

The Need for Care: A Study of Teachers' Conceptions of Care and Pupils' Needs in a Swedish School-Age Educare Setting

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Abstract: This paper presents the findings of a study investigating School-Age Educare (SAE) teachers' conceptions of care and care practices and how these conceptions of care and actual practices relate to pupils' needs. The study is based on observations and interviews with two experienced SAE teachers and one young teacher in a Swedish SAE centre, working with pupils between 9–11 years old. The study was undertaken between March 2018 and April 2019, and provides insight into different forms of care and caring practices. The study also shows that pupils nowadays, according to the teachers, have needs that were previously met by their families. The teachers' conceptions of the importance of a well-functioning group and pupils' needs to be able to share their feelings, dreams and worries and to value each other's differences were also salient findings of the study.

Keywords: School-Age Educare, conceptions of care, caring practises, pupils' needs, care ethics

Introduction

School-Age Educare (SAE) in Sweden has its own chapter (4) in the national curriculum policy document for the primary school system, preschool classes and after-school centres (The National Education Act (NAE), 2011/2018). In addition to offering meaningful leisure time, SAE should also “stimulate pupils' development and learning” (p. 23). Previously, after-school centres were mainly places for care and recreation (cf. Calander, 2000). National policy (NAE, 2011/2018) now states that “The concept of an educational programme should be given a broad interpretation in school-age educare, where care, development and teaching constitute a whole” (p. 23). Care, development and teaching can thereby be interpreted as impossible to separate from each other. Policy documents provide evidence of an ideological shift from leisure and care as the main objective of SAE towards a more comprehensive view. The use of the term “teaching”, with children seen as “pupils”, signals that children are now the objects of education (Pihlgren & Rohlin, 2011). SAE is expected to contribute to the fulfilment of school objectives. Learning is described in the curriculum relating to SAE (NAE, 2011/2018) as situated, activity oriented and based on pupils' needs and interests. It means that SAE activities can serve several aims, being meaningful and fun from the perspective of pupils while at the same time enhancing subject knowledge and skills development. However, this implies a risk that SAE might reproduce the logic of tra-

ditional classrooms and overlook care- and value-based issues (Pihlgren & Rohlin, 2011; Boström, & Augustsson; 2016; Holmberg, 2017). Concern about the increased emphasis on education at the expense of care has also been reflected in worries about the risk of “schoolification” of the pre-school curriculum (Gunnarsdottir, 2014, p. 246).

On the other hand, there is an international trend towards care for children’s well-being and socialisation, embodied by programmes such as social and emotional training (SET) (Kimber, 2006). These programmes depart from a risks perspective, accounting for children that have to handle unsound peer relations, bullying, dysfunctional families, crimes and drugs, etcetera (Bartholdsson, Gustafsson-Lundberg, & Hultin, 2014). The sociologist Frank Furedi (2004) identifies this trend, promoted in schools, as anti-intellectual, as it focuses on the development of emotional intelligence. As such, according to Furedi, it forms a part of a wider predominant therapeutic culture. The main caring objective is to raise pupils’ self-esteem and help them develop self-control. Care in this sense relates to pupils’ psychological lives and relies on the idea that strong self-esteem is the foundation for learning. However, Furedi (2004) argues that despite its focus on self-control, this trend makes us helpless and in need of others and may therefore hamper the development of pupils’ autonomy. It has even been argued that caring teachers are the main obstacles preventing pupils’ development into democratic citizens (Mc Cuaig, 2011).

Review of the Related Literature

The Inward Turn in Education and the Programme Invasion

At the beginning of 2000, Sweden witnessed an upsurge in different preventive health programmes in schools. This was mainly in response to a call for evidence-based methods and assumption that teachers lacked the relevant competencies to teach the life skills, values and other health-related issues required to meet schools’ caring and fostering responsibilities (Bartholdsson & Hultin, 2015; Irisdotter, Aldenmyr, & Olson, 2016). Social and emotional training (SET), referred to above, was for instance designed to prevent drug abuse and criminality and to develop pupils’ emotional intelligence (Kimber, 2007). Although the use of programmes such as SET has declined, variations of this programme and others like it remain in schools throughout Sweden (Bartholdsson & Hultin, 2015; Irisdotter, Aldenmyr, & Olson, 2016) and internationally (Wood, 2018), where they influence fostering practices. Some research has reported positive outcomes of the SET programme (Kimber, Skoog, & Sandell, 2013; see also, Durlak, Dymnicki, Weissberg, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011). However, this so-called “inward turn in education” (Irisdotter, Aldenmyr, & Olson, 2016) has been criticised (Bartholdsson, Gustafsson-Lundberg, & Hultin 2014). Feelings, in these programmes, are often regarded as biological responses to stimuli. They do not account for other perspectives on feelings, i.e. that they are socially and culturally constructed and therefore can arise and be evaluated and interpreted according to different social contexts (Bartholdsson & Hultin, 2015). Focusing on the management of feelings and self-control also implies to a significant extent that the individual is responsible for failures in life. The source of the problems encountered in life (e.g. unemployment) is found in the individual’s emotional domain rather than in structural and political domains.