In search of didactics in school-age educare centres: To conceptualise what exists, but has not yet been found

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to focus on approaches that could build a didactic framework for school-age educare centres (SAECs). As a theoretical basis and a research field, didactics exists within many disciplines (e.g., education in natural sciences and preschool). This is not the case within the SAEC. While a lot of research has been devoted to subject didactics, there is a lack of research on didactics in SAECs, and the marginal research that exists shows a fragmented picture of what it could consist of. However, researchers in the field agree that didactics in SAECs is *something else* than subject didactics and differs from general didactics. Our aim in this paper is to suggest and discuss how a didactic framework in SAECs could be conceptualised with an intention in the near future to find the specific didactics that distinguishes the work in SAECs. The proposed design involves theory building/testing with a bottom-up perspective and various data collection methods. Because building a didactic theory for SAECs is the intention, the research process will take informed grounded theory (GT) as its methodological starting point. The empirical material will be related to the two dominant didactic frameworks: the German and the Anglo-Saxon. These frameworks will also be critically reviewed in relation to the activities in SAECs. The results will contribute important knowledge to the development of a relevant and useful didactic theory for SAECs. The practical implications are directly relevant to every stakeholder affected by the SAECs' activities: policy actors, staff, students, and researchers. In the long term, we will be able to find a legitimate platform for didactics in SAECs, which will have concrete importance for professionals and researchers in particular.

Keywords: *didactics; didactic framework; leisure-time-pedagogy; school-age educare centres*

Introduction

This paper is about finding and building a didactical theory for school-age educare centres (SAECs). As a theoretical basis and field of research, didactics exists in many disciplines related to education (e.g., natural sciences, mathematics, and preschool pedagogy).

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This is not the case in the discipline of SAECs. Despite this, teacher students (after completing their education) must fulfil nationally established goals in accordance with the Higher Education Ordinance (SFS, 1993:100), in addition to the general objectives in the Higher Education Act, for the basic teacher degree with a focus on work in SAECs. One of the learning objectives is to "demonstrate such knowledge in didactics and subject didactics, including methodology required for teaching and learning in the field of leisure pedagogy" (SFS 1993:100). The problem, however, is that there is no defined didactic theory or theoretical framework for leisure pedagogy, which is the main subject within SAECs. The research is also rather invisible. This problem became clear when the University Chancellor's Office evaluated the basic teacher education programmes in 2018, and four out of twelve programmes received poor quality in the first review on this goal (UKÄ, 2019). Pointedly, it can be expressed in such a way that students are taught a curriculum that lacks an explicit theoretical basis and through which they are assumed to be able to learn and use didactics in the field of leisure pedagogy. This is a "catch 22".

This lack of didactic theory also creates problems for the SAEC staff during their daily activities. Most of the staff work in both SAECs and schools and need to handle different pedagogical practices. Depending on the activity, whether it takes place in the school or the SAEC, the steering documents are partly different. This, in turn, leads to several possible concrete varieties of didactical considerations depending on which steering documents apply to a particular task (Orwehag, 2015). During their daily work, the staff must handle and relate to these partly different cultures and pedagogical traditions as well as various, and sometimes overlapping, steering documents. Another complexity with the work in SAECs is the tension between SAECs and the school organisation. There are concerns about "schooling" (Boström & Augustsson, 2016) and that the use of school terminology will lead to a school-oriented practice that extends to the SAEC. The picture becomes even more problematic because the Swedish Schools Inspectorate, in a national review of the SAECs, criticised their teaching in terms of not being sufficiently "prominent or developing" (Skolinspektionen, 2018, p. 5). Another tension also lies in the fact that SAECs' activities should be goal oriented and at the same time based on pupils' needs and interests. Pupils should have a say and the opportunity to exercise influence in their daily practice (Skolverket, 2016). A third tension is that, in SAECs, pupils should be offered meaningful leisure time, where they themselves have an expectation of owning their leisure time (Lago & Elvstrand, 2021), and at the same time should be provided a clear learning assignment. It is a complex process to meet and balance these tensions. In addition to being measured in relation to the above mentioned, didactics must also be considered in relation to the SAECs' special pedagogical context, where experience-based, situation-based, and group-oriented learning should be the focus. Thus, this conceptual research idea fulfils a research gap in many aspects: It could lay a foundation for daily activities and the research field, inform the staff's daily work, and enhance the professional legitimacy of the SAEC teachers.

