Digital Learning Activities at School-age Educare when Policy Reforms Calls for Educational Change

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Abstract: This study examines teachers’ accounts of what is happening in practices of the School-age Educare centre (SAEC) when faced with pressure from policy reforms to adopt digital technology and promote digital competence as both a requirement and a right for all children. The aim is to explain anticipated tensions that may produce the (im)possible digital practices of SAECs. The study is conducted with teachers from three SAECs in Sweden. Reflection conversations and interviews were used to produce data that was analysed using a constructivist grounded theory approach. The study contributes to understandings of teachers’ main concerns when SAECs are requested to adopt technology and align with reforms. It explains how tensions emerge, impact SAEC teachers’ actions towards revised curricula and affect the distribution of digital learning activities. Attention is asked to ensure that the rights of also young pupils are upheld in the digital world of today and tomorrow.

Keywords: School-age Educare, policy reform, digital competence, digital learning activities, main concerns, educational change

Introduction

As we enter the second decade of the 21st century, our society is increasingly becoming a digital culture. Today, children are active users of digital tools from an early age. The internet and digital worlds are central parts of their everyday lives. In other words, digital technology has become a significant feature of modern childhood (De Felice, 2017). At the same time, children have become objects of a multitude of monitoring devices including mobile media, wearable devices and social media platforms that generate detailed data about them (Lupton & Williamson, 2017). Accordingly, recent policy reforms highlight that those children are entitled to profit from these environments but also to understand their privacy rights online, to freedom of expression as well as be protected from sexual and aggressive threats variously mediated and amplified by the internet (e.g. Livingstone, 2016; UN, 2018; UN, 2021). Hence, digital competence has been underlined in educational policy both as a requirement and a right for these children (Ferrari, 2013; Long & Margerko, 2020), since both national and global authorities consider policy implementation appropriate means of control, govern, and change of standard in education (Ball, et., al., 2012; Braun, et., al., 2010; Viennet, & Pont, 2017). This paper reflects on the pressure for educational practices to align with the policy reforms that concern digital competence (European Commission, 2018; Ministry of Education and Re-
search, 2017; UNESCO, 2019; UNICEF, 2020) using Sweden’s School-age Educare centres (SAEC) as an example. The attention is directed to SAEC as it is an important emissary arena for developing children’s digital skills, at the same time the Swedish policy documents both leave much space for interpretation and little guidance for the SAEC teachers in this regard (Martinez, 2019). Understanding SAEC teachers’ practices and factors that contribute to various approaches to digital media is essential, because disregard may effectively hinder children from their entitled rights to develop digital competence.

Many countries in Europe and Asia, as well as the US, are currently developing various extended activities like afterschool care or all-day school (see e.g., Durlak, Mahoney, Bohnert, & Parente, 2010; Huang, La Torre & Leon, 2014). Some afterschool programs are affiliated with national organizations, while others are sponsored by public institutions or agencies or operate as subunits within private organizations. The Swedish SAEC can also be described as an afterschool programme. However, compared with many other countries, Sweden has a long history of distributing afterschool care, dated back to the 19th century. Gradually, the afterschool care has become incorporated to the national educational system during the 20th century. The Swedish SAEC has been regulated by the domestic curriculum since 1998 (Rohlin, 2012).

Afterschool programmes in general, have often been described as intermediary spaces, which highlights the tensions around the social purposes in connection with children’s wellbeing and the role of afterschool programmes emphasizing improved educational achievement (Noam, Biancarosa & Dechausay, 2003). Adding to the complexity around the social versus academic purposes of afterschool programmes, there are competing discourses about what children and young people need from digital media and how to serve those needs (Ammari, et al., 2015; Livingstone, 2016). This situation might be emphasized in Swedish SAECs because the institution, as mentioned, is being coordinated by the government policies for the educational institutions. This could make some of the highlighted issues more visible in the Swedish SAECs.

The regulations stipulate that Swedish SAECs are places where self-directed and group-based learning should be designed around each pupil’s interests, adapted to children’s culture and formal learning goals. In 2016, the national curriculum for SAECs was first revised to strengthen the learning goals in general, and then also the importance of developing digital competence among children was highlighted (Ministry of Education and Research, 2017; Swedish National Agency for Education, 2011, rev. 2018 and 2019; Swedish Municipalities and Regions, 2019). So, teachers working at SAECs in Sweden, who undergo three-year teacher education at the university level, are increasingly expected to be adept at a variety of technology-based approaches for content delivery, goal-oriented learner support, and assessment. At the same time, they are also supposed, as mentioned, to organize learning activities that are characterized by informal learning situations where children’s perspectives are considered important (Lager, 2020).

Hence, in this study it is of particular interest, to examine teachers’ accounts of what is happening in SAECs practices when faced with pressure from policy reforms to adopt digital technology and make SAECs an institution where digital competence is promoted as both a requirement and a right for all children (UN, 2021). The aim is to explain anticipated tensions that may produce the (im)possible digital practices of SAECs by scrutinizing the following research questions: