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Didactics in school-age educare centres – An unexplored field but with distinctive views

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ABSTRACT

The background for this study is the lack of well-defined and distinct theories on didactics in school-age educare centres (SAECs). Therefore, in this study, we investigated and compared perceptions among nine professional groups employed in the field. The participants included 390 females and 102 males in Sweden, and their beliefs about didactics in SAECs were measured through a questionnaire consisting of 24 items on a 4-point Likert scale, which researchers and those related to the didactics in SAECs proposed. Descriptive statistics presented an overall picture of the various claims on a group level. The Mann–Whitney test investigated the distinctions between occupational categories. The results indicated that most of the items were relevant. Furthermore, the pupils' orientation was not taken into account enough. Didactics should be translated into SAEC practices but the transfer into practice remains unclear. Many respondents appeared to agree with all of the items to varying degrees, but least that SAEC didactics should not be related to school activities. An important result was that principals' perceptions diverged largely from those of other groups, especially regarding the relationship of didactics to the school's activities. The results partly explain that different professions the SAECs affect see the role of didactics differently.

1. Introduction

Didactics exists within many disciplines (e.g., education in natural sciences, mathematics, and preschool pedagogy) as a theoretical basis and a research field. This is not the case within school-age educare centres (SAECs). Research lacks on didactics in SAECs, and the marginal research that exists shows a fragmented picture of what it could consist of, whereas much research has been devoted to subject and school didactics. However, researchers and practitioners in the field agree that didactics in SAECs is something other than subject and school didactics and that it differs from general didactics. What this is has not yet been defined and organized in a unified framework, which is therefore needed in many ways. A theoretical framework is the structure, the scaffolding, and the frame that provides a general representation of relationships between characteristics in a given phenomenon according to Merriam (2001). Based on a framework, a didactic theory specifically for the SAEC can then be developed (see Boström, Elvstrand, & Orwehag, 2022).

Not having a common didactic framework for SAEC activities creates

various types of problems. One is that the staff may lack both a professional language and the didactical tools to develop the teaching practice in an SAEC (Boström & Berg, 2018). Another problem is evident to SAEC staff during their daily activities because the staff has to perform their work in both SAECs and schools with different pedagogical practices (Ackesjö et al., 2019), which different curriculum documents partly govern. The staff must take into account whether the activity takes place in the school or the SAEC as well as the meaning of SAEC activities that occur, such as school collaboration or leisure activities. One consequence of this is having several possible concrete varieties of didactical considerations depending on which steering documents apply to a particular task (Hansen Orwehag, 2015).

SAECs have been described as a “borderland in the Swedish educational landscape between preschool, preschool class and primary school” (Ludvigsson & Falkner, 2019, p. 13). The SAEC has its background in a social pedagogical tradition that emphasizes values such as social relations and group-based learning (Gustafsson Nyckel, 2020). The staff must handle and relate to these partly divergent cultures and pedagogical traditions. In many cases, this leads to tension between

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SAECs' and schools' assignments. Some have raised concerns about SAECs' "schoolification" (Boström & Augustsson, 2016; Lager, 2020); that is, that the school culture and focus will take over and influence the activities in the SAECs. Using school terminology will lead to school-oriented practices that extend to the SAECs. Therefore, it is important to preserve and develop the core of SAEC pedagogy (Närvänen & Elvstrand, 2014).

The work of SAECs creates several dilemmas or tensions for the staff. While SAECs' activities should be goal oriented, they also should be based on pupils' needs and interests. The steering documents clarify that pupils should have the opportunity to influence their daily practice (Skolverket, 2019). Which didactic framework can solve that dilemma? Another tension is that pupils in SAECs should have meaningful leisure time, which they have an expectation of owning (Lago & Elvstrand, 2021), and at the same time, the teachers should provide a clear learning assignment. How could these tensions between children's agency and the simultaneous demands for goal achievement be met and balanced from a didactical perspective?

This problem is not the only one the staff encounters. In a national review of SAECs, the school-reviewing authority, the Swedish Schools Inspectorate, criticized their teaching as not sufficiently "prominent or developing" (Skolinspektionen, 2018, p. 5). Boström and Berg (2018) reported the cross pressure on the staff's experience because of the staff's frustrations in relating to various steering documents depending on their SAECs' daily activities and the challenging conditions they face regarding large groups of pupils in unsuitable premises and sharp criticism from various actors about the quality of their daily work. A critical question is whether the staff has time to develop their teaching with the current high pupil numbers per teacher, a teaching staff that, to a large percentage, lacks pedagogical education (Statens offentliga utredningar (SOU), 2020: 34), and the lack of a didactic framework that establishes, for example, a common professional language.

This lack of a didactic framework has created problems, although not just for SAEC staff. Teacher education programs focusing on SAECs and SAEC pupils have also been affected. One of the learning objectives in the basic teacher degree with a focus on work in SAECs is to "demonstrate such knowledge in didactics and subject didactics, including methodology required for teaching and learning in the field of leisure pedagogy" in accordance with the Higher Education Ordinance (SFS, 1993, p. 100). This problem became evident during the evaluation of teacher education that the University Chancellor's Office conducted in 2018. Four out of 12 programs were evaluated as of "poor quality" regarding this goal (UKÄ, 2019). The frustration among the actors involved was clear when pupils should learn a curriculum that lacks an explicit theoretical basis (Boström, Orwehag, & Elvstrand, 2022), yet must be evaluated based on whether they have achieved a goal. This is a paradoxical situation.

