection criteria that mattered most to parents. Based on the literature review, 45 characteristics were identified, and participants were asked to indicate how much each of them affected their final decision, using a 5-point Likert scale. Finally, section six included seven questions about parents' satisfaction with

the selected program, the characteristics that they had to tradeoff and those that they would change in the selected setting.

The questionnaire was developed in Greek and in English and was administered online both in Cyprus and in the Netherlands.

5. Results

Table 4 summarizes the reasons why parents in both countries have decided to enroll their children to an ECEC program. As seen in Table, the three most frequently mentioned reasons from the parents in both countries are: professional, socialization and learning and development reasons. Crosstab analysis has revealed that there is a significant association between country of residence and enrolling children to a program to learn about discipline and rules (χ^2 (2) = 9.89, p. = 007) as well as enrolling children to a program to learn the native language (χ^2 (2) = 18.66, p. = .000).

Table 4: Reasons for Enrolling the Child to a Preschool Program

Reasons	Cyprus		The Netherlands	
	Yes	No	Yes	No
Professional reasons (both parents are working)	66.1%	33.9%	75.6%	24.4%
Financial reasons (both parents HAVE to work)	28.6%	71.4%	26.8%	73.2%
In order for the child to socialize	66.1%	33.9%	75.6%	24.4%
Preschool programs can support better children's learning and development	64.3%	35.7%	70.7%	29.3%
Most of the children of his//her age are enrolled in preschool programs	16.1%	83.9%	14.6%	85.4%
He/she will learn about discipline and rules	32.1%	67.9%	9.8%	90.2%
In order to learn the native language	7.1%	92.9%	43.9%	56.1%
Because other options (e.g. nanny) are more expensive	5.4%	94.6%	2.4%	97.6%

Turning to the resources that parents have used in order to collect information about available ECEC programs for the total sample the two main sources of information that have been used are friends (70.1%) and the internet (60.8%). Great variations have been found across countries. In Cyprus, the three main sources of information are friends (81.8%), the internet (47.3%) and lists available from social services and/or the Ministry of education (34.5%). In the Netherlands, the three main sources of information are the internet (80.5%), friends (53.7%) and colleagues (26.8%).

As far as the resources parents used to select the program they did are concerned and how did they learn about the selected program, friends (47.9%) and the internet (47.9%) were reported as the main sources of information for selecting the program. In Cyprus, the three main sources of information about the selected program were friends (61.1%), the internet (29.6%) and the lists available from social services and/or the Ministry of education (29.6%). In the Netherlands on the other hand, the three main sources of information were the internet (74.4%), friends (28.2%) and colleagues (17.9%).

The importance of recommendations was also revealed when parents were asked to describe the process they followed before their final selection. Out of the 76 parents who replied to the question, 32 of them mentioned that they visited the program before their final decision. 14 out of the 76 mentioned that they visited programs for which they had recommendations from friends and 11 out of the 76 mentioned that they collected information about the programs available using the internet, available lists, statistics, etc. 23 out of the 76 parents mentioned that they visited programs that they were close to their home/work.

Table 5 presents data related to the ECEC program decision process. As seen in Table 5, parents have visited 2.78 programs before they reached their final decision. Crosstab analysis indicated that there is a significant association between country of residence and the extent to which participants consider that the information from the state is adequate (χ^2 (8) = 32.52, p. = .000). Parents who considered more than one programs, were asked which were the reasons for which they rejected other programs. Figure 1 presents the most referred to reasons for rejection.

