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Pupils’ development: Policy enactment in Swedish school-age educare

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ABSTRACT
The historical roots of what is now a modern Swedish school-age educare (SAEC) were formed from a social pedagogical starting point in which children’s social development, freedom and well-being were prioritized. SAEC has now become more focused on an educational pedagogical assignment and has been incorporated into the Swedish curriculum. SAECs could therefore be seen as institutions under reconstruction, in that their current work is formed in what can be regarded as a transition period. This transition could imply new points of departure concerning work practices and forms of documentation, both of that could challenge older traditions. Using policy enactment theory as a methodology, this case study discusses the work practices and forms of documentation that are in use now, with a specific focus on the latter. The main purpose of the article is to explore and develop SAEC staff’s points of departure for developing their documentation and assessments and how the new curriculum assignment is enacted in the context of SAEC’s pedagogical practices. The study’s findings show that the enactment process could be seen as an initiative based on local needs for clarity. The developed documentation and assessment practices are described as a cultural shift away from former practices.

Introduction
This article focuses on Swedish school-age educare centres (SAECs), formerly known as leisure-time centres, and how the new assignment and incorporation into the curriculum affects the enactment of this social practice. Although SAECs might not be well-known institutions in educational research, they have become more visible in the emerging international domain of extended education (Schüpbach, 2014; Stecher, 2018). Some 480 000 pupils between the ages of 6–12 years currently participate in SAEC activities, both before and after attending school. This means that more than 80% of all pupils between 6 and 9 years participate in SAEC activities while about 19% of all pupils between 10 and 12 years are involved in these activities (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2022). The SAEC has counterparts in all the Nordic countries (Gravesen & Ringskou, 2017; Lehto & Eskelinen, 2020; Londal et al., 2016) as well as in many other European countries (Platenga & Remery, 2013), the US (Howard, 2015; Lowe Vandell et al., 2020) and Australia (Cartmel & Hayes, 2016). One thing that differentiates Swedish SAECs from other countries is that Sweden has a three-year teacher education programme directed specifically towards teachers in SAECs. The SAEC is grounded in a social pedagogical tradition (cf. Gustafsson Nyckel, 2020) but was integrated into the compulsory school system at the end of the 1990s and since 2010 has been included in the Swedish Education Act (2010). It was incorporated in the Swedish National Agency for Education’s (SNAE) curriculum in 2016 in a part specifically relating to the SAEC mission. In the curriculum, it is described as an educational programme with the mission to integrate childcare and learning and to:

… stimulate the pupils’ development and learning, as well as offer the pupils meaningful leisure time. This should be done through the educational programme being based on the pupils’ needs, interests and experiences, while ensuring that the pupils are continuously challenged, by inspiring them to make new discoveries. (SNAE, 2016, p. 22)

The curriculum states that SAECs consist of a core content that is aimed at language and communication, creative and aesthetic forms of expression, nature, society and games, physical activities and outdoor excursions. This content should give pupils the necessary prerequisites to develop specific abilities, such as creating and maintaining good relationships, learning to co-operate using a democratic and empathetic approach and creating and expressing themselves through different aesthetic forms of expression (Curriculum for the Compulsory School, Preschool Class, and School-age Educare (2011: revised 2018, p. 24)

The social pedagogical background of prioritizing aspects like children’s social development, freedom and well-being (Gustafsson Nyckel, 2020) and its
relatively short history in the educational tradition means that SAECs have not yet been subjected to what Biesta (2009) calls the ‘remarkable rise’ in interest in the measurement of education. According to Biesta, this interest can be exemplified by large international comparative studies like TIMSS, the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) and the OECD’s Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). While these studies are mostly designed to measure pupils’ knowledge in the nine-year compulsory school, assessments and documentation have since many years also appeared in the preschool in Sweden and in other Nordic countries (Dahlberg & Elfström, 2014; Roth, 2010; Vallberg Roth, 2013). However, assessments and documentation in the Swedish preschool have not yet been subjected to large international comparative studies such as TIMSS or PIRLS.

Research on assessments and documentation in Swedish school-age educare is rare (Ackesjö, 2022; Haglund, 2022) and assessing individual pupils’ skills could meet resistance since it is not part of the SAEC tradition (Lager, 2019). Furthermore, the number of trained SAEC teachers is low, which contributes to difficulties in realizing the SAEC assignment (SNAE, 2011 The Swedish Schools Inspectorate, 2018). This case study shows how the new curriculum assignment could be interpreted and enacted in SAECs. The article begins by describing and discussing the different points of departure for how and why educational reforms are ‘spreading across the globe’ (Ball, 2003, p. 215). The article then goes on to describe the different kinds of assessment and documentation that are in use in the SAEC context. The main purpose of the article is to explore and develop a SAEC team’s points of departure for developing their documentation and assessments and how the new curriculum assignment is enacted in this context.