As can be seen from the problem described above, there is a great need to carve out a didactic framework for SAECs to find a common ground in the long run for staff and researchers to develop didactics in SAECs. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to evaluate content (24 items) that researchers have assigned to didactics in SAECs and to compare the perceptions in nine different occupational groups. Thus, it is first of all important to provide an overview of what the research has shown, which we present in the next section.

2. Previous research

2.1. New as a field of research

Initially, the field of leisure pedagogy linked to SAECs was fairly new as a field of research and to a large extent, studies frequently have been performed only in the Nordic countries, mainly in Sweden and Denmark (Broström, 2015, 2017) and to some degree, in Iceland and Norway. Therefore, this overview is based primarily on Swedish research, but also in some respects, on input from Sweden's Nordic neighbours.

Furthermore, there has been a shift in Sweden and its neighbouring Nordic countries partly regarding SAECs contributing in a more specified way to children's learning and partly regarding changes to teacher education and policy work on quality and equality issues (Moloney & Pope, 2020). This, in turn, means that the focus in several respects has been placed more clearly on teaching and forms of activity in SAECs and that the need for leisure-time pedagogical research has further increased, not the least a need for research on didactics in SAECs. The following overview is based on some crucial studies.

More than 20 years ago, the concept of didactics was first published in texts in a SAEC context (Hansen, 2000a; 2000b). The researcher related didactics to action strategies that aimed to take advantage of pupils' opportunities for experience-based learning through the SAEC teacher's systematic work, mainly regarding increased general knowledge and abilities that the curriculum highlighted. Ten years later, in 2011 and 2012, the research project Knowledge Opportunities in Swedish SAEC (Löfdahl et al., 2011; Saar et al., 2012) addressed the possibility of formulating a didactic theory specifically for SAECs. These researchers pointed to the characteristics of leisure pedagogy in relation to the pedagogical basis of schools and argued that SAECs should be studied in their own terms, not schools' agendas. Thus, SAEC constitutes its own context and needs to be researched on its own terms and not based on that of the school's. The researchers also formulated an alternative view of didactics in SAECs based on how children and staff together responded regarding "what is this?" and "what could it become?" Thus, disparate perspectives could be articulated and given attention in a concrete and tangible way based on the activities and knowledge opportunities that emerged. Saar et al. (2012) named this didactic approach as SAECs *potential didactics*.

Broström (2017) described and debated SAEC didactics in Denmark. He firmly stated, "The pedagogues in SAEC must master didactics and be didactically competent [our translation]" (2017, p. 113). Broström (2015) identified some important didactic principles or basic assumptions for SAECs, including holistic thinking, openness, and self-determination. The what-and-how aspects of the SAECs' pedagogy differ in crucial respects from their counterparts in school didactics, according to Broström (2017). Pupils' active goal-oriented activities, participation in a social practice community, and guided participation with their teachers' support are crucial didactic aspects for SAECs. Broström advocated a didactic model for SAECs that he called *dynamic situation didactics*. Its starting point is an analysis of the children's situations, their current interests, the teachers' and children's history of experiences, and the experiences they have made together. A situation analysis connects each of these parts, and the didactic assessments depend on the current situation.

Recently, Boström, Orwehag, and Elvstrand (2022) conducted a systematic literature review focusing on the state of the art of didactics in SAECs. The results showed that the interest in and awareness of the didactics concept has developed over the past 10 years and that most studies used a qualitative approach with debating, argumentative, and reflective analyses. A small number of studies were based on empirical data. Regarding content, the studies captured some of the traditional didactic concepts such as the teacher, leadership, the didactics subject, and distinct theoretical starting points. The definitions of SAEC didactics were scattered, vague, and they overall substantiated demands for a didactic framework to build the profession in various respects. Using the didactics concept in SAECs indicates the area needs to be developed, that the concept of didactics is set in relation to SAEC activities, and that it is used as an interpretive framework for empirical material. The studies demonstrated awareness of various didactic aspects, but no studies incorporated the complexity of didactics.

2.2. Dilemmas of and possibilities for using the didactics concept in SAECs

To understand the didactics concept in a SAEC context, we first wanted to describe some dilemmas regarding the use of the concept and

then expand upon its possibilities.

To use didactic aspects, a subject is initially needed. This introduces the first problem. There is no consensus either in research or the practical field about what characterized pedagogy in the SAEC context. SAEC pedagogy as a concept assumes that pedagogical and didactic intentions take place in specific pedagogical practices in SAECs (Rohlin, 2017). However, although researchers today have no clear definition regarding SAEC pedagogy, they agree it is a special approach to children and their leisure time activities (Elvstrand & Lago, 2019; Klerfelt & Haglund, 2011). Notably, there also is no consensus among those who provide the education.

Another problem is the terms of SAECs practice. As newly described in a national report about SAECs, the conditions vary considerably regarding the staff's educational levels, the facilities, and the group sizes (SOU, 2020:34). Former research has also well described that the staff in SAECs often feel that as a teacher group, they have a lower status than schoolteachers do.

