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 is paper examines how university-based learning networks support the professional development needs of teachers in School-Age educare. University-supported network 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 redirection 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-

sional learning for teachers in School-Age educare, or how the participants perceive participation in these networks.

The Linnaeus University Network for Teachers in School-Age Educare

Since 2015, the Linnaeus University in Växjö, Sweden has organized and coordinated network meetings targeted specifically for teachers in School-Age educare called *Nätverk för fritidshem/fritidspedagoger* (Network for School-Age educare teachers). Originally, the network was created to support teachers in the schools working with the student-teachers during their practicums. The scope has since been expanded to include all university educated, practicing teachers in School-Age educare. The network aims to promote professional learning and to support the connection between research and practice. The teachers meet three to four times per school year, and the full-day meetings take place at Linnaeus University. During the network meetings, the teachers explore various professional development subjects and are given an opportunity to learn about, and participate in, current research in the field. Researchers from the university work in close collaboration with the teachers and involve them in current research studies. The topics chosen for the network meetings are guided by the feedback given by the participants.

Review of the Literature

Professional Learning

International research on teacher professional development clearly demonstrates the importance for teachers to have access to professional learning opportunities to improve their practice (Darling-Hammond, Wei, Andree, Richardson, and Orphanos 2009; Kennedy 2016; Timperley, & Alton-Lee 2008; Van den Bergh, Ros, & Beijaard 2014). Teachers who have worked between eight and fifteen years also look to manage the tension and pressures of their work and their personal lives, thus searching for professional learning that will support both their personal and professional learning (Borko, 2004; Day, & Leitch, 2001; Hoekstra, & Korthagen, 2011; Postholm, 2012). Desimone (2009) emphasizes the importance of professional opportunities that stretch over an extended time and ongoing professional learning is also preferred by the teachers themselves. When professional learning is viewed as relevant by the participating teachers, it has shown to lead to sustainable changes in teacher learning and practice (Avalos, 2011; King, 2014; Timperley et al., 2007). While there is no agreed-upon optimal duration that is viewed as most effective and beneficial, it is clear that when teachers are given time to collaborate, dialogue and reflect over a longer period of time, they grow their personal and practical knowledge.

Teachers develop their professional knowledge both through formal learning opportunities such as courses, workshops and top-down initiatives offered by employers, as well as through informal learning opportunities. Informal learning range from reading a professional article or engaging in conversation with a colleague in the hallway, to collaborating with a critical friend or being part of a community of learners (Beck, & Kosnik, 2014). In the current educational environment of results-driven agendas for teacher professional learning

(Day, 2016), teachers' choice and their personal and professional needs have often been pushed to the background in the professional learning debate. For many teachers, the most valued type of professional learning is being able to observe colleagues, either through formal processes such as learning study or through more informally processes such as visiting their colleague's classrooms. The second most valued type of professional learning, that teachers identified as having an impact on their practice, are formats that allow them to share their practices with other teachers (Bolye et al., 2004)

Networks as Communities of Learning

Belonging to a network is participating in a community of learners where participation itself is a form of learning (Lave, & Wegner, 1991). The participants in such networks jointly negotiate and re-negotiate both the groups' purpose and format. The network community's strength lies in the relationships of *mutual engagement* that bind members together into a social entity… with a *shared repertoire* of communal that members have developed over time (Wegner, 1998). Working collectively, and having the opportunity to belong to a network of learners, not only promotes the individual teacher's learning, but it also extends supports to all teachers in the network (Webster-Wright, 2009; Zehetmeier et al., 2015). Networks can be either temporary or formed for longer-term learning and they can be organized by either purpose, function or ideological /pedagogical beliefs (Hargreaves et al., 1998; Lieberman,& Grolnick, 1996). What characterizes most networks is their strong sense of a shared purpose, while at the same time functioning as a platform for both sharing ideas and receiving support (Hofman, & Dijkstra, 2010; Snow, Martin, & Dimuke, 2015). Often, but not always, do networks include a facilitator that helps guide the group in moving beyond the expertise of the group itself (Lieberman, 2000). Successful networks are often those that balance the outside knowledge *(of the expert)* with the collective knowledge of the group (Lieberman, 2000).