The study’s research questions are: 1) What are the SAEC staff’s points of departure for developing their SAEC documentation and assessments? 2) How is the new curriculum assignment enacted in SAEC’s pedagogical practices?

Global education reforms

Since the 1990s Sweden has moved away from its traditional social democratic stance towards a stronger emphasis on neoliberal policy (Imsen et al., 2017). Some of the changes in the educational context over the last decades can be seen as part of an increasing market orientation (Apple, 2005) inspired by New Public Management (NPM) governmental reforms (Hall et al., 2015). Hood (1991) asserts that one way of interpreting the origins of NPM is to view it as ‘a marriage of two different streams of ideas’ (p. 5). One stream of ideas is based on post-World War II developments of public choice and theories of bureaucracy. The other stream is based on an international scientific management movement tradition. In Sweden, these reforms have led to the responsibilities of school managements being moved from national control to become more decentralized in terms of a transfer of decision-making to the municipalities (Jarl, 2013; M. Rönnberg, 2011; Wilkins, 2017). The context of schooling has also shifted in response to an increased focus on pupil achievement. Whilst the Swedish educational system has a dual mandate of teaching pupils traditional subject knowledge and democratic citizen values, this has now, as in many other OECD countries, moved towards standards, decentralization and accountability (Verger et al., 2019).

The increased focus on pupil achievement should be seen as a shift in governmental technology (Miller & Rose, 2008; Rose, 1996). Standardized assessments add a further understanding of neoliberal governing in that they increase the possibilities of controlling teachers and children by providing evidence of performance (Roberts-Holmes, 2019). Governments all over the world are engaged in building a measurement web as a way of governing their educational systems. At the same time, the OECD has developed similar constructions at a global level (Moss & Urban, 2018; Roberts-Holmes, 2019). This expanding web of standardized assessments is part of a neoliberal governance and competition in the global market (Roberts-Holmes, 2019). The main story, which is promoted via the globalized and neoliberal discourses of early childhood education, is one of quality and high returns (Moss, 2017), i.e. that (early) investments in education will yield high economic and social returns (Heckman, 2000).

Assessment in the preschool and the early ages of schooling is a long-standing and contested educational issue. The resistance mainly stems from ideas that such assessments do not reflect a holistic view of children’s development (Moss, 2016), or the diversity found in pedagogies, provisions, childhood, or cultures (Moss et al., 2016). Even though assessments in the early years are contested, they are in general also said to be essential in the educational process. In addition, formative assessments, including giving feedback to children, have been promoted globally (Hattie & Timperley, 2007).

Thus, standardized assessments should be seen as part of a bigger picture. Sahlberg (2016) calls this bigger picture the Global Education Reform Movement (GERM); a neoliberal process that incorporates the strategies of market economy into public education in order to improve the quality of pupils’ learning. GERM fosters competition and accountability yet minimizes autonomy (Diaz-Diaz et al., 2019; Verger et al., 2019). Standardized assessments are
central to this pursuit in that they stimulate competition between schools. The OECD plays an important role in the spread of GERM by stimulating competition between countries and introducing a performativity agenda (Ball, 2003; Diaz-Diaz et al., 2019), for example by using PISA. A preoccupation with the standardization of education, predetermined results and test-based policies runs the risk of reducing education to a technical practice that prioritizes the search for effective methods rather than its meaning, purpose and values (Diaz-Diaz et al., 2019). The emerging risk is that teaching will become more aligned with national and international policy frameworks than with children’s needs. Thus, teachers’ pedagogical visions, aspirations and autonomy in the local classroom could diminish in favour of a standardized teaching based on assessments.

When Hjalmarssson (2018) in her study discusses how staff approach the demands for documentation in relation to their work in SAECs she asserts that documentation was regarded as increasing the status of the practitioners. The transition of SAECs from a social pedagogical arena to an educational one could also mean that social pedagogical content produces new forms of practice (Lager et al., 2016):


an individual perspective on social issues has integrated not only the traditional educational field, but even parts of the leisure-time centre. When the leisure-time centre meets the structuring, individualised quality discourse, the new demands on quality are enacted in relation to the traditional contextual and institutional factors. On the other hand, the results also show how recontextualisation of documentation visualises a reconstruction of the social pedagogical approach. (Lager et al., 2016, p. 706)

As already indicated, SAEC practice is now under reconstruction and being formed in a transition period. This transition could imply new points of departure concerning work practices and forms of documentation, both of which could challenge older traditions. This case study discusses possible changed work practices and forms of documentation in the SAEC with a specific focus on the latter.