In other words, the objective of this article is to conceptualise a theory-building process towards a didactical framework for the SAEC. Theory-building designs are

rare in the area of educational sciences (Kettley, 2012), which is why this concept will add scientific novelty through its design and somewhat explorative character. To understand and clarify the outline of the article, a brief introduction is needed about the path choice we must make in designing it. The chosen conceptual approach can be described as a *model paper* (Jaakola, 2020), which "describes an entity and identifies issues that should be considered in its study" (p. 24). In our case, we want to present a tentative research process and link existing theories (cf. Watts, 2011) to provide multiple insights. Since this article is linked to theory building, one intention is that research will lead to new (or modified) tested theories (cf. Callahan, 2010). As this conceptualisation is based on the practical activities of the SAEC, this may result in a didactic theory rooted in practical activities, which guarantees a useful, relevant, and well-adapted theory in today's context (cf. Schwab, 2013). The structures have followed the guidelines given by Jaakola (2020) in designing a conceptual model paper. The paper is organised as follows: The next section outlines the current state of the art followed by theoretical frameworks. Then, we discuss the methodological approach and the research process. The article ends with conclusions and recommendations for the continued construction of a didactic theory for the SAEC.

Current state of the art; research overview

In the history of Swedish education, the terms *didactics* and *teaching* have been used very sparingly in relation to SAEC. The SAECs' activities and the teachers' actions have been described in terms of attitudes, professional roles, and activities, rather than in relation to terms of a structured and planned content as in the subject didactics (Boström et al., 2021). The concept of learning was rarely linked to the SAECs' activities; rather, in many cases, the term *learning* referred to children's *development* of knowledge, whether social or relational, as opposed to a school concept of learning. The content and design of the activities were also often compared and contrasted to teaching in schools.

Hansen (2000a, 2000b) was among the first to mention didactics in relation to the SAEC in two anthology articles where didactics relates to action strategies that aim to take advantage of pupils' opportunities for experience-based learning through the systematic work of the SAEC staff. Changes in the steering documents for the SAEC over the last 20 years seems to have brought on that the concept of didactics appears in earnest in research (Boström et al., 2021) When SAECs were included in the Swedish School Law in 2010 and the general school curriculum in 2011, the terminology slowly started to veer towards the use of school terms.

An early research project, "Knowledge opportunities in Swedish SAEC" (Löfdahl, 2010; Saar et al., 2012), dealt with the possibility of formulating a didactic theory specifically for the SAEC and pointed to the characteristics of leisure pedagogy in relation to the pedagogical basis of schools. In an analysis, Hansen Orwehag and Mårdsjö Olsson (2011) highlighted four characteristic didactic principles for leisure pedagogy, but without explicitly using the concept of didactics, namely: learning in a practical context,

using subject content as a means rather than a learning outcome to capture learning opportunities "in flight" and to work with long term overall goals.[1] Pihlgren (2011) addressed the concept of didactics in the SAEC in relation to two pedagogical traditions in leisure pedagogy: Fröbel's pedagogical tradition and the progressive pedagogical tradition, mainly through Dewey. These two traditions lead to partly different didactic strategies, with a more passive supportive approach in the Fröbel tradition and a more active communicative attitude in the progressive tradition. Broström (2015) discussed the SAEC in detail as an arena for learning and identified some important didactic principles or basic assumptions for the SAEC—that is, holistic thinking, openness, and self-determination. He also addressed the what-and-how aspects of the SAECs' pedagogy and emphasised that these differ in crucial aspects from their counterparts in the schools' didactics but also that the large amount of didactic research that exists rarely or never deals with the specific nature of the SAEC. Above all, he emphasised the methodological aspects in terms of pupils' active goal-oriented activities, participation in a social practice community, and guided participation with the teacher's support.

With group-based learning as a starting point, Orwehag (2020) highlighted possible theoretical points of departure and characteristic features of the SAECs' didactics, which play as a teaching strategy. Orwehag pointed out, "Increased professionalisation of the leisure-time teaching profession goes through the development and awareness-raising of the didactics and strategies required to fulfil the ambitions expressed in school laws and curricula" (2020, p. 20).