Table 5: The Preschool Program Decision-Making Process

Indicator	Cyprus			The Netherlands		
	N	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD
Number of preschool programs parents visited before their final selection	51	3.12	.220	40	2.40	.237
Agreement between partners about the selection of the program	53	4.62	.118	41	4.73	.131
Adequacy of information offered by the state about the available preschool programs in the city	54	2.24	.140	41	3.46	.175
Agreement with the statement: "There are plenty of good choices for child care where I live".	55	3.11	.151	41	3.66	.166
Difficulty of the process of selecting a preschool program	55	2.84	.157	40	3.23	.170

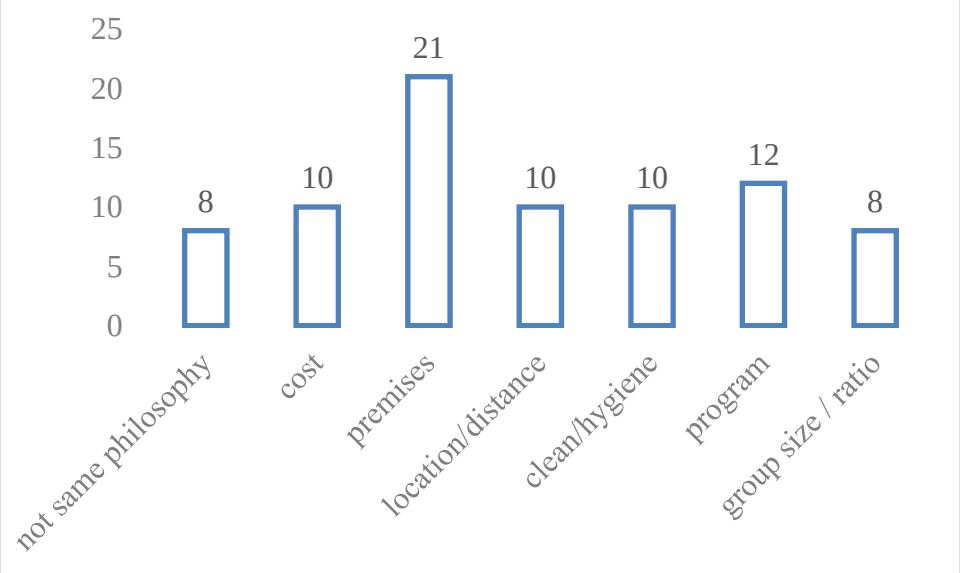

Figure 1: Reasons for Rejecting Other Preschool Programs

Turning to the time it took for parents to reach their final decision, analysis indicated that it took less than a week for the 27.8% of parents in Cyprus and for 37.5% of parents in the Netherlands. For 18.5% of parents in Cyprus versus 12.5% of parents in the Netherlands, it took one week to reach their final decision. For 11.1% of parents in Cyprus and 25% of parents in the Netherlands, it took two weeks, whereas for 25.9% of parents in Cyprus and for 12.5% of parents in the Netherlands it took three to four weeks to reach their final decision. Finally, 16.7% of parents in Cyprus and 12.5% of parents in the Netherlands reported that it took them more than a month to reach their final decision.

Table 6 presents the criteria that received the higher ratings when parents were asked to select the ones that affected the most their program selection. Based on the literature review and the categorization presented in Table 2, we also grouped the selection criteria into four categories: practical, process, structural and instructional. Analysis indicated that the highest scores were assigned to the instructional (M for total sample = 3.23; S.D. = 1.16) and the structural (M for total sample = 3.07; S.D. = 1.14) characteristics of the program, rather than on the practical (M for total sample = 2.13; S.D. = .82) and process characteristics (M for total sample = 2.79; S.D. = .085).