The term *network* is sometimes associated with online networks that have become known *as personal learning networks* or PLN. As the use of social media for information has grown, many teachers use platforms such as Facebook and Twitter to connect with other professionals (Krutka, Carptern, & Torrey, 2016). The social media platforms provide teachers with easily accessible ways to learn from others throughout the globe. At the same time, there is a concern that the amount of information available through these platforms can be perceived as overwhelming, while the credibility of the information found in these forums can at times be hard to evaluate (Grote-Garcia, & Vasinda, 2014). The ability to meet in person thus allows teachers to sort through this information while reflecting and discussing issues of validity along with developing a collective efficacy (Moolenaar, Sleegers, & Daly, 2012).

One of the main benefits of being part of a network is grounded in the idea that we learn better in groups. By sharing and interacting around theories and ideas there is the potential for the group's participation to develop new understandings. "When community exists, learning is strengthened…everyone is smarter, more ambitious, and productive" (Paley, 1992: p. 2). In the case of teachers, belonging to a network helps to counteract the isolation that is a common reality in teaching (Beck, & Kosnick, 2014; Lieberman, 2000). Networks provide an opportunity for teachers to work with others around a shared purpose. Embedded in this sharing is the support that comes from working together with other professionals (Lieberman, 2000; Lieberman, & Grolnick, 1996). Reflection, as part of teacher

learning and growth, is an integral part of working with others in a community of learners (Dewey, 1933; Lave, & Wegner, 1991; Schön, 1987). In a network, the participants have the opportunity to reflect together in a community.

Networks can function as a vehicle for change, as they offer the participants learning opportunities fostered by the interpersonal connections and interactions (Niez, 20017). A network has the capacity to develop into a community where learning is interlinked with the sense of belonging and can facilitate the development of the teachers' professional identity and agency. By learning through shared reflection, discussing, exchanging and problem-solving, participation in the network gives teachers the opportunity to co-construct meaning of new concepts relevant for their professional practice (Lave, & Wegner, 1991). Belonging to a network can even offer a type of job-focused inquiry into student learning. As this form of professional learning is situated in the teachers' practice in school, it can provide professional learning that takes place over an extended period; one of the hallmarks of effective professional learning (DuFour, & Eaker, 1998; Nehring, & Fitzsimons, 2011). The collaboration among the teachers in a network provides the prospect of being able to build the relational trust needed to make sustainable change in teachers' professional practice (Nehring, & Fitzsimons, 2011; Opfer, & Pedder, 2011).

Theoretical Framework

The underlying framework for this study is grounded in Dewey's (1938) concept of constructivism, where the learner is an active participant in constructing new knowledge. Such learning is understood as social in nature and as well as being distributed amongst individual teachers and the people within the learning environment. Learning is seen as situated in the society where it takes place and where knowledge construction occurs through the interaction with others (Avalos, 2011; Borko, 2004; Postholm, 2012; Putham, & Borko, 2000). To view and understand this interaction, this research uses the social constructivist framework of knowledge construction known as *Communities of Practice*. This concept, developed by Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger (1991), is defined as "groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly" Wegner, 1998). The teachers in this network work within different types of learning communities in their professional as School-Age educare teachers. The interlinked concepts of community, identity, and agency are used as a lens to gain an understanding of how their participation in the network is connected to their professional learning.

Research Question

This research aims to construct knowledge of how networks, and specifically university-based networks, contribute to supporting professional learning for teachers in School-Age educare. This paper explores in what ways such networks can provide an opportunity for teachers to develop their professional practice, identity and agency. The main question examined is:

- In what ways can university-based learning networks support the professional development needs of teachers in School-Age educare?

Method

The study used a qualitative research design where the information collected consisted of three sources of data from the participants in the Linnaeus university network for teachers in School-Age educare. The first data came from questionnaires filled out by the teachers after each session. The second data source were from the findings of a brainstorming session around professional learning, and the third source was from interviews with four teachers who had participated in the session were included.

The topics and activities presented in each network session differed, however, the survey questions completed were the same. The topics of the sessions covered included: collaboration with parent and guardians, children's literature and storytelling, drama as pedagogy, mathematics and outdoor education, entrepreneurial education and programming and digital learning. There were altogether 150 responses collected from six different sessions held from 2016-2020. After each session, the teachers responded in writing to what they viewed as positive, what could be improved on and what topics or areas they wish to see included in future sessions. Responses to the first two questions were read and re-read carefully and themes were identified which helped create codes for analysis.

