

# University-Supported Networks as Professional Development for Teachers in School-Age Educare

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**Abstract:** One of the most valued types of professional learning for teachers are forums that allow them to share their practices with other teachers. This paper examines how university-based learning networks support the professional development needs of teachers in School-Age educare. University-supported networks provide a more informal approach to professional learning and allows the teachers in School-Age educare to connect with other teachers in their field. The network further provides the participants an opportunity to be an active part of the research that is conducted at the university and a platform for developing a collective agency.

**Keywords:** Network, professional learning, School-Age educare, teacher agency

## Introduction

### School-Age Educare in Sweden

The Swedish elementary school system is unique in that it is designed to provide a wrap-around system of both education and care. The Swedish public education system is founded on the principles of democracy, equality and equity and “The Education Act (2010: 800) stipulates that the school system aims at pupils acquiring and developing knowledge and values” (Skolverket, p. 5). In Sweden, a majority of students also attend the before- and after school section of the elementary school system known as *Fritidshem*, or School-Age educare. This section of the education system fulfills an important role of the Swedish school system by providing group and situational based learning that stimulates the growth and development of students in grades one to six. While not compulsory, School-Age educare remains an important component of Swedish schools, and its mandate to complement and support student learning has become an important pillar of the public school system. In contrast to before- and after school programs common in other countries, the teachers who work at the Swedish School-Age educare centers are required to have an undergraduate degree in teaching School-Age educare. The requirement for licensed university-educated teachers is rather unique in the world as only Sweden and Denmark requires teachers to have an undergraduate degree (Dahl, 2014). To meet this demand for university-educated

teachers, Swedish universities offer a three-year undergraduate teacher program focused on teaching how to develop the needs and interests of School-Age educare children. In the university program, the student-teachers gain an understanding of how to interpret and implement the curriculum, as well as how to teach social skills in an informal setting. Since 2012, the students who graduate from this teaching program are further qualified to teach an aesthetic subject such as music, sports or arts, in the regular elementary school program.

In 2017, almost 500 000 students between the ages of 6 and 12 were enrolled in School-Age educare in Sweden, which is more than the total enrollment of students in the secondary school system (Skolverket, 2010). This means that over 84% of Swedish School-Age children spend a significant part of their school day at School-Age educare. This has, in turn, led to an increased need for educated personnel at the School-Age educare centers. While the number of schools offering School-Age educare has virtually remained the same for the last decade or so, the number of children enrolled has increased by close to 40%. Today, as many schools attempt to fill the teaching positions, principals often have to resort to hiring staff with other qualifications in childcare and similar qualifications, resulting in a situation where only one-quarter of the staff at School-Age educare is qualified with an undergraduate degree (Skolverket, 2010). More qualified teachers are needed to fill this growing demand, as there are now more children per teacher in School-Age educare than in the past. This change in the children-teacher ratio has come about mostly due to cuts or re-direction of educational funding.

The current curriculum document now include core content for the School-Age educare program, along with specific goals in the areas of Language and communication, Creative and aesthetic forms of expression, Nature and society as well as for Games, physical activities and outdoor excursions. This means that, more than ever before, there is a need for qualified staff to assure the curriculum is correctly interpreted and translated into practice. The demand for well-educated staff also places an emphasis on providing professional learning for all who work as teachers at the School-Age educare centers.

In Sweden, the term *kompetensutbildning* is used in describing teachers' professional development or professional learning. While similar in context to the English term professional development, the Swedish word puts a higher emphasis on the development of competencies, rather than the professional aspect of improving one's profession. For the purpose of this article, the term professional learning will be used to describe all types of learning associated with enhancing and developing the skills needed for the teaching profession. Although School-Age educare is an important part of the Swedish public school system, there are often fewer opportunities for teachers who work in this program to develop their professional skills and knowledge. While many school boards actively promote and support teacher professional learning, the teachers at School-Age educare can still find themselves excluded from the formal professional development opportunities that their colleagues in K-6 attend. One type of professional learning that contains elements of both formal and informal professional learning is belonging to a professional network as they are grounded in a constructivist view of how adults learn and grow professionally. We know that networks provide different types of learning and support depending on their form and function, and while research on various types of networks can be found, there is currently no information on how networks organized by universities can support profes-