Documentation and assessments in SAECs

The governmental shift described above has also affected the activities in SAECs (Ackesjö, 2022, Falkner et al., 2023; Haglund, 2022). Documentation accounting for quality and results is often described as systematic quality work (SQW) in the Swedish context, which according to Hjalmarssson (2018) primarily connects to formal school knowledge, whilst by tradition attendance at SAECs has mainly been associated with social learning (Lager, 2019; Lager et al., 2016). This difference, which could derive from the fact that schools and SAECs have their origins in different traditions (Haglund, 2004, 2016), results in tensions when SQW is discussed and carried out at SAECs. Andersson (2010) claims that “leisure-time pedagogues chiefly assess the individual child’s development of social skills, the harmony and development of the group of children, the activities and the pedagogues’ own contributions” (p. 207). However, these assessments are mainly based on informal observations and conducted without written documentation. Andersson also claims that although the staff undertake assessments, they are not entirely comfortable about executing them. This could be because assessments are closely connected to school tests and the control of pupils’ knowledge. A similar point of departure discussed by Haglund (2016) is that SAECs are in transition from a social pedagogical arena to an educational one, where a form of resistance towards the schoolification of SAEC activities and the categorization of individual children is apparent (Lager, 2019). According to Bradbury (2019), schoolification is when preschools include ‘practices traditionally associated with primary schools’ (p. 10). SAECs’ transition from a social pedagogical tradition to an educational pedagogy tradition could be seen as a similar development.

Policy enactment

The study’s theoretical point of departure is grounded in policy enactment theories, "where ‘enactment’ refers to an understanding that policies are interpreted and ‘translated’ by diverse policy actors in the school environment, rather than simply implemented” (Braun et al., 2010, p. 547). Policies are therefore seen as creating circumstances that may give policy actors different opportunities and options for action. Braun et al. emphasize that policies are processes and can be worked on in different ways, because policy practices are contextualized and mediated by positioned relationships and by the positioning of involved key policy actors.

The policy enactment of policy actors and – in the context of this article teachers in school-age educare – ‘involves creative processes of interpretation and recontextualisation – that is, the translation through reading, writing and talking of text into action and the abstractions of policy ideas into contextualized practices’ (Braun et al., 2010, p. 549). In other words, policy is constructed by those who use/enact it, and the recontextualisation process is a process ‘… whereby content that has been given expression in one context/…/is subsequently reused and made manifest in a different context’ (Connolly, 2014, p. 378). According to Ball et al. (2012), policies are therefore open to situated changes and can be integrated into older ways of working or incorporated
into new ways of conducting schoolwork and policy enactment, all of which involve creative processes of interpretation in relation to history and context. Braun et al. (2011) argue that policies are ‘shaped and influenced by school-specific factors’ (p. 585), such as history, staffing and the school culture, which often tend to be neglected.

According to Ball et al. (2012), interpretation is one of ‘three [necessary] constituent aspects of the messy reality of school life’ (p. 43). In addition to interpretation, material and discursive aspects are necessary in order to show how policy is enacted and how the everyday school or school-age educare practices take place. The material aspect could include resources that are used to assess pupils’ progress or support teachers’ planning. Drawing on Foucault (1986), discourses are seen as texts, artefacts and practices that support practices being carried out in specific ways.

As highlighted earlier in the article, standardized assessments have become more important in schoolwork. Ball (2003) connects this development with ‘performativity’, which is seen as a technology for regulating subjects and organizations. He emphasizes that:

… performances (of individual subjects or organizations) serve as measures of productivity or output, or displays of ‘quality’, or ‘moments’ of promotion or inspection. As such they stand for, encapsulate or represent the worth, quality or value of an individual or organization within a field of judgement. (p. 216)

Ball therefore argues that control of the field of judgement and its values is vital, in that the people or organizations that determine what counts as a valuable or acceptable performance also have the power to control the values that are at stake.

Methods

This study is a qualitative case study which, according to Yin (2018), implies that the empirical inquiry investigates a phenomenon (i.e. in this case how one SAEC team interprets and ‘translates’ parts of the curriculum assignment) in depth and in its actual context. Yin also implies that eventual boundaries between this phenomenon and the existing context is not evident (i.e. it is important to involve important contextual conditions to the case). The study problematizes how an SAEC staff team develops and uses a specific rubric directed at pupils’ social skills to document their development in accordance with the skills they are supposed to develop. One of the team members, Albin, took part in a research and development project between 2019 and 2022. This project included some 120 participants (school-age educare teachers and their principals) from four different municipalities. At one of the research and development meetings, Albin and his principal Sara did a power point presentation that showed how they used a rubric to describe and develop the pupils’ different capacities when participating in SAEC activities. We, as researchers, became interested in the rubric and its use and asked Albin if we could conduct a group interview with him, his team members and his principal. Sara, the principal, did not participate, but Albin and his three fellow employees, Zofia, Lena and Kalle did. They were all informed that the study was guided by the Swedish Research Council’s Good Research Practice (2017) and were willing to take part in it (See Table 1).