In a collective brainstorming activity during a session in 2019, the participants discussed the different aspects of professional learning in this network (see appendix 1). The teachers worked in groups and recorded their responses, which they shared with the whole group. The written comments, without the names of the participants, were submitted at the end of the session. The responses were analyzed using the codes created from the feedback, and then re-read to find relevant information used for a re-coding of the texts.

Four of the teachers participated in semi-structured interviews conducted by the researcher. The interviews were conducted as part of another study on professional learning for teachers in School-Age educare, and the data used in this paper was focused on their participation in networks (see appendix 2). The teachers in that study had an opportunity to reflect on, and describe, what type of professional learning they view as beneficial to their own personal and professional learning. The interviews were transcribed and a hand analysis of the data was done to code and compare it with the themes that emerged from the brainstorming session as well as the participants' feedback (Creswell, 2013). The participants have been anonymized and all the quotes used in this article have been translated into English by the author.

A thematic analysis approach was used throughout the analysis process to find an emerging description of the teachers' descriptions of professional learning in the university network session. The three sources of data were used to create triangulation in order to validate that data as well as create a more complete picture of the participants' view of how university-based learning networks support their professional development needs. The theoretical framework of the community of practice was finally applied in viewing the findings through the interlinked concepts of community, identity, and agency.

Results

The responses from the teachers involved in the university-supported network for School-Age educare teachers revealed that what they valued most was being part of a larger community and being able to reflect on their practice together with others. They appreciated meeting other School-Age educare teachers, learning about each other's problems of practice, and being able to exchange ideas. By experimenting with hands-on activities and learning together in the network meetings, they build their professional identities and collectively created meaning that allowed them to connect theory and practice. These exchanges further worked to strengthen their own professional identity and sense of a professional community.

Participating in the network meetings built their professional knowledge in various ways. The main reason why the teachers appreciated the network meetings was the clear focus on the needs of teachers in School-Age educare. They saw this as especially important to their professional practice as they expressed that most other professional improvements they had participated in were usually directed towards classroom teachers in the compulsory program, or the pre-school program. While they said that there was a benefit to attending those as well, they often felt that their professional reality went ignored or was minimized. The stark reality is that many of the School-Age educare teachers are left to independently find, or actively create, their own professional learning opportunities. This meant that attending the network meetings were sometimes the only professional learning opportunity that related directly to their professional practice as School-Age educare teachers.

The teachers also emphasized how the network meetings functioned as an important forum for learning about the latest research and new literature within their field. They strengthened their professional knowledge and skills through exchanging experiences and ideas with School-Age educare teachers from other schools and school districts, thus widening their professional community. This collegial exchange allowed them to learn new ideas and gain insights; something they placed a particularly high value on as it came from their peers. The teachers appreciated the mix of sharing of research and theory with hands-on practical activities and collegial exchanges. Many of the teachers mentioned that this was also their main source for learning about new courses and professional learning opportunities. Because the meeting agendas were created based on participant feedback, many teachers felt the meetings offered them an increased sense of relevance for their professional learning and practice.

A majority of participants said they shared their new learning with their work colleagues when they returned from the network meetings. While they experienced some challenges in finding time to formally share the latest research, the teachers identified many informal ways they shared with colleagues. However, many of the teachers were searching for more formal structures of imparting what they had learned at the network meetings. To what degree this formal type of sharing was possible was largely connected to the principal's instructional leadership.

The teachers attending the network meetings can be defined as an enterprise of a community of practice for several reasons. The learning enacted within this group share many of the characteristics of a community of practice; through mutual engagement, they develop

a shared repertoire that is part of the mutual engagement of the participants. The participants are continually negotiating the learning community and its practices through interaction, and through the feedback they provide, they are also active participants in creating the learning. They build and develop professional relationships that allow them to address the issues of their daily practice. Through the discussions around theory and practice, they seek to develop a shared repertoire and vocabulary with which to define and express their professional practice (Wegner, 1998). Their learning is fluid and multifaceted and can be described in relation to their sense of community, identity and agency.