Schools have too strongly influenced the concept of didactics (Boström & Augustsson, 2016). It is not obvious to researchers that the concept of didactics should or can occur in leisure centre activities (Klerfelt & Stecher, 2018). Researchers have warned of a "schoolification" of SAEC activities (Boström & Augustsson, 2016; Klerfelt & Ljusberg, 2018; Lager, 2020). Regardless, the concept of teaching (along with the concepts of pupil and teacher) was introduced in the SAECs' steering document, the 2010 update of the Education Act (SFS, 2010:800), which strengthened the SAECs' learning commitment via the addition of a special section (Chapter 14). SAECs are seen as a complement to compulsory school forms. The activities in SAECs are described here as education, and the concepts of teaching, teacher, and pupil also apply in the legal texts concerning SAECs. With the new curriculum, Lgr11 (Skolverket, 2019), from 2011 onwards, SAECs were initially more clearly linked to schools, in that the first two parts now also applied to the SAECs. This development was made even more relevant by the fact that in the 2016 curriculum revision, the SAECs received their own section in the curriculum, Part 4, where both teaching methods and the central content were described. As previously mentioned regarding the Swedish Schools Inspectorate's 2018 national review, SAECs' teaching was criticized as not being more "prominent or developing" (Skolinspektionen, 2018, p. 5). Thus, in SAECs, teaching is a basic concept, and the discipline that is the science of teaching is didactics.

2.3. Didactics in SAECs context and didactical traditions

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 (Skolverket, 2019). Didactics extracts the learning component from pedagogy at a general level and/or moves it into a discipline or subject environment. Therefore, didactics has a natural connection to all subjects and disciplines (Kroksmark, 1997). Didactics is described as "teachers' tools," which provides them a theoretical language to describe their practice and, for example, clarify their pedagogical and didactic choices and their work. With the help of didactics, teachers can explore, describe, and put their work into words. Based on practical everyday life, didactics can contribute to an overall picture of reality so that teachers can reflect on their work's results in a systematic way (Jank & Meyer, 1997).

To use, understand, and relate to didactics in everyday life, a professional language and a developed and well-defined common foundation is needed for staff in educational contexts (Broström, 2017). Didactics refers to the doctrine of teaching in all its possible forms regarding content, methods, actors, and practices (Westbury, 2000). Thus, didactics is about the broad problems that affect leisure staff in their professional lives in various ways.

The two dominant didactic theories, the Anglo-Saxon and the German, can provide clues to find SAECs' specific theory. The former

focuses on a goal- and measurement-oriented curriculum culture within the education system. Curriculum is regulated in relevant governing documents where implementing the curriculum's content is in focus. When the content is provided, the teacher's implementation is a top-down process. This didactic theory can be applied to the staff's understanding of the implementation of curriculum content (Westbury, 2000), from formulation to realization and implementation (cf. Bladh et al., 2018) but also to teachers' planning, implementation of teaching, and assessment work. The core of the German theory is the didactic triangle, the nodes of teacher, student and content, and between them, presentation, methodology, and interactions (Hoppman, 1997).

2.4. The web survey

In view of the need for a didactic specifically defined for SAECs, we constructed a web survey based on 24 statements adapted from research on SAEC teaching practice. Our interest was to delimit the particular aspects of what didactics in SAECs is or can be, according to actors in the field. The 24 statements have emerged from studies in Sweden where researchers explicitly described how didactics in SAECs can be interpreted (Boström et al., 2022). Based on the systematic literature review, we sorted out explicit statements about what didactics in SAECs is/can be according to current research. Because the research has just begun, there is no deeper theoretical grounding within different didactic frameworks of the various claims. These statements were by no means comprehensive, but only a first step in finding a framework for what the SAECs didactics could be. To obtain a more comprehensive picture, solid research is required based on the conditions of the business with different types of data and analysis methods. This is described in detail as a concept in Boström, Elvstrand, and Orwehag (2022).

The purpose of the study was thus to evaluate the core of didactics in SAECs described by researchers in nine occupational groups and to examine whether there were significant differences between the occupational groups. This generated the following two research questions.

- What do didactics in SAECs include according to nine different groups of actors in the field?
- Are there divergent views between the nine groups of actors regarding the 24 different items? If so, in which respects?

3. Method

3.1. Participants

This study's sample comprised 492 actors, 102 (21%) males and 390 (79%) females. The participants who stated their current professional position were SAEC teachers, leisure educators, leisure leaders, child-minders, principals, other higher education professionals, teaching staff at universities, researchers in SAECs or nearby fields, and SAEC teacher students. The selection of participants thus included both academic and practical professions as well as a representation of teacher students. The criteria for selecting professional positions were based on the most common professions in SAEC activities and education.

3.2. Methodology, instrument, and data analysis

The purpose of the survey was to chart opinions from actors involved concerning issues related to didactics in SAECs. To examine their thoughts and attitudes, materials were gathered through a survey with open- and closed-ended questions. This article presents the quantitative findings from the survey from the closed-ended questions.

The empirical material upon which our analysis is based was obtained in spring 2021. Data were collected using a web-based questionnaire administered through a link to the survey tool Netigate (www.netigate.se). The survey was sent to the Swedish Academic Network for SAEC, which includes participants from the 15 universities that provide

teacher training with a focus on SAEC. All universities were asked to send out the survey to students, professionals in the field, and staff. The sample was a typical case sample. The survey was followed by a message explaining the study's purpose and that participation was voluntary and anonymous. The empirical data for this study were based on responses from 492 actors in SAECs from all over Sweden.

In addition to demographic information such as age, gender, professional position, working years in SAECs, and so on, the questionnaire consisted of items based on claims about SAEC didactics (see Appendix 1). Before the questionnaire was sent out, 10 individuals in different positions in SAECs tested and examined it in an academic forum.