Research in recent years has focused on various didactic aspects, such as staff leadership (Boström & Haglund, 2020), policy implementation (Boström & Augustsson, 2016; Boström & Berg, 2018), the professional role (Haglund, 2020; Jonsson, 2018), the role of play (Löndahl & Greve, 2015), relational aspects and social learning (Dahl, 2020), learning environments as didactic tools (Grewell & Boström, 2020), and possible theoretical foundations for SAEC didactic strategies (Broström, 2015; Orwehag, 2020). Boström et al.'s (2021) literature review reflects both the scattered research and the complexity of defining the field. In summary, all previous authors have indicated a strong lack of research focusing on how teaching is realised in the SAEC. One explanation is that SAECs' activities include many focuses, such as well-being and social development; play, rest, and learning; and knowledge and teaching (Haglund & Ackesjö, 2021). Staff members simply require the didactic tools to work with and develop the various teaching activities in a systematic way (Elvstrand & Lago, 2019). The literature review (Boström et al., 2021) also showed that empirical research is poor, texts are more argumentative, reflective, or description dominate, and studies based on quantitative approaches are almost completely lacking. Furthermore, it appears that the traditional didactic models, Anglo-Saxon and German, can be defined in the field, but further research is needed to capture the didactics of the SAEC completely.

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[1] Later on, group based learning and learning with and from a child perspective were added to these principles (Orwehag, 2020).

The distinction between Anglo-Saxon and German will be touched on more thoroughly later in the article. Didactics in SAECs is "something else" than the schools' didactics, and its specific nature is unclear. We argue that research into leisure pedagogy must go beyond traditional didactics used in schools. In Boström et al. (2021), we conducted a pilot study focusing on the state of the art in this field. The results in this pilot study point to a lack of research in didactics, including the scattered and vague definitions that didactics can include, as well as a demand for a didactic framework to build the profession from various aspects. Furthermore, the results point to problems that have arisen in the SAECs' activities: the cross-pressure on the staff's experience because it has to relate to various steering documents depending on daily activities, the overall lack of research into the SAEC, and the challenging conditions in terms of large groups of pupils and unsuitable premises (cf. SOU 2020:34).

Theoretical framework

Our tentative theoretical foundation consists of theory building whereby various theoretical perspectives will be visible in various phases of the research process. As building a theory in relation to didactics in SAECs is the starting point of the concept, the methodological process will rely on the informed constructivist grounded theory (GT) (Charmaz, 2014). This has consequences for the use of the theory in the building process, which will be characterised by an interplay, openness, and reflexivity between former theory and empirical data (Thornberg, 2012). The theory will also help to open, widen, and put the empirical data into a scientific context.

Because this is a tentative concept about didactics, we argue that it has to relate to the two theoretical traditions: Anglo-Saxon and German. The use of these theories is in line with central starting points in informed GT ideas of abduction and theoretical sampling, which emphasise the importance of a researcher having (a) extensive knowledge of relevant theory and research in the field and (b) an openness to generating new knowledge with the help of empirical data. The German educational tradition and the critical constructive tradition (Klafki, 1997) refer to the didactics of creating opportunities for co-determination and solidarity. The constructive aspect focuses on schools' practices and on concepts that develop the teaching. In this tradition, content is in focus, and the teacher decides in his or her didactic analysis what is important and what gives the pupils value in certain teaching situations. In this model, the classic didactic questions are often asked: who, what, why, where, and how. The didactic triangle is based on the teacher, the pupil, and the content. Between them, realisations exist—such as presentation, methodology, and interactions (Hoppman, 1997). The Anglo-Saxon tradition instead has a focus on a goal- and measurement-oriented curriculum culture within the education system. In this didactic tradition, the content of the curricula is predetermined, and a teacher's task is to implement and follow it (Westbury, 2000). The content of the curriculum is regulated in the relevant steering documents, and a teacher's task is to choose working

methods in everyday life that benefit both the individual and the group in the best way. When the content is given, the teacher's implementation is a top-down process.