Community: Learning as Belonging

Wegner (1998) describes how communities of practice come to be developed around things that are important to people. The teachers in this study identified the opportunity to meet with other School-Age educare teachers as one of the most important reasons for belonging to the network. Their feedback indicated that they valued this opportunity for learning and that it mattered greatly to them in their professional role as School-Age educare teachers. One word that was frequently used in describing the meetings was "inspiring". The teachers explained how they left the meetings inspired to try new things in their practice. The network meetings provided a forum for them to discuss, and reflect upon, both practical and theoretical issues relevant to their profession and daily work. Within the network-meeting milieu, they were able to pose and debate questions regarding their daily practice in a way they could not do when collaborating with their colleagues teaching grades one to six. Being part of a community meant not only meeting other School-Age educare teachers but also being allowed to grow new connections to professionals who shared similar working realities. The network meetings allowed them to expand their network beyond their school or group of schools, and to build important connections to other teachers in other schools.

> You learn so much. And it is fun to share with others. I almost think that *(interacting with other teachers)* is the most important thing…to have colleagues, or rather to have colleagues at other schools.

The importance of collaboration between the teachers in the different school forms (compulsory school, preschool class and School-Age educare) is often emphasized in Swedish education as an important and necessary component in supporting student learning. However, this collaboration is an expectation that frequently fails to materialize (Ludvigsson, & Falkner, 2019). Too often, the collaboration that is expected instead emerges as a model of competition, where the School-Age educare section competes with resources, such as professional development time, with the teachers working in the compulsory school section. The network then offers to become a place where the teachers who share the same restrictions within the schools can discuss common concerns and issues. To a certain degree, this format of learning together can be seen as "levelling" the impact of the schools' policies and realities. The feedback from the teachers who attended the network sessions emphasized the need for a different kind of collaboration for the teachers in the School-Age educare system.

> I think that these School-Age educare network meetings …are very desirable *(to the teachers in School-Age educare)*. They are very sought- after… and I think there is an attraction to this kind of networking thinking: "How do we solve this? What do you do at your school?"

The network meetings provided a more informal approach to learning; a community that fosters the commitment of time and energy needed for learning and improving one's practice.

Identity: Learning as Becoming

Research tells us experienced teachers seek out learning opportunities that honour their professional knowledge, integrity and identity (Day, 1999). Belonging to the community of practice that the network formed, allowed the teachers, both experienced and new, the opportunity to form and develop their own identity as School-Age educare teachers. While identified as elementary school teachers (within the Swedish school system), their identity as teachers differs from the teacher identity that is associated with their colleagues who teach in the compulsory school classes. This division is partially based on the history of School-Age educare and how the profession has evolved over the years. The position has shifted over the years as one associated mostly with the caretaking aspect, to the more teaching-based role it is today. Although the Swedish government tried to strengthen the professional identity of the teachers who work in School-Age educare by creating a university-based teacher education program focused on School-Age educare, the status and identity of these teachers are still markedly different from that of their counter partners. (Berglund et. al, 2019). Being part of the community of the university-based network is one way to negotiate and renegotiate their identity. Some respondents said that the felt "strengthened in their professional role" through the interaction with other teachers in the same field. They could see themselves as professionals with a specialized collection of knowledge and skills.

Due to the hiring practices in the time of teacher shortage in Sweden, many of the university-educated teachers regularly find that they are the only ones who are certified, School-Age educare teachers at their workplace.

> There are many places where you are alone…and it is getting worse too. We know that there is a lack of pedagogues *(School-Age educare teachers)* everywhere…at the network you will at least get the form of support that you need.

> With so few people educated *(as School-Age educare teachers)*, it is difficult to have (professional) discussions.

As our professional identities are made of a combination of many factors, such as "personal experience, knowledge, and values; schooling practices and policies; and institutional values" (Goodnaught, 2010, p. 168), it is crucial that we have the ability to see ourselves reflected in others. Learning together with other School-Age educare teachers becomes a way out of the isolation many feel at their workplace. In interacting with others in the same profession, they form both a collective and individual professional identity. Many of the teachers wrote about passion and engagement for the profession itself and how this passion led them to seek out ways to develop their practice and skills by themselves.

> We are left very much to our devices…and rightly, or wrongly, if you have an interest *(in improving professionally)* then you spend a lot of your own time on it. But I believe, that if you don't, as a School-Age educare teacher and the way our workplace situation is today, then I think you would not develop professionally.