The study followed the Swedish Research Council's rules and ethical recommendations for studies in social science research (Vetenskapsrådet, 2017).

3.3. Instrument and data analysis

The survey instrument, the 24 items on diverse perceptions of SAEC didactics, which were adapted from current research, were rated on a 4-point rating scale, ranging from 1 (*strongly agree*) to 4 (*strongly disagree*). The participants also had the opportunity to answer, "I do not know." There are two percentage distributions reported. The first shows the percentage distribution where "I do not know" is included, and the second percentage distribution (valid percent) shows the distribution when "I do not know" has been removed. This is simply to know the total response frequency to the items and then report the percentage distribution of the "I do not know" responses.

All data were analysed using IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 27). Frequency analyses have been performed to describe the questionnaire questions. The data items consisted of ordinal variables. Frequencies, means, and medians were used to analyse single items with descriptive statistics. The Mann-Whitney *U* test was used when comparing the ordinal variables between nine professional groups. The results were reported with descriptive statistics and significance testing. Exact chi-square tests were performed on each questionnaire to compare the participants' professional roles, because "I do not know" was also included as an answer alternative. Here, we examined whether the percentage distributions differed. The chi-square test was performed when two variables were crossed against each other and both variables were category variables. Because so few were in some groups, we had to use the exact chi-square test. The Mann-Whitney *U* test is a nonparametric test and is comparable to the parametric two-sample *t*-test. It is used to test the null hypothesis when two samples are drawn from the same population. It determines whether the difference between the average rank of the two groups (in this case, males and females) is significant. This test is used when the normality assumption is questionable and/or when the data are ordinal.

A factor analysis with varimax rotation with the requirement eigenvalue greater than 1 was used to distinguish different groupings of items (see Appendix 2). Three variables were removed (17 and 24) because they did not fit the themes that came out of the groups. Six themes emerged, namely curriculum, connection to school, interaction of pupils versus teachers, pupils' learning, and teachers. Cronbach's alpha was calculated for each theme. In the factor analysis, seven factors were found, but because the seventh factor only had one item (20), the item had low correlation to all the other variables and did not belong to any of the other factors. Cronbach's alpha was calculated for each item within a factor, if each item had a loading above 0.50 in the factor matrix. Factor 7 was excluded because there was only one item (20).

3.4. Method discussion

Like all similar studies, the results presented here should be viewed as snapshots. Perceptions about didactics can and could change over time and depend on contexts and subjects (Selander, 2017). To delve deeper, repeated measurements and longitudinal studies are required.

The study is limited to nine professions, and the results are valid for those included in the study. Given the size of the spread between categories, this was adequate for the chosen design (Hassmén & Koivula, 1996). One strength of the chosen statistical methods is that outliers (extreme scores) do not affect the test, which can occur in parametric tests. One weakness is that it requires more interpretation of their results; that is, it is not as powerful as parametric tests (Siegel & Castellan, 1988).

4. Results and analysis

The following sections present the descriptive results regarding all respondents' rankings of the statements and of the items answered "I do not know." Then, the results regarding significant differences between the occupational groups are presented and, in conjunction with each subresult, our interpretation (see Table 1).

4.1. Ranking of the various items

The percentage distribution of how respondents answered the 24 items is presented in Table 2. The table shows the valid percentages of respondents who marked "strongly agree" or "agree to a large extent"; that is, we have summed up both of those answers into one whole in the result. As can be seen from the table, 50% or more of the respondents agreed on 20 out of 24 statements in the web survey. Of the respondents, 75% or more agreed upon half of the answers. Our conclusion from this is that many of the statements contained in the web survey were relevant to didactics in SAECs.

In an examination of the statements that received low degrees of approving answers, we saw that three of them were about schools. The respondents did not agree to any great extent that didactics in SAECs was about linking to what was currently being dealt with in schools, that is, it should support and strengthen subject-related learning in schools, and that it does not deviate in any decisive way from didactics in schools. Very few of the respondents agreed that didactics in SAECs took place in a specific area. We believe this also could be interpreted as an opinion that separates SAEC didactics from school didactics. In schools, the classroom is the obvious location where teaching, learning, and, as a logical consequence, didactics is applied. In SAECs, teaching and learning (and didactics) are regarded as eminent parts of all activities, regardless of location. We also find it particularly interesting that a clear majority believed didactics in SAECs differed from didactics in schools. Only 25.7% of the respondents believed it did not differ, which means almost three fourths of the respondents did not agree; that is, SAEC didactics must be distinguished from school didactics.

Table 1
Information on frequencies regarding professional positions.

Professional position ^a	Frequency	%
SAEC teachers	128	26.0
Leisure pedagogues	96	19.5
Leisure leaders	25	5.1
Childminders	25	5.1
Principals	51	10.4
Other higher education professionals ^b	17	3.5
Teaching staff at universities	57	11.6
Researchers in SAECs or nearby fields	22	4.5
SAEC teacher students	71	14.4
Total	492	100

^a The participants categorized their professional positions. Meaning, they selected the position that they thought best described their current positions. The position leisure pedagogue is not a regulated position, which means this category could include participants with or without a formal academic education.

^b Other higher education professionals could include preschool teachers, primary school teachers, behavioral scientists, and sports teachers.

Table 2

The percentage distribution of the answers “strongly agree” or “agree to some extent.”