As the global COVID-19 pandemic made it difficult to conduct the interview in situ, we instead did it through a digital video platform, which according to Bryman (2018) has great potentials especially if no technological errors occur. Before the interview took place we asked for a copy of the rubric used by the team, which was sent to us via email. This gave us an opportunity to study the rubric and ask questions about its use and construction. The rubric is connected to the seven abilities that SAECs are expected to develop according to the curriculum.

The rubric was designed to describe how the pupils’ competences are in line with the abilities described in the curriculum. The staff team had broken down every ability into three or four sub-abilities, which in different ways can be seen as included in the ability. Table 2, below, shows the section of the rubric relating to the ability create and maintain good relations and co-operate based on a democratic and empathic approach.

Each square in the rubric can be coloured green, yellow or red. If a pupil achieves the goal on their own the square is coloured green and yellow if the pupil has the ability to achieve the goal with support. The square is coloured red if the pupil is unable to achieve the goal.

The interview was semi-structured and made use of an interview manual divided into different areas (Bryman, 2018; Kvåle & Brinkman, 2014). The interview’s overall focus and the different question areas were directed towards the informants’ educational

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Work experience</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Albin</td>
<td>School-age educare teacher</td>
<td>6 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zofia</td>
<td>School-age educare teacher</td>
<td>2 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lena</td>
<td>Junior level schoolteacher (pupils aged 6-9 years)</td>
<td>4 years (2 years at this SAEC)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kalle</td>
<td>Childminder</td>
<td>4 years</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2. The rubric displaying the ability ‘create and maintain good relations and co-operate based on a democratic and empathic approach’ and its four sub-abilities.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Can co-operate with other pupils</th>
<th>Can solve conflicts on one’s own</th>
<th>Can play with different friends</th>
<th>Can comfort or say ‘I am sorry’ to a friend</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pupil</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>A A</td>
<td></td>
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<td>B B</td>
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<td>C C</td>
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backgrounds, their work with the rubric, how and why they assessed the things they did and how their work and the use of the rubric could be developed further. The main focus of the interview was to find out why and how the staff developed and used the rubric and how this work was enacted. Depending on how the questions were answered, different follow-up questions were posed. The intention was that the interview should be perceived as an ongoing discussion rather than a formal interview. The interview lasted for 75 minutes and was later transcribed verbatim. The team members were later encouraged to read the transcription and make comments if they wanted anything added or changed.

Several months after the interview, a new presentation of the ongoing work with the rubric was conducted within the research and development project. This time, Albin and two colleagues, Maria and Hedwig from other SAEC departments at the school, did a digital presentation for the projects 120 participants. This presentation was documented with aid of field notes with the purpose of complementing the interview data by getting more data and new or perhaps confirming opinions that could strengthen the understanding (cf. Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). Albin and his colleagues in their department and the two colleagues from the other SAEC departments consented to participate in the study and were also given an opportunity to read and comment on the study’s manuscript before being submitted for publication.

Findings written as a narrative

The results are structured as a narrative. A narrative can be described as a story consisting of different events and involving a person or an object. It can depart from a single person’s story but also discuss more overall social structures (Bold, 2012) and has the potential to give voice to silenced knowledge (Grady et al., 2018). Connelly and Clandinin (1990) assert that:

[…] the study of narrative is the study of the ways humans experience the world. This general concept is into the view that education and educational research is the construction and reconstruction of personal and social stories; learners, teachers, and researchers are storytellers and characters in their own and other’s stories. (p. 2)

A narrative can be formed by a participant and later analysed by the researcher, or ‘take the form of snippets of data that are “storied” by the researcher’ (Dwyer & Emerald, 2017, p. 1). This process of knitting different events together and integrating them into a whole is called a narrative configuration (Polkinghorne, 1995). According to Polkinghorne, the narrative configuration creates a narrative meaning, i.e. the created narrative can be understood and make sense in the described occasions in the specific context. In this study, using a narrative approach is based on the ambition to give the participants an opportunity to express their experiences of using their self-constructed rubric and, together with the researchers, shape a narrative configuration that can be seen as trustworthy in that particular context, even if it cannot be generalized. One point of departure was therefore to create a narrative through the collected material where I, as researcher, co-constructed the narrative together with the involved staff team. The findings are structured through three sub-headings: the rubric’s background and development, the use of the rubric in the everyday practice and the advantages and challenges of using the rubric.