Both theories, which could be described in terms of a "dominant framework" in didactic traditions, have inspired the design of the concept, and they should be visible in the research process. When analysing empirical data, consideration has to be set in relation to these didactic theories while also investigating them (with the help of empirical SAEC data) in a critical way as a step towards gaining further and specific knowledge of didactics in SAECs. The interplay between theory and empirical data could be described in terms of an interpretative theory-building inquiry.

When building a theory or improving upon an existing one, the ways in which phenomena can be generated, verified, and refined must still be defined. Lynham (2002) described and defined theory building as an "an on-going process of producing, confirming, applying and adapting theory" (p. 222) and stated that it can also be described as a process in an interpretative theory-building inquiry. Focus has to be set on interaction and practical activities that are simultaneously informed by policy and practice through the interpretation of daily activities that occur in SAEC contexts. The underlying assumption in this theory building is that the constructed meaning of stakeholders is considered to be the foundation of knowledge. The empirical purpose should be to make sense of, understand, and interpret the data. A constructivist worldview (Creswell, 2014) underpins the first two phases of the intended research process (see Figure 1) and emphasises the importance of giving multiple participants meaning, together with social and historical constructions. Inquiries should generate an empirically based theory of patterns of meaning in relation to didactics. In the tentative phases 3 and 4, the worldview will be combined with a pragmatic perspective through which consequences of the actions will be evaluated.

The selected strategy in theory building is the research into theory strategy (Lynham, 2002), whereby the methodology in summary assumes that a phenomenon should be selected and that its characteristics should be listed. The characteristics could then be measured in a variety of situations. The data could be analysed to determine whether a systematic pattern exists, which could formalise the pattern as theoretical statements. Applied theory building requires researchers to have expertise of the phenomenon central to the theory, as well as to interact with and to be informed by their experiences in practice and the theory-building method. In this tentative concept, these requirements should be met by the researchers' accumulated experiences and the attached expert panel: "Knowledge of and knowledge about the phenomenon central to the theory are brought together" (Lynham, 2002, p. 228). This projected approach is also in line with central ideas in informed GT (Thornberg, 2014).

Method and research process

The purpose should be to explore, test, and improve a didactic theory that can describe and explain daily work in SAECs with the aim of improving the teaching process as well as staff's professionalism. Expected results are to obtain new
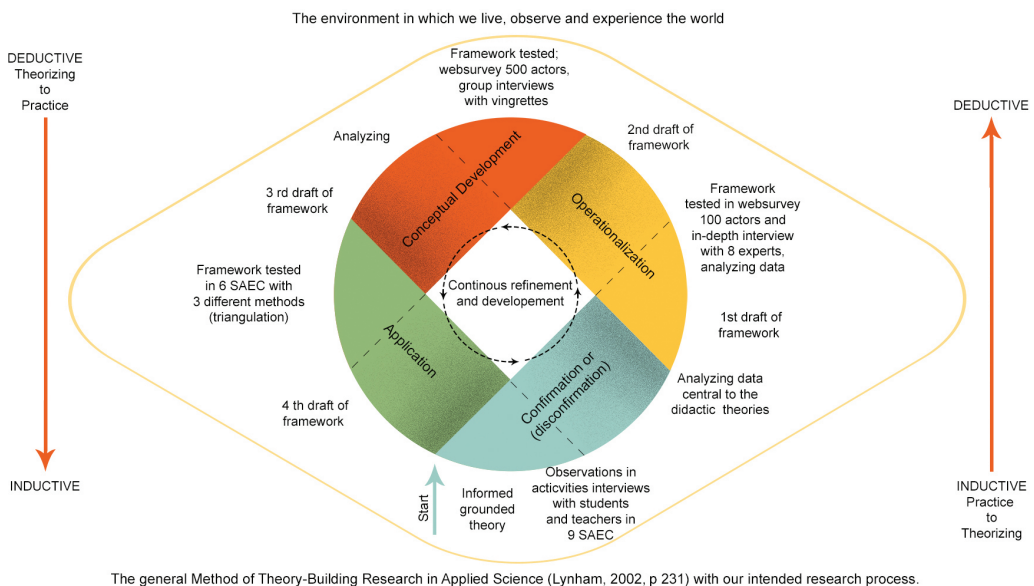
knowledge regarding the didactic theory in SAECs to support teaching and learning processes in the activities. Furthermore, a deeper understanding would be gained of the specific nature of didactic strategies and thinking in the SAEC environment, as opposed to school (subject) didactics. A long-term goal should be to build up knowledge concerning a valid theoretical framework for the SAEC that can be beneficial for increasing research in the field and for developing the theory of didactics in SAEC.