<i>Didactics in SAEC ... (“I do not know” answers are not included)</i>	%
... is about daring both the pupils’ self-chosen activities and the educators’ planning.	93.1
... captures opportunities for learning that arise in the situation, for example, when the staff interacts with pupils.	90.1
... also includes staff leadership.	87.9
... includes how knowledge, values, and experiences are to be understood and organized in concrete teaching and learning situations.	87.3
... is about consciously structuring the activities so that everything is connected.	79.8
... is about educating pupils towards the development of democratic skills.	79.5
... is based on pedagogical intentions on how teaching should be done.	78.2
... includes aspirations or activities planned based on long-term goals.	78.2
... also includes theoretical perspectives on curricula.	77.9
... puts relationship building at the SAEC where other subject areas are used for the staff’s work in relationships.	77.4
... includes aspirations or activities planned based on curriculum goals.	76.5
... is about how teachers in SAECs understand and articulate SAEC activities.	75.6
... also includes the implementation of steering documents.	74.7
... is about pupils’ activities in SAECs being related to each other in a continuous movement and development.	74.6
... is most often elucidated on the basis of how the teaching or activities are translated into SAEC practice.	70.0
... is about how pupils arrange and participate in the activities in SAECs.	67.4
... is about collaboration with home and parents.	60.8
... is often highlighted from the pupils’ perspectives.	59.1
... has a focus on facilitating pupils’ opportunities to absorb learning during the school day.	53.3
... should focus mainly on the key areas addressed in Part 4 of the curriculum.	50.6
... is about how SAECs should in the best way support and strengthen subject-related learning in schools.	36.6
... should clearly link to what is currently being dealt with in schools.	36.1
... does not differ in any decisive way from didactics in schools.	25.7
... takes place in a specific place in SAECs.	10.8

4.2. “I do not know” items

Because this type of survey had never been conducted before and the questions had never been tested before, it was also important to examine which items rendered the largest number of “I do not know” answers. As can be seen in [Table 3](#), two statements had a fairly high number of “I do not know” answers. The first of these two items showed 10.3% of the respondents replied that they could not take a position on the claim that the didactics was most often elucidated based on how the teaching or activities were implemented in SAECs. The second showed 9.0% could not take a position on the claim that didactics was often highlighted from pupils’ perspectives. We concluded that these two statements stand out as evidence that the concepts of pupils and teaching have recently been introduced and therefore have not been implemented in SAEC culture.

The results also showed that half of all statements had “I do not know” answers from less than 5.4% of the respondents. The conclusions we drew from this were that many statements seemed to be relatively easy to demonstrate that they were relevant to the activities and were found in the actors’ professional positions.

4.3. Differences between professions

Nine professional categories relevant to SAECs answered this questionnaire. The Appendix gives a complete picture of the answers from each professional group. [Table 4](#) provides a summary of the items where significant differences occurred between the occupational groups. [Table 4](#) should be read as follows: The first professional group to be mentioned in the comparison agreed with the current item to a significantly higher level than the second professional group, for each pair in the table. There is thus a significant difference of opinion between the two professions in each pair.

Table 3

The percentage distribution of the number of “I do not know” answers *didactics in SAEC %*.

... is most often elucidated on the basis of how the teaching or activities are translated into SAEC practice.	10.3
... is often highlighted from the pupils’ perspectives.	9.0
... also includes theoretical perspectives on curricula.	6.3
... does not differ in any decisive way from didactics in schools.	6.0
... puts relationship building at the SAEC where other subject areas are used for the staff’s work in relationships.	6.0
... is based on pedagogical intentions on how the teaching should be done.	6.0
... should focus mainly on the key areas addressed in Chapter 4 of the curriculum.	5.7
... is about pupils’ activities in SAECs being related to each other in a continuous movement and development.	5.4
... is about how SAECs should in the best way support and strengthen subject-related learning in schools.	5.2
... also includes the implementation of steering documents.	5.1
... is about collaboration with home and parents.	5.1
... is about how teachers in SAECs understand and articulate SAEC activities.	5.1
... is about consciously structuring the activities so that everything is connected.	4.5
... should clearly link to what is currently being dealt with in schools.	4.2
... has a focus on facilitating pupils’ opportunities to absorb learning during the school day.	4.0
... includes aspirations or activities planned based on long-term goals.	3.9
... includes how knowledge, values, and experiences are to be understood and organized in concrete teaching and learning situations.	3.5
... captures opportunities for learning that arise in the situation, for example, when the staff interacts with pupils.	3.3
... also includes staff leadership.	3.0
... is about educating pupils towards the development of democratic skills.	3.0
... is about how pupils arrange and participate in the activities in SAECs.	2.7
... includes aspirations or activities planned based on curriculum goals.	2.7
... takes place in a specific place in SAECs.	2.7
... is about taking into consideration both the pupils’ self-chosen activities and the staff’s planning.	2.4

First, there were significant differences between professional groups for six items; that is, there were clear differences in perceptions. Regarding content, four of these questions were about didactical relationships to the school. It is also clear from the results that the professional group that varied most from the others was principals. Principals were found in almost half of all distinctive views.

The first distinguishing question was about consciously structuring activities so everything is connected. Principals agreed with this statement to a significantly greater extent than leisure pedagogues and SAEC teacher students did. We see this as understandable because a principal’s task is to be responsible for the entire school day, and their school perspective is evident. We also believe that a minority of the principals came from SAEC practice; therefore, most were more school oriented in their perspectives. We believe these two other professions wanted to distinguish themselves from the school culture and defend the SAEC culture.