These sub-headings could, in some respects, be seen as corresponding to the structure of a story (a background, a plot and an ending) which, for example, means that data that was directed to the staff team’s co-operation with schoolteachers was not included in the narrative since the narrative’s focus was directed to the work at the SAEC. The findings are presented on a descriptive level, but another point of departure was to discuss the findings, the narrative configuration, through the lens of policy enactment theory and in that way get an immerse understanding of how the staff team interpreted and ‘translated’ the curriculum into practice. Some prominent theoretical concepts in this endeavour are enactment, i.e. how the staff team interprets and translates the curriculum and policy ideas into a contextualized and local practice and recontextualization, i.e. when a certain content (documentation and assessment) is expressed in one context and is reused, maybe into new ways, in a different context. Another concept is performativity,
i.e. how the staff team’s field of judgement becomes visible for themselves, the principal and for school teachers and what qualities the staff team emphasize through their use of the rubric.

Findings
The rubric’s background and development

The SAEC in question is located at Broad Sea School, which consists of some 350 pupils between six and twelve years of age. Around 210 pupils are enrolled in the school’s four SAECs. According to Albin, the school is located in a well-established socioeconomic area. Albin said that ‘We started to use it [the rubric] to some degree two years ago. But it is perhaps only recently that I’ve felt that I’ve used it seriously in the way it was supposed to be used’.

Two years ago, many of the staff were not trained to work at SAECs. The different activities were mostly carried out for the sake of doing an activity. Then, care was in focus rather than any actual teaching. However, there was an ambition to clarify the SAEC assignment, develop its quality and create a common ground for it. Broad Sea School became part of a SAEC network and SAEC staff from the different schools in the municipality met there to discuss the work, how to develop it and the different tools that could be used for documentation and staff support. Among other things, information about the different ways of doing the work was shared:

One of the other schools had started to work with something similar [to our rubric]. They had formulated goals for our curriculum and some of simplified criteria for how to achieve them. We then felt that was an easier way of working, especially so that the staff could understand the kinds of goals we were working towards. (Albin)

The experience that the rubric could be seen as a tool for supporting clarity remains and was also emphasized by Hedwig, one of the teachers who participated at the presentation in March. She expressed that the rubric made both the SAEC content, its curriculum and the pupils more visible. During the digital interview Kalle said that as a child minder he was not trained in the existing curriculum and that the staff had worked with the goals before starting to use the rubric, but that:

it was difficult to do something with it over time. You worked with one area [of the curriculum] and managed that but had nothing to look back and compare it with [to see how the pupils’ abilities had developed]. The main difference is that now we can use it and over time develop all the different abilities.

(Kalle)

Albin claimed that the rubric had been discussed with Sara, the principal. Sara was not employed as principal when the development of the rubric began but was very positive to and supportive of it. Albin continued by saying that:

We assessed what we thought was in most need of development. / … / It’s always good if that kind of developmental work is both objective and as close to the actual practice as possible so that you feel that it really is based on need rather something that has been imposed from the top.

Even if the principal supported the use of the rubric, it was the staff who designed and developed it in accordance with their own ideas and needs. The fact that the staff’s own contributions created the rubric was regarded as more beneficial for the everyday practice than if it had been imposed from above.

The use of the rubric in the everyday practice

The children attending this SAEC are six years of age, which means that they have not participated in such activities before and the staff have no prior knowledge about them. Zofia says that the rubric functions as a mapping process that “is based on the pupils’ needs and interests. From that we create a description of the current situation in order to work with the objectives and reach the set targets”.

The seven abilities that are depicted in part 4 of the curriculum form the point of departure for the rubric. The abilities are placed at the top of the rubric (see Table 2) and every ability is divided into three or four minor goals ‘in an effort to make them more substantial’ (Albin). He also says that the rubric has two main purposes:

One [purpose] is to make colleagues and staff familiar with the goals as clearly and concretely as possible. The other is, as we discussed before, to get an overall picture of the group’s needs. What do we need to focus on most in our teaching in the SAEC?

All the SAEC departments at the school use the same rubric, although the activities and the teaching could vary between departments depending on how the staff assess the pupils’ needs and interests. It is possible to create a plan for the year depending on what the rubric shows and which abilities and minor goals needed closer examination, both individually and in each department. Albin says:

As a matter of fact, we did some basic planning for next year last week. We checked the rubric for what we felt we needed to put the most emphasis and focus on. We felt that some things were going well and that [the pupils] perhaps did not need as many challenges in those areas. Instead, it would be best to put more emphasis on the things that we felt we needed more attention.