Table 6: Criteria that Affected the Most Parents' Preschool Program Selection

Criteria	Country	N	Mean	SD
Individual attention to the child	Cyprus	44	4.18	1.12
	The Netherlands	35	3.80	1.02
Warm and friendly environment	Cyprus	48	4.25	1.10
	The Netherlands	39	4.13	0.95
Children do not watch TV	Cyprus	37	4.05	1.12
	The Netherlands	27	3.15	1.63
Time for rest	Cyprus	42	4.02	1.25
	The Netherlands	30	3.20	1.56
Good communication with parents	Cyprus	45	4.07	1.15
	The Netherlands	38	3.68	1.21
Friendly educators	Cyprus	45	4.31	.99
	The Netherlands	37	4.03	.95
Helps child socialize	Cyprus	44	4.25	.91
	The Netherlands	37	4.11	1.07
Similar values	Cyprus	43	4.23	1.04
	The Netherlands	32	3.41	1.26
Access to many materials and toys	Cyprus	45	4.31	.92
	The Netherlands	37	4.08	1.01
Personality of the teacher	Cyprus	44	4.07	1.22
	The Netherlands	34	3.47	1.33
Safety policies	Cyprus	46	4.00	1.26
	The Netherlands	35	3.23	1.39
Hygiene policies	Cyprus	46	4.00	1.28
	The Netherlands	35	3.29	1.31
Outdoor play area	Cyprus	44	4.14	1.09
	The Netherlands	38	4.11	.95

Safe and clean environment	Cyprus	44	4.45	.92
	The Netherlands	39	4.21	.89
Playful learning	Cyprus	48	4.10	1.13
	The Netherlands	35	3.97	1.09
Creativity is encouraged	Cyprus	46	4.15	1.09
	The Netherlands	38	4.00	1.06
Love for learning is encouraged	Cyprus	46	4.09	1.17
	The Netherlands	36	3.86	1.09
Children learn to follow instructions	Cyprus	48	4.00	1.14
	The Netherlands	35	3.54	1.17
Helps child learn how to learn	Cyprus	45	4.00	1.18
	The Netherlands	35	3.63	1.19
The child learns social skills and socializes	Cyprus	45	4.09	1.08
	The Netherlands	37	4.00	1.02

In addition, when asked to report the number one reason that led them to select the program they did, the four most frequently mentioned reasons were convenience/location (N = 14), teacher behavior (N= 10), the program (N = 10) and the premises (N = 8).

Turning to parents' satisfaction with the ECEC program they have selected, in both countries, parents are satisfied with the program they have selected (Cyprus M = 4.34; S.D. = .14; The Netherlands M = 4.49; S.D. = .95). In addition, in both countries parents would almost highly recommend the program to a relative or friend (Cyprus M = 4.40; S.D. = .92; The Netherlands M = 4.54; S.D. = .59). When asked what they would change in the program they have selected, 28.8% of the parents that live in Cyprus and 22.5% of the parents that live in the Netherlands replied that they would change nothing. The second most frequently mentioned factor was the cost in both countries (11.5% in Cyprus and 20% in the Netherlands).

To explore if and how parental and family characteristics affected the criteria that parents used in order to select the ECEC program as well as other aspects of the decision-making process, bivariate correlation analysis was used. Table 7 presents how parents' and family's characteristics have affected parents' decision to enroll their child to an ECEC program. On the other hand, Table 8 presents how parents' and family's characteristics have affected the sources of information parents have used to learn about available ECEC programs and about the program they have selected.

Table 7: Bivariate Correlation Results Among Family's Characteristics and Reasons for Enrolling the Child to a Preschool Program

Factor	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
Residence (1)	1								-.395**				
City (2)		1							.224*				
Country of origin (3)			1						-.420**				
Age (4)				1						-.226*	.212*		
Employment status (5)					1							.554**	
Education level (6)						1							
Partners' education level (7)							1						
Helping hand (8)								1	-.219*		.250*		.238*
Enrolment native language (9)	-.395**	.224*	-.420**					-.219*	1				
Enrolment socialize (10)				-.226*						1			
Enrollment discipline and rules (11)				.212*				.250*			1		
Enrolment professional reasons (12)					.554**							1	
Enrolment other options are more expensive (13)								.238*					1

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

Table 8: Bivariate Correlation Results Among Family's Characteristics and Resources Used to Learn about Available Programs and to Select the Program