The next distinguishing items pointed out that SAEC didactics also includes theoretical perspectives on curricula. Both principals and teaching staff at universities valued this item significantly higher than childminders did. We also interpret these differences as consistent because childminders probably did not study the curriculum in their education. The group childminders can also include untrained staff. For principals, the curriculum is a cornerstone of school activities, and for teaching staff at universities, teaching about the curriculum is central to the education they provide.

The third distinguishing item was that SAEC didactics did not differ in any decisive way from school didactics. The principals agreed on this to a significantly higher degree than four other professional groups did: SAEC teacher students, SAEC teachers, teaching staff at universities, and researchers in SAECs or nearby fields. Our interpretation of this was as follows. It is reasonable to presume that the distinguishing groups had notably deeper insights into and theoretical reasoning about what SAEC

Table 4
Significant differences between professional groups and specific items.

Items with significant differences	Asymptotic significance	Adjusted significance ^a
... is about consciously structuring the activities so everything is connected.	0.018**	
Principals vs. leisure pedagogue		0.049*
Principals vs. SAEC teacher students		0.029**
... also includes theoretical perspectives on curricula.	0.002***	
Principals vs. childminders		0.002***
Teaching staff at universities vs. childminders		0.007***
... does not differ in any decisive way from didactics in schools.	0.002***	
Principals vs. SAEC teacher		0.006**
Principals vs. SAEC teacher students		0.007**
Principals vs. teaching staff at universities		0.002**
Principals vs. researchers in SAECs or nearby fields		0.014**
... should clearly link to what is currently being dealt with in schools.	0.000***	
Childminders vs. SAEC teachers		0.014**
Childminders vs. Teaching staff at universities		0.020**
Principals vs. SAEC teachers		0.012**
Principals vs. teaching Staff at universities		0.025**
... has a focus on facilitating pupils' opportunities to absorb learning during the school day.	0.000***	
Principals vs. SAEC teachers		0.009***
Principals vs. teaching Staff at universities		0.001***
... is about how SAECs should in the best way support and strengthen subject-related learning in schools.	0.000***	
Other higher education professionals vs. leisure pedagogue		0.040*
Other higher education professionals vs. SAEC teachers		0.016**
Other higher education professionals vs. researchers in SAECs or nearby fields		0.044*
Other higher education professionals vs. teaching staff at Universities		0.003***
Principals vs. SAEC teachers		0.017*
Principals vs. researchers in SAECs or nearby fields		0.002***

^a Significance values were adjusted with the Bonferroni correction for multiple tests.

didactics could be, compared to the principals. These four professional groups had probably encountered the dilemma of introducing SAEC didactics into school didactics. SAEC didactics is something other than school didactics. Some dividing lines compared to school are the care perspective in the children's free time and the emphasis of working both with formal and informal learning. Another central aspect in the didactics in SAECs is the pupil-centered approach, where teaching is based on pupils' interests, needs, and experiences. This means that teachers need to gather and use pupils' perspectives as a starting point for their planning. We believe there may be some difficulties in transferring SAEC didactics into school contexts. These two cultures should influence each other and collaborate (Skolverket, 2019), but in reality, this is not always the case. Conversely, principals first and foremost have an operational perspective. Furthermore, it could be of importance what education each principal has and on what didactic knowledge they are able to lean.

The next item with significant differences was that SAEC didactics should clearly link to what was currently being addressed in schools. Both principals and childminders had dissenting opinions compared to SAEC teachers and university faculty. We presume that principals' views were clear on that issue. Principals were concerned about the whole school day for the pupils and, consequently, agreed that SAECs should

support schools. The interpretation of the reaction from the childminders was not quite as obvious. Childminders sometimes work as assistants in the classroom for certain pupils or as assistants to teachers and would then possibly view school as more central than the SAEC actors do. In contrast, other childminders work exclusively in SAECs and are often, through their education, focused on the care aspect of SAECs. This might lead them to view schools as the main pedagogical source and therefore the more important activity. Finally, the other two professions, SAEC teachers and teaching staff at universities are presumably more strongly committed to the specific pedagogical content and culture of SAECs and are therefore not as willing to submit to the schools' needs and wishes and might not have a strong professional affiliation to school culture.

The fifth distinguished item was about facilitating pupils' opportunities to absorb learning during the school day. Principals' views also differed significantly in this case from SAEC teachers and teaching staff at universities. Principals agreed on the item "... has a focus on facilitating pupils' opportunities to absorb learning during the school day." Here, too, it was understandable from the principals' holistic and operational perspectives. In contrast, SAEC teachers and teaching staff at universities presumably put a greater value on the specific learning in its own right that takes place in SAECs and might not be prepared to focus primarily on the learning that goes on during the school day.

The last item that rendered the most distinctive views related to other higher education professionals who differed significantly from four other professions concerning the item "... is about how SAECs should in the best way support and strengthen subject-related learning in schools." Our interpretation of this is that it had to do with this group's professional backgrounds and education, including education in specific subjects. If an individual's focus is in a specific subject, it is likely that they relate the didactics to it. Principals also agreed to a significantly higher degree with this statement, compared to SAEC teachers and researchers in SAECs or nearby fields. We believe this is consistent with our interpretations of the items described above because also in this item, school is indirectly marked as the dominant and most important of the two concerned parties. It is reasonable to assume that this idea is not in line with the opinions of parties with deeper insight into SAEC pedagogy and learning.