The following are examples of specific research questions:

The research questions (RQs) overlap to some extent:
• What didactic aspects are visible regarding teachers' teaching, pupils' learning, and the subject of leisure pedagogy in the SAECs' specific learning environments?
• What didactic aspects are visible in various learning environments and activities within the SAEC? What are the differences and similarities?
• What didactic aspects are visible in activities based on pupils' free choice and on the activities decided by the teacher? What are the differences and similarities?
• Which parts of the empirical results can be linked to previous didactic theories and what can be added to SAECs' specific learning environments and learning situations?
• How can a tentative didactic framework be developed and refined in the SAEC?

Theory building could be used as an exploratory sequential mixed-methods design (Creswell, 2014). In this case, this means beginning with qualitative data (fieldwork) and analysis and then using the findings in a second quantitative phase (web survey). The various steps including examples of data collection and samples, and their relations are visualised below:

The general Method of Theory-Building Research in Applied Science (Lynham, 2002, p 231) with our intended research process.

Figure 1. The theory-building process and the research process in the study (adapted from Lynham, 2002).

The general method of theory-building research in applied science could follow the ensuing five circular phases:

1. *Confirmation/disconfirmation*: This phase involves planning, design, implementation, and evaluation. In this phase, analytic tools from informed GT are used.
2. *Operationalisation*: This phase focuses on operationalising an explicit connection between the emerging conceptualisation and practice, as well as an informed framework converted into elements for further confirmation.
3. *Conceptual development*: This phase includes the development of key elements in the theory and explanations of their interdependences and limitations. In this phase, we will use a mixed-methods approach with consideration of deductive methods.
4. *Application*: When the theory is confirmed, it will go through this phase, which enables further studies and inquiries. The outcome enables the theory to be further developed and refined.
5. *Continuous refinement and development*: This phase marks a further overlap between practice and theorising components and ensures the theory is kept current and relevant for continuous work. This phase is not separate but instead overlaps the other phases.

Conclusions

The focus of this conceptual article was on building a didactical framework for the SAEC. Because didactic theory is lacking in the SAECs' activities, framing theory is of the highest significance for the activities, including all school actors, pupils, researchers, and politicians. This conceptual framework addresses the existing research gap: The need for a sustainable and didactic theoretical framework built from the SAECs' daily activities and highlighting the uniqueness of the SAEC. A didactic framework can also bridge the school policy reforms that have put the SAEC in a kind of vacuum. On the one hand, the Higher Education Ordinance requires that students in teacher-training programmes should be educated in leisure pedagogy didactics, but on the other hand, the concept is neither found in the SAECs' steering documents, nor clarified in the research. In other words, the study can break completely new ground for the benefit of all actors in SAECs.

From a national perspective, a didactic theory for the SAEC may provide the missing piece in SAECs and add a broader perspective of didactics in general. The tentative results from a specific didactic theory for SAECs will also illuminate and clarify the understanding of the move between two different value systems, because teachers are in a state of tension between tradition and new educational policy intentions (Haglund & Ackersjö, 2021). This research is directly relevant in studying all kinds of didactic aspects in SAECs (e.g., policy implementation, professionalism, the common language, organisation, structuring, and leadership of the teaching activities). The staff will also be able to meet the curriculum guidelines more clearly and better realise the content of the curriculum (Boström & Berg, 2018).

With a clear basis for didactics, SAECs can also respond to criticism from the Swedish Schools Inspectorate (2018) because a solid didactical framework will also address the demand for other qualities and competences that characterise didactics in SAEC. Through the theory-building explorative design, the results will renew the current research front through the combination of educational designs. Through the tentative research design, didactics in SAECs will advance the current research front.

Another important implication of the theory building is that the results could stand as an inspiration and role model internationally. Several countries (e.g., Switzerland, Australia, and Norway) are building an educational structure around leisure education, and Sweden is serving as a model. However, the most important result would be SAECs acquiring a didactic platform based on research in the daily work, which in turn would build on evidence-based research.

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