Factor	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21
Residence (1)	1								.268**	.323**	-.280**	.290**					.273**		.219*	-.386**	.271**
City (2)		1											-.206*			.274**				.320**	
Country of origin (3)			1							-.251*	-.252*	.279*								-.246*	.346**
Age (4)				1									-.208*								
Employment status (5)					1										.214*						
Education level (6)						1					-.224*										
Partners' education level (7)							1		-.221*					.235*	-.373**			-.401**			
Helping hand (8)								1		.355**		.247*							.207*	-.370**	.252*
Info about programs: Friends (9)	.268**						-.221*		1												
Info about programs: Relatives (10)	.323**		-.251*							1											

Info about programs: The internet (11)	-.280**		-.252*			-.224*					1									
Info about programs: Lists (12)	.290**		.279*					.247*				1								
Info about programs: Neighbors (13)		-.206*		-.208*									1							
Info about programs: Professionals (14)							.235*							1						
Info about programs: Colleagues (15)					.214*		-.373**								1					
Source of info for selected program: Professionals (16)		.274**														1				
Source of info for selected program: Friends (17)	.273**																1			
Source of info for selected program: Colleagues (18)							-.401**											1		
Source of info for selected program: Relatives (19)	.219*							.207*											1	
Source of info for selected program: The internet (20)	-.386**	.320**	-.246*					-.370**												1
Source of info for selected program: Lists (21)	.271**		.346**					.252*												1

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

On the other hand, according to the results from the bivariate correlation, children's age and gender have been found to be limitedly associated with aspects of the decision-making process (Table 9).

Table 9: Bivariate Correlation Results Among Child Characteristics and the Decision-Making Process

Factor	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**6**	**7**	**8**
Child's gender (1)	1		-.217*		-.234*	.213*	.263*	.211*
Child's age (2)		1		-.239**				
Child enrolled to socialize (3)	-.217*		1					
Child enrolled because all children of that age are enrolled (4)		-.239**		1				
Child enrolled to learn the native language (5)	-.234*				1			
Working hours (6)	.213*					1		
Pedagogical approach (7)	.263*						1	
Children do not watch TV (8)	.211*							1

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

6. Discussion

Drawing from previous research which highlights that although there is adequate research on the ECEC program selection criteria that matter most to parents there are still gaps related to the decision-making process as a whole, the present study aimed at expanding current thinking by exploring the processes and mechanisms adopted by parents in Cyprus and the Netherlands while deciding on and selecting a program for their child. To the best of our knowledge, no previous research has explored parental decision-making in neither of these two countries. Results of the present study confirm previous results which indicate that the parental decision-making process is a multi-faceted phenomenon (Weber, 2011), that is impacted by family and community characteristics, parental values and beliefs, resources and needs (Kim and Fram ,2009).

According to Kim and Fram (2009), the first step to ECEC program decision-making is parents' choice to use non-parental care 'and the reasons for using child care are an important context for understanding more nuanced choices among non-parental care arrangements' (78). Interestingly in our study parents have not taken such a decision for financial reasons (i.e. they have to work), but equally for professional reasons and for the child to socialize. Thus, in both countries parents feel that ECEC programs can support better children's learning and development. This triptych has been also revealed in other studies (Ferguson et al., 2022). Yet, given that the majority of the participants in the Netherlands are immigrants, parents have decided to enroll their child to a program also in order to learn the native language. Given that the majority of our sample consists of dual families and of higher SES, it would be interested to explore further how this triptych would have changed in cases of single families or low-income families.