Albin thinks the team knows what the pupils like to do and ‘that we try to plan activities that are connected to the rubric’s goals in combination with
something we believe that they would like to do’. According to Zofia and Albin, the rubric is used in planned and unplanned situations, although Albin put more emphasis on planned activities. They had worked with one ability per month during the year and at the end of each month had filled in the rubric for that specific ability during a staff meeting. As already indicated, the colours green, yellow and red were used to visualize whether an individual pupil had achieved a specific goal on their own (green), with support (yellow) or not at all (red). However, the reason for choosing this specific assessment scale was not clear.

Hm … I don’t remember when we took that decision. But it is probably the same thing as with the partial goals [abilities] we discussed in our SAEC network. We tried to agree and decide on something that was assessable and equitable for every class and also for the different departments. (Albin)

The staff team were in agreement over the assessments, although the origin of the colour scale was unclear. Lena adds that the same assessment scales were also used in their planned conversations with the pupil’s caregivers, because then there was ‘something to look at in these conversations and they enable a good discussion from a pupil’s own perspective’. However, the staff did not tell the caregivers or pupils that they used a rubric, because it was primarily seen as an internal device for the team’s own purposes.

The assessment process was such that the staff had to do several repeated assessments because they focused on a new ability each month. The point of departure is that this assessment work is not just a simple check. The assessment involves a check where they first try to find out the pupil’s ability within one specific area, then different activities were carried out that were connected to that area and at the end of each month the staff assessed whether the pupils’ abilities have developed or not.

Sometimes the staff focused on creating small groups of pupils and activating them with the same content. They sometimes also created small groups that were managed by one of the staff while the rest of the pupils and staff were doing a different activity outdoors. The aim was to create groups in which the pupils were at the same level or at a level where they could support each other. This meant that the staff were able to sit together at the end of the month and discuss how the pupils’ abilities aligned with the rubric goals. As there was no other information to clarify why the assessments were graded as green, yellow or red, the rubric became the only documentation. This could be seen as a problem, because as Kalle explained, ‘it is sometimes difficult to remember everything that you have seen and heard during the month and how a specific pupil acted in a certain situation’.

According to Albin, the staff also discussed whether it would be more effective if a team member who managed a specific activity used a laptop to assess the pupils’ performances when the activity was carried out. According to Hedwig, another difficulty of using the rubric in this way was that it was time consuming and that more time was needed for discussions about the pupils’ performances.

One difference between the school and the SAEC is that the school curriculum set out a plan for what the pupils should do and learn each year, which is not the case when it comes to describing how the SAEC should work with the pupils’ abilities. This also means that the rubric’s goals are the same regardless of how old the pupils are. Albin thinks that the present assessment formulations of managing on one’s own, with support or not at all, will not change and that the relations between the assessment and the pupils’ ages could be aspects to reflect on in the future.

This kind of individual pupil assessment should be seen as a rather unconventional practice when it comes to assessing the work carried out in SAECs. When asked if the assessment of individual pupils could be perceived as ‘now they have copied the practice in the classroom or in school’, Albin responded that this same question had been raised several times before:

We were also asked that question in our first digital presentation via the chat function. But the answer I gave then and repeat now is that I have difficulties in imagining that a better and broader understanding of the pupils’ abilities could be anything negative.

**The rubric’s future and possible development**

The team agreed that they would keep the rubric’s fundamental principles of mapping the pupils’ abilities and using the minor goals to visualize their development. However, Zofia and Albin both emphasized that it would be possible to make changes. Zofia argued that the rubric could be developed, but that ‘The important thing is that we have an analysis and a result and that we know how we should work to reach the set goals’. Albin mentioned several things that could be developed. The first was to make the pupils aware of why they were doing different activities and understand what was being practised. One way of doing that could be to rewrite the goals in a way that six-year-olds could understand, knew what they were practising and why a certain content was in focus. As already indicated, the team had reflected on the kind of content they should use for the pupils and how they could make best use of it. Zofia said that the
use of the rubric functioned like a mapping process “and departs from the pupils’ needs and interests. We use it as some kind of description of the here-and-now situation in order to achieve the set goals”. In many respects this mapping process was a first step.