4.4. Linkage to didactics and steering documents

To examine relationships between different variables and distinguish possible underlying factors, a factor analysis was carried out on items with varimax rotation. Six themes emerged: curriculum, interaction of pupils versus teachers, pupils' participation, connection to school, teachers, and pupils learning, on which Cronbach's alpha was calculated (see Table 5.) Considering that Cronbach's alpha should be above 0.6 to be considered a good measure of reliability, the first four themes can explain how the researchers chose and formulated the items.

5. Discussion

The starting point of this study was an emergent need for a didactical framework for SAECs. Above all, the staff in SAECs has a professional

Table 5
Cronbach's alpha and the themes.

	Chronbach's Alpha	N of itemes	Items in the survey
<i>Curriculum</i>	0.815	6	11, 8, 5, 13, 9, 4
<i>Interaction of pupils vs teachers</i>	0.795	6	10, 16, 6, 14, 1, 12, 3, 7
<i>Pupils participation</i>	0.750	5	10, 16, 6.1 4,1
<i>Connection to school</i>	0.800	4	21, 22, 19, 23
<i>Teachers</i>	0.574	3	12, 3, 7
<i>Pupils learning</i>	0.546	3	18,2 7

need for this framework to fulfil their mission (Boström, 2017). Several problems SAECs have to contend with were highlighted in the background: the different contexts in SAECs and schools (Skolverket, 2019), the dilemmas regarding pupils' free time in SAECs and the governance that is needed (Lago & Elvstrand, 2021), the staff's dilemmas regarding distinct governing documents to relate to specific assignments (Boström & Augustsson, 2016), the disparate environments as a basis for teaching and leadership (Boström & Haglund, 2020), the problems of having many pupils in groups, declining staff density, and declining SAEC premises (SOU, 2020:34). In 2011, a new teacher training was enacted where SAEC teachers had a clear assignment to work as teachers in both SAECs and schools. This new role has created tensions in balancing the diverse practices and the teachers' roles, according to Ackesjö et al. (2019). SAEC teachers' dilemma regarding the dual roles, namely, to be SAEC teachers in schools and SAEC teachers in SAECs, occurs in research as well as in practical reality.

In addition, for researchers, school authorities, and other actors, an influx of knowledge in the field will make important contributions to SAECs' activities, school development in general, and the research field specifically. As related above, we found points of agreement across the nine actor groups but also, in some cases, distinctive differences between certain groups. We also found some connections to the steering documents and the dominant didactic theories.

5.1. Didactics in SAECs—The connection to the school context

One overall conclusion we can draw from the web survey is that it was easy to answer because the "I do not know" alternative was used to a low extent in most items. One of the two items with the greatest percentage of the use of this alternative was "... is most often elucidated on the basis of how the teaching or activities are translated into SAEC practice," on which 10% could not take a stand. We believe this is logical because research in the field is in its infancy (Boström et al., 2021) and the concepts of pupil, teaching, and teacher only recently have been applied to SAECs in the steering documents (SFS, 2010; Skolverket, 2019). The factor analysis also confirmed that this item did not correlate to the others because the loadings were low (under 0.5). In retrospect, we are also a bit critical of our own wording of the item, namely the choice of the verb "elucidated," which can be ambiguous to interpret. The second item that seemed hard to take a stand on was "... is often highlighted from the pupils' perspectives." With the same basis as the previous item, namely the concept of pupils' incorporation into SAECs, we presume the discussions about pupils has not been on the agenda for all included professions.

Answering the first research question, regarding what didactics in SAECs may include or not, provided substantive claims of high relevance consistent within the themes of teacher–student interaction, content, and teaching from the respondents. One item that stands out is "... should focus mainly on the key areas addressed in Part 4 of the curriculum," with which 53.3% of the respondents did not agree. The factor analysis also confirmed that this item did not correlate to the others. One interpretation may be that the staff in SAECs distinguish between the general writing in Part 4—which has quite a lot of support—and, conversely, the four specified central learning areas about which more staff are sceptical because in some cases, it seems to lead to a rather controlled and knowledge-based and even a fairly "schoolified" activity (cf. Lager, 2020). The following critical questions are raised. Do teachers in SAECs see the curriculum specifications for SAECs as divided into two parts, or as one general area that, to a great extent, links with the traditional culture of schooling and learning in SAECs? If SAEC teaching and learning areas were more closely related to those of schools, could SAECs be regarded as teaching to complement specifically the teaching in schools? Could this possibly lead to a split in the group of professional staff, where some hold on to the more traditional cultural values of SAECs and others orient themselves towards regular schools and see themselves mainly as a support team for them? The latter alternative

seems to be a view many of the principals held.

The item that distinguishes SAECs most was "... takes place in a specific area in SAECs," which only 8.4% of the respondents agreed on and was the lowest ranked. This item was also not included in the reliability analysis because there was no correlation between this and other items. By that, we mean that we can dismiss it from the discussion on SAEC didactics because almost all staff see didactics as linked to all activities, outside and inside, free, and structured, in contrast to schools, the activities of which are quite clearly connected to the classroom. In addition, the item that was second lowest ranked, that is, SAEC didactics does not differ in any decisive way from didactics in schools, and which only principals ranked highly, supports an argument on the peculiarity of SAEC didactics compared to school didactics.

Three items that were low ranking and that showed major differences between the professional groups were about the SAEC and school learning contexts regarding pupils' learning and the whole school day, supporting subject-related learning, and the differences in didactics. We conclude that these three statements are important in laying the foundation for SAEC didactics and that everyone involved in these contexts should discuss the issues in depth until a consensus is reached.