Turning to the resources used to collect information about available ECEC programs the internet and friends were the two main sources of information in both countries. Yet analysis indicated that in Cyprus friends were the primary source of information whereas in the Netherlands the second source. This may be explained by the fact that in the Netherlands the majority of participants are not native and as a result, their social networks are not as large as the ones for parents living in Cyprus. This is also evident in the fact that in Cyprus parents have also used relatives as a major source of information, whereas in the Netherlands only 4.9% of the parents used relatives. Another explanation might be that in the Netherlands, there is more information on the internet about the existing programs. This postulation might be supported by the fact that parents in the Netherlands are more satisfied with the adequacy of information about the existing programs in their city. Yet, parents in the Netherlands did not use lists available from social services and the Ministry to collect information about existing programs as much as parents in Cyprus. This might be attributed to language barriers, and to the fact that information might be available primarily in Dutch. The same patterns have been revealed also in terms of the sources parents used to select the program. The internet and friends were the two main sources from which participants heard about their chosen program, with the country of residence affecting the ranking of these resources, as previously. Our

results are partly in line with previous research. Raikes et al. (2005) and Chaudry et al. (2010) have also found that the primary source of information is friends, relatives and other personal networks. In our study, in Cyprus, the majority of the participants heard about the program from a friend. Yet, in the Netherlands, the internet was the primary source of information. This finding substantiates the importance of social networks for the decision-making process (Chaudry et al. 2010). Thus, given that immigrant families do not have access to extended social networks and they rely on other sources, the finding of our study also highlights the need for "*informational interventions, that is programs or policies that work by providing individuals with relevant information at key decision-making points*" (Bassok et al., 2018, 1). Forry et al. (2013) also suggest that "*creating a cadre of trusted child care advisors who can listen to families' unique circumstances and provide guidance that is culturally sensitive would be a potentially valuable service to families*". Such a suggestion acknowledges that in order to be effective interventions should be taking into account family's needs and background and adopt properly in order to tackle barriers such as language and difficulty in orienting in a foreign system. At the same time, given that previous research has indicated that information about ECEC programs is imperfect (Meyers and Jordan 2006, 61) the need for well-organized informational interventions is further substantiated.

Before they reach their final decision parents visited approximately three programs and for the majority of them, it took less than a week to reach their final decision. Contrary to the results of the study conducted by Bassok et al. (2018) the parents of our sample have invested time into searching for a setting as they have considered approximately three programs. This finding is in line with the results of the study conducted by Forry et al. (2014). Yet, in our study participants made their final decision within one week, as opposed to Bassok et al. (2018) and Forry et al. (2014) study.

The reasons for rejecting the other programs they visited include but are not limited to the quality of premises, the quality of the program, the cost, the location/convenience and the hygiene of the program. These reasons summarize also the reasons why some parents have previously changed a setting for their child, apart from the practical reasons mentioned such as the age of the child and the need to enroll to a higher educational level or the relocation of the family. Our study confirms previous research results which highlight that when parents are not satisfied with the program their child attends are likely to change (Forry et al., 2014). Yet, the fact that many of these factors are observable from the beginning (e.g. quality of premises, the cost, etc.) supports the argument that parents when they are choosing they "*often have little information and little child development knowledge about what criteria to look for and how to assess the quality of the care that they are seeking for their little one*" (Honig 2022, 1940) and highlight the need for "*proactive consumer education regarding the characteristics of and benefits of using high quality care*" (Forry et al. 2014, 1011).

Overall, participants in both countries indicated that there are some good choices available where they live and that the decision-making process is on average neither easy nor difficult. Thus, although most of them indicated that the program they selected has