Apart from this mapping process we have been poor at assessing our own work. It’s another step if we see that nothing happens and there is no progress, then we need to focus more on that and reflect on what we need to change in our activities and work. (Albin)

According to Albin, the following year would be more focused on trying to change, increase or improve. The use of the rubric did improve the team’s overview of the pupils in that in their staff meetings they realized that with some of the pupils ‘we really don’t know, we cannot give any colour indication because we simply don’t know. The follow-up question is therefore Why don’t we know?’ Albin continued by answering the question himself:

It could be because a pupil has not been attending the SAEC on a regular basis, but it could also be because they are not seen or heard very much. This could be seen as a result in itself and that we need to pay more attention to that pupil in some way.

It could also be the case that a pupil who was well known and participated a lot in SAEC activities was always marked with red. During the discussion the team explained that those pupils really existed, that the staff were aware of the situation and that special educational interventions were used because such difficulties were also visible in other parts of the school day. However, during the conversation it also became clear that the special education or complementary staff resources were not allocated to these pupils during the SAEC education … only during school time. Zofia continued by saying that the important thing was to ‘concretize this work’ as much as possible to get support from the staff at the school and that they [the schoolteachers] understand that the SAEC has a learning assignment. Not everyone understands that’.

The co-operation with schoolteachers has been underdeveloped, although according to Lena some of the school’s teachers had appreciated the opportunity to discuss the pupils with the support of the rubric. Zofia added that:

It is easy to forget the SAEC and the activities that take place in the afternoon. But I think it is important to also involve the health team and even prioritise the afternoon activities and see the SAEC as part of the pupils’ whole school day. This is important so we [the school] can be better in that respect.

Although the principal supported the SAEC and there was a development group that involved the principal, the vice-principal, representatives from the school’s junior and intermediate levels and a representative from the SAECs, the SAECs education and activities and the use of the rubric was not well known. The SAEC team hoped that their work with the rubric would develop, establish itself and that how they used it would spread to other parts of the school. This was in line with the digital presentation made by Hedwig almost a year after the digital interview. During her presentation she said that the SAEC staff perceived an enhanced professional status in that their work had become more visible and that this visibility may have contributed to the schoolteachers’ curiosity and the principal’s support. This curiosity and recognition could also become more widespread in that more cooperation with the schoolteachers was planned for the coming year.

Then it would be possible to compare our view of the pupils’ abilities with the schoolteachers. It would be an opportunity to make comparisons between us [the SAEC and the school] and find out whether and where they agree with us and where they don’t. (Lena)

Albin asserts that the school has more trained school-age educare teachers than when he started work at Broad Sea School. At that time he was the only one with such training, but today there is a trained person in each of the SAECs at the school. According to Albin:

It [assessment] was somewhat unknown before and it was rather well-recognised that it [the SAEC] was relatively un gover ened. It was harder to try and change that [structure] and work with the goals, whilst now, what can I say … it’s more embarrassing not knowing how we work than actually doing it. [the assessment]

Albin thinks that a cultural shift has started at his SAEC and also in the other SAEC departments at Broad Sea School. This cultural shift is significant in interviews with potential team members who are informed about how they should do the work. If an interviewee accepts the employment, they also accept the way of working, including the use of the rubric. Albin concludes that this also contribute to the teams’ work with the rubric becoming even more established and focused.

**Discussion and conclusions**

According to Ball et al. (2012), teachers’ use of documentation and assessments is largely a result of a top-down steered practice, i.e. the curriculum and political decisions steer and govern how the documentation should be done and how the assessments should be carried out. In the described narrative, documentation and assessment are, at least partly, managed for other reasons. The school-age educare part in the SNAE
The curriculum of 2016 is a starting point for the rubric, but the Broad Sea School management do not seem to push the staff in a NPM documentation or assessment direction (Ball, 2003; Hall et al., 2015). The design and creation of the rubric have instead been a bottom-up initiative. By means of enactment and creative processes of curriculum interpretation together with the staff teams at other schools, the emphasis has been on the recontextualisation of pupils’ abilities. This has been possible by means of a translation process in which reading, writing and talking about policy ideas has become part of the staff’s own contextualized practices (Braun et al. (2010)). The narrative describes the lack of trained SAEC teachers as a cornerstone in this enactment process (cf. Haglund, 2018; SNAE, 2018; The Swedish Schools Inspectorate, 2018).

The described enactment process could be seen as a local initiative, i.e. a local interpretation and translation of the curriculum (cf. Braun et al., 2011) based on how the staff team experience the world (Connelly & Cladninin, 1990), although this is not unique. Different Swedish SAECs produce and use ‘hometo’ tools for documentation and assessments and some municipalities recommend which devices should be used in all their schools and SAECs (Ackesjö, 2022; Haglund, 2022). It is therefore possible, although not spelled out in the staff team narrative, to assume that NPM education discourses (cf. Biesta, 2009; Hall et al., 2015) and a governmental technology (Miller & Rose, 2008) contribute to the enhanced importance of this documentation and assessment.