In this context, it is important to point out that the items found in the group in connection with the school show a high Cronbach's alpha. The correlation between these items is thus and shows that an important aspect to consider in designing SAEC didactics is to relate to the school context. This does not mean that it is a mainstay of SAEC didactics.

5.2. Didactics in SAECs - In relation to steering documents and didactical theories

To understand how the researchers formulated the various items, a brief account of the themes that emerged is in order. As can be seen from Table 5, items containing curriculum aspects have the highest correlation. The only item that did not match was 20, which was about Part 4 of the curriculum. As can be seen from Table 5, items containing curriculum aspects have the highest correlation. The only item that did not match in was 20, which addressed the didactics and should mainly focus on the central areas in Part 4 of the curriculum. We interpret this primarily as the curriculum being the focus of SAEC didactics and that this fits well with the implementation theory of the Anglo-Saxon tradition (Westbury, 2000). We see the fact that the didactics should not be aimed primarily at the central areas in Part 4 of the curriculum because of SAEC didactics being a broader field than that.

Interactions between pupils and teachers as well as pupils' participation can partly be traced in the German didactic tradition (Hoppman, 1997), and partly in the governing documents on how teaching should be conducted in the SAECs (Skolverket, 2019).

5.3. Didactics in SAECs—What about the principals?

For the second research question regarding whether the nine actors had dissimilar views on the 24 items, we found that in relation to many of the statements, there was a consensus. Seven items showed significant differences (see Table 4). Regarding content, they were about the relationship to school, the relationship to didactics in schools, the link to what is being addressed in schools, facilitating pupils' opportunities to absorb learning during the school day, and how SAECs should in the best way support and strengthen subject-related learning in schools. Our conclusions are that (a) this is a strong indication, especially among the teachers in SAECs, that SAEC didactics and school didactics belong to two different contexts; and (b) this points to the importance of raising the question for all actors, preferably in common. As the results show, principals have the most divergent views. We wonder whether this distinction is because principals have a school activity perspective, or they are not sufficiently familiar with didactic issues related to SAECs. An interesting area to explore would be to determine principals' professional background and the possibilities and specific knowledges they

have to act as pedagogical leaders for the SAEC.

The item where the views contrasted most among the respondents was "... is about how SAECs should in the best way support and strengthen subject-related learning in schools." Other higher education professionals agreed with this statement to a significantly higher level than four other professions did, and principals agreed at a significantly higher level than two other professions did. It is logical that staff who teach specified subjects agree this is important. As we previously suggested, the differing opinions between principals and SAEC staff might be explained by their varying interpretations of what the focus for the SAEC teacher should be: the school as a whole or the specific development and learning in the SAEC.

In summary, we believe this study gives clear indications that SAEC didactics is "something else" than what school didactics is. As previously stated, SAEC is a different context than the school context. The items that were selected and grouped via factor analysis showed partly the influence of the school context but also an effect of leisure pedagogics, which pointed out that didactics in SAEC should have a child-centered approach, where teaching is based on pupils' interests, needs, and experiences. Some aspects traced in the Anglo-Saxon and the German didactic traditions was mainly the focus upon implementing the goals in the curriculum (Wetsbury, 2000) and the importance of the interaction between pupils versus teachers (Hoppmann, 1997).

The study also indicates that professions with a strong professional identity, such as principals, and an overall view of the school as a unified teaching unit, position themselves clearly in relation to other professions (cf. Närvänen & Elvstrand, 2014). This positioning also applies to staff members with an academic education aimed at SAECs, who seem to have a strong focus on the SAEC and its specific teaching culture rather than the school. Furthermore, university faculty and researchers in SAECs or nearby fields seem to share their views. We agree that SAEC didactics entails potential opportunities that should be studied on their own terms, not those of schools (cf. Löfdahl et al., 2011; Saar et al., 2012). Moreover, we agree that the learning environments in schools and SAECs differ (cf. Klerfelt, 1999), which also is an important argument for clarifying a defined didactic framework for SAECs. The item that most respondents agreed with concerning SAEC didactics was about capturing learning opportunities that arise in the situation; this points to Broström's (2015) proposed epithet, dynamic situation didactics. Our overall view is that a special didactic platform is needed for SAEC staff but that it should be based on the specific circumstances in the SAEC context.

5.4. Continued research

Based on the results of this study, we believe that to determine and develop SAEC didactics, an interplay between theory and practice, based on theoretical knowledge and practical experience, is needed. We can achieve this best by letting distinctive actors' voices be heard and building on the knowledge of those closest to the activities. Based on most of the statements in the survey, we believe the next natural step is to carry out empirical studies in SAECs in the form of, for example, observations and interviews with pupils and teachers. Because this is such an undeveloped area, it is important to have an exploratory approach so that the researcher does not get stuck in predetermined assumptions about what didactics could be.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Lena Boström: Conception and design of study, acquisition of data, Formal analysis, Writing – original draft, Revising the manuscript critically for important intellectual content, Approval of the version of the manuscript to be published. **Helene Elvstrand:** Conception and design of study, acquisition of data, Formal analysis, Revising the manuscript critically for important intellectual content, Approval of the version of the manuscript to be published. **Monica Orwehag:** Conceptualization,

design of study, acquisition of data, Revising the manuscript critically for important intellectual content, Approval of the version of the manuscript to be published.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssaho.2022.100333>.

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