some features that they do not like, the majority of them are satisfied with their choice and they would recommend the program to a friend or relative. Given that participant parents indicated that the program has also some negative elements that they have decided to overlook, our results are in line with previous research which indicates that it is difficult for parents to acknowledge that their child attends a program which is somehow unsatisfactory (Davidson et al., 2022; Shlay, 2010) and that when faced with constraints they have to tradeoff certain characteristics. This fact substantiates the argument that parental preferences do not mirror choice, as parents in the sample indicate that they would change several characteristics of the program their child attends. In addition, analysis confirms previous results according to which the criteria used by parents to select the ECEC program give a glimpse into their life circumstances (Barbarin et al., 2006). For example, in the Netherlands, 21.7% of the participants indicated that the fact that the selected program was the only one available in their neighbourhood affected to some extent their final decision. Thus, 17.4% of them reported that their final choice was affected to some extent by the fact that the selected program was the only one with a place available for their child. In addition, 35.2% of the parents in Cyprus and 27% of the parents in the Netherlands indicated that the cost affected to some extent their decision. 50% of the parents in both countries indicated that their decision was affected to some extent by the location whereas 57.1% of the parents in Cyprus and 42.9% of the parents in the Netherlands mentioned that their decision was affected by the working hours of the program. As it becomes evident, although parents assign importance to instructional and structural characteristics, practical issues have also been considered. Given that such constraints lead parents to tradeoff for certain characteristics we would maintain that parents make decisions among programs that first of all meet their practical considerations. Both results of our study and results from previous studies reveal that parents are aware of those tradeoffs that they make or need to make in order to meet their dual role and highlight the need 'for an integrated community development approach that helps parents manage work and family demands' (Meyers and Jordan 2006, 66).

The majority of parents replied that they would not change something to the program and the first most frequently mentioned factor that they would change is, in both countries, the cost. This finding is partly in line with previous research. Forry et al. (2011) have also found that the majority of parents would not change something in the program they have selected. Thus, although the aspects that Forry et al. (2011) found that parents in their study would like to change have been also mentioned by the participants of our study (e.g. the location, the curriculum, transportation, etc.) in our study the most frequently mentioned factor is the cost. This is an interesting finding as it indicates that parents in our sample decided to tradeoff the cost for the quality of their children's program. In addition, although in the Netherlands the cost for ECEC programs is subsidized, parents there would also wish to pay less for the ECEC program. Given that affordability of ECEC is a prerequisite for accessibility policymakers should take further steps to ensure that cost barriers do not limit children's access to high-quality services.

Turning to the criteria that mattered most to parents when they selected the ECEC programs, analysis revealed that parents paid attention to instructional and structural characteristics of the program, rather than to practical and process characteristics. In fact, when asked to report the three main advantages and disadvantages of the selected program, parents consider as an advantageous aspect of the quality (process and structural) whereas practical considerations such as working hours and cost are considered as a disadvantage. Yet, when asked to report the number one reason that led them to select the program they did, apart from quality dimensions, convenience/location was also one of the most frequently mentioned reasons. This finding is in line with the results of the study conducted by Forry et al. (2011).

Of course, this study does not come without limitations. Although the study adds to the decision-making research field, we have to caution that the data cannot be generalized as the sample was small and recruited via convenience and snowball techniques. In addition, the sample is quite homogenous in terms of family types (the majority of participants are in dual families), gender (the majority of the respondents were mothers) and SES (most of the participants are highly educated, full-time employed). In addition, all participants parents had already selected the program so it might be the case that their replies reflect their current and more informed understanding of program quality as users rather than their previous understanding as potential users. Memory lapses may also have occurred. Finally, another limitation has to do with the mapping of the characteristics that mattered the most. That is participants were asked to 'evaluate one characteristic at a time, independent of the other characteristics, [an approach that might not] fully capture this level of complexity when assessing' (Leslie et al. 2000, 302) parental decision-making processes.

To conclude; the present study yielded important results and add significantly to existing research in the field of parental ECEC decision-making as it addressed multiple aspects of the process. One of the important findings of the present study is the differences and similarities immigrant and native parents may encounter during the decision-making phase. Overall, parents searched carefully for a suitable program for their child. Based on whether they are native or immigrants different sources of information have been used a finding that has implications both for policymakers and programs. In addition, parents seem to assign greater importance to instructional and structural characteristics of the programs whereas they seem to be trading off practical considerations in favor of quality dimensions. Yet, future research should explore how these trends might change among low SES parents. Results highlight the need both for parent education, parenting support programs and interventions that can empower them in selecting high-quality programs and support them in the decision-making process. At the same time, policy actions should be targeted at ensuring flexibility and affordability of ECEC as well as integrated support of the dual role of parents.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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