Besides clarifying the SAEC content, the rubric enactment also contributes with performativity (Ball, 2003) in that the enactment becomes visualized and given a positive value so that the principal and the schoolteachers appreciate and pay attention to the SAEC’s learning assignment. The use of the rubric is perceived as enhancing the SAEC teachers’ professional status given that their work with the pupils’ social abilities is made more visible (Hjalmarsson, 2018), i.e. the contextualized policy practice changes, which also brings opportunities to change the positioned relationships between SAEC teachers and schoolteachers (cf. Braun et al., 2010). However, this appreciation should be seen as a side effect, in that it is not the main purpose for the use of the rubric.

This formalized assessment of individual pupils is a somewhat unconventional SAEC practice. Andersson (2010) writes that SAEC staff do undertake assessments of individual pupils but mainly do so in an informal way where written documentation is rare. In her description before the current curriculum came into effect, SAEC staff were reluctant to assess pupils because SAEC practice could be regarded as being too closely connected to school practice and the assessment of pupils’ knowledge. From these points of departure, and the sparse research on SAEC teachers’ use of documentation and assessments, it is fair to say that Albin’s claim that a ‘cultural shift has started’ at his SAEC and at the other SAEC departments at Broad Sea School is correct.

Can the described policy enactment process and the ‘cultural shift’ be seen as a schoolificiation process (Bradbury, 2019)? In some respect it could, in that the documentation and assessment can be seen as a transition from a social pedagogical arena to an educational one (Falkner et al., 2023; Lager et al., 2016). On the other hand, the assessment relates to activities that are specifically designed for SAECs and, according to the staff, are grounded in what they think the pupils will appreciate, which points to a social pedagogical point of view. However, it is not possible to express any conclusions about whether the activities themselves are schoolificed because they have not been researched.

So far, the rubric’s main function has been to serve as a mapping device and a platform for the coming work. A problem with the rubric’s first step, the mapping process, is the staff’s perceived lack of time to execute it. The second step, developing the SAEC by changing, increasing or improving the activities to develop the pupils’ abilities, may be even more time consuming. The possibility to develop the SAECs content will, in some respect, depend on the kind of resources and support the staff get from the school management. Another important aspect is how and by what means the staff will enact this second step. Will they carry out and assess a content based on an SAEC social pedagogical tradition, where the pupils’ interests, needs and meaningful leisure will prevail, or one that is easy to assess and favour a more standardized teaching style (Diaz-Diaz et al., 2019)? Or will it be a mixture of both these points of departure (cf. Lager et al., 2016)? These questions touch on another important aspect, namely how the enactment of the second step will proceed. This aspect lies in the field of judgement (Ball, 2003), which according to Ball depends on the values connected to the important people in the organization, i.e. principals and SAEC teachers. Their mutual contribution will determine what will count as valuable, what an acceptable performance means and, as in this case, how and why the documentation and assessments should be done in a certain way. Through their enactment and their translation of texts into action (cf. Ball, 2003) they have, to some degree, an opportunity to create a SAEC practice based on a recontextualised social pedagogical tradition or to create one that is more schoolificed.
Notes

1. The notion of ‘educare’ has been used by researchers for a couple of years and means that the activities in SAEs are a combination of education and care.

2. Somewhat paradoxically, the shift towards school autonomy has also given rise to more extensive controls from the government (L. Rönberg, 2012; Wilkins, 2017). According to Rönberg, Swedish schools are ‘exposed to the most thorough inspection and checking in modern times’ (p. 69).

3. The transition is in some respect similar to what Ackesjö and Persson (2019) describe as the integration of a social-pedagogical early education tradition and an academic school tradition concerning the preschool class.

4. The seven abilities are: 1) to experiment with and develop ideas, solve problems and put their ideas into action, 2) to pay attention to the personal need to maintain a balance between activity and rest, 3) to create and maintain good relationships, as well as learn to co-operate using a democratic and empathetic approach, 4) to communicate with linguistic forms of expression, in different situations and for different reasons, 5) to create and express themselves through different aesthetic forms of expression, 6) to explore and describe phenomena and relationships in nature, technology and society, as well as 7) to versatilely move in different environments and understand what can affect health and well-being (SNAE 2011, p. 24–25).

5. The origin of how the pupils’ abilities should be measured is not clear. Without speculating too much, a possible origin may be found within a Vygotskij (1982) tradition. The assessment of the pupils’ abilities to achieve the goal on their own, to achieve the goal with support and a lack of ability to achieve the goal resemble Vygotskij’s argumentation for and description of learning in relation to the zone of proximal development (ZPD).

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