To Teach Undercover: A Liberal Art of Rule
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Abstract: School-age educare centres in Sweden have previously not engaged in teaching guided by objectives, but since 2016 there has been a legal requirement to do so as part of an assignment to complement the knowledge requirements in school. Through focus group discussions with children and school-age educare teachers this study explores how it is possible to teach in a voluntary educational programme such as school-age educare. The analysis problematises the voluntary nature of school-age educare in relation to the requirement to teach by using the concept liberal arts of rule while asking what can be governed and how one can govern in these centres. The results show that the children willingly participate in school-age educare since they experience themselves to be free and with great opportunities to play when in the centres. At the same time, the teachers fulfil the complementary assignment by disguising learning while teaching undercover.

Keywords: extended education, school-age educare, complementary assignment, advanced liberal rule

Introduction

How does one teach in a context where teaching —by tradition— is not considered legitimate? This seems to be a task that is not easy to perform, yet it is a mission that Swedish school-age educare faces today. How this task is handled by teachers and how children experience their participation in school-age educare is explored in this article through a qualitative analysis of focus group discussions.

School-age educare, hereinafter referred to as SAEC, is an integral part of the education system in Sweden, constituted of both education and care — educare. Legislation stipulates that all municipalities must offer this kind of educational programme, staffed with university-educated SAEC-teachers among other pedagogues, for children in preschool classes, compulsory school and compulsory school for children with learning disabilities. Unlike the school, SAEC is completely free from knowledge requirements and mandatory attendance for children; nevertheless 85% of children aged six to nine are enrolled in this educational programme (The Swedish National Agency for Education, 2019a, hereinafter SNAE). However, SAEC centres are governed by the Education Act (SFS 2010:800) and a national curriculum (SNAE, 2019b) and through these they are regulated to complement the school. The curriculum requires co-operation between the different forms of education with an intention to enhance children’s development and learning. The complementary assignment for SAEC revolves around offering learning that is situationally governed, experience-based and group-oriented and with a content that is based on children’s needs, interests and initiative.

Since 2016, SAEC teachers have been obliged to teach while guided by objectives. During this time the term teaching was entered into a new chapter intended solely for SAEC in
the national curriculum. While the purpose, objectives and central content were clarified, the concept of teaching was given a prominent role: to teach should aim to stimulate children’s development and learning, and offer meaningful leisure time (SNAE, 2019b). It is therefore through teaching that the centres should complement the other education forms in their implementation and fulfilment of the objectives of the curriculum (SNAE, 2016). In the Education Act, teaching is defined as goal-driven processes that, under the guidance of teachers, aims at development and learning through the acquisition and development of knowledge and values (SFS, 2010:800, 3§). The curriculum includes a supplement which states that in SAEC, the concept of teaching should be given a wide interpretation, where care, development and learning in the teaching forms a whole (for more detailed explanations of the Swedish SAEC, see for example Klerfelter & Ljusberg, 2018 and Klerfelter, 2017).

SNAE points out that the concept of teaching is controversial and debated vis-a-vis SAEC. In their evaluation of the new curriculum chapter a dissatisfaction emerges among the personnel in the centres, revealing opinions that emphasise that the concept does not belong in SAEC. According to SNAE there are fears that the use of the term ‘teaching’ —distinctly associated with the school— will reinforce an ongoing and contested schoolification of SAEC. The evaluation also shows different interpretations of the complementary assignment among the personnel, some indicating that the new curriculum chapter —with its focus on teaching guided by objectives— may lead to overly controlled activities, which is also considered too similar to the school (SNAE, 2018).

Overall, this indicates contradictions between traditional and newer ideals, implying a disagreement about what SAEC is or should be these days. This study, therefore, intends to highlight how this contradiction is handled by SAEC teachers in SAEC centres when assigned to complement the school by conducting teaching guided by objectives in a voluntary educational programme, and in relation to this the study examines how the children perceive their time in SAEC today.

Aim and Research Questions

To make visible how teaching, as part of the complementary assignment, is managed in practice in SAEC, the study explores how children and SAEC teachers talk about the purpose of SAEC and about what they actually do when in the centres. Given the voluntary nature of SAEC, the aim is to problematise the requirement of teaching in relation to what can be governed and how one can govern in the centres. The analytical focus is directed towards the following research questions:

- How do the children talk about their time spent in SAEC?
- How do the teachers talk about their work in the centres?
- How is it possible to teach in a voluntary educational programme?