Professional identity can be regarded as being both hybrid and fluid; it is formed by the society in which we live and work as well as by our personal experiences. As our experiences and context changes, so does our identity. The teachers who attended the network meetings found their identity as professionals strengthened through the interaction with others work-

ing in the same field and through learning about, processing and debating over current research in their field. Seeing themselves reflected in this research, and having the opportunity to be part of research as well worked to strengthen their professional identity as School-Age educare teachers.

Agency: Learning as Acting

Just like identity, agency can be "understood as resulting from the interplay of individuals' capacities and environmental conditions" (Priestly, Biesta, & Robinson, 2018). It is not unusual for agency to be considered as an individual trait, however, agency is better understood as a created outcome of the community of practice a group, like the teachers attending the network sessions, create together. Agency resides both within the individual and in the societal context; it exists in the interplay between individual capacity and society. It is intimately linked to both the renegotiation of identity and the development of the skills needed to improve one's professional practice. While empowerment and agency are not the same things, creating and developing agency does work to empower the teachers in their professional practice. Agency can lead to action; to teachers making autonomous decisions about their learning. Teachers, who together have created and nourished agency, are conscious of how to seek out opportunities to improve their professional knowledge and often make deliberate choices in how to reach their professional learning goals (Calvert, 2016). The School-Age educare teachers expressed how their agency often gave them the encouragement to lead and share their knowledge. One teacher expressed how experience and learning from the network meetings created: "A platform for leading development and improvement at my work."

Aware of the fact that in many School-Age educare centers the teachers are not given much time to do this type of professional development work, the teachers take it upon themselves to create spaces for sharing their knowledge. The agency that these teachers express stems from their knowledge and their capacity to act (Priestly, Biesta, & Robinson, 2018). They even see themselves as catalysts in disseminating the knowledge and skills they have gained from the network meetings:

> In some places, you are not given any time at all *(to share and collaborate with others)* and then it comes down to your interest because you want *(to share with others)* and because you are passionate about your job.

> *(the network meetings at)* Linnaeus University has become the biggest part of our professional learning.

> It is difficult to find professional learning in other places.

Many of the School-Age educare teachers emphasized the value they placed on gaining access to current research in their field. School-Age educare is still an under-researched field and the teachers expressed a high interest in the research that is currently being produced. This often gave them agency to explore ways to disseminate this new information to their colleagues.

> We highlight current research at the network meetings in our school board.

> We search for more research through social media and other sources as well.

Conclusion

This research highlights various ways that university-based learning networks can support the professional development needs of teachers in School-Age educare. First and foremost, the network meetings supported the professional development needs of teachers in School-Age educare by providing a community of practice where the teachers create and renegotiate their identity as professionals, and by giving them the agency to work for improvement and change in their field.

To begin with, the School-Age educare teachers perceived the professional learning that the university-supported network meetings provide a highly relevant. This could partly be since there are fewer opportunities for professional learning for them, but more importantly, because the learning is grounded in their own practice at school (Boyle, While, & Boyle, 2004; DuFour, & Eaker, 1998; Nehring, & Fitzsimons, 2011 Pregner, Portman, & Handelsalz, 2018). The fact that the learning provided by the network is tailored specifically to their working reality cannot be emphasized enough. This is especially relevant at a time when the professional identity of teachers in School-Age educare is evolving; in large part due to state educational policies local governance of schools' organization, and the current shortage of teachers in Swedish schools. Networks can thus work to reverse the isolation felt by many teachers during this time of uncertainly and redefinition of their roles as teachers (Lieberman, 2000). Learning together in the community created through the university- supported network meetings promotes the learning of the individual teacher while connecting them to a larger network of School-Age teachers who share similar challenges and teaching realities. By belonging to a community of practice, they engage in the negotiation of a shared repertoire and language. Through this engagement they share and reflect together as they also gain an extended support network through the teachers they meet there (Beck, & Kosnik, 2014; Webster-Wright, 2009; Zehetmeier et al., 2015).

Furthermore, the type of professional learning that is found in the network meetings supports the dual process of negotiating their professional identity and the improvement of skills and knowledge in their workplace. Collaborating with their peers helps them negotiate the tension between their identities as caregivers and teachers, as teachers in School-Age educare, and as being part of a larger team of teachers of the obligatory form of the Swedish school system. As the School-Age educare teachers value the learning with teachers beyond their school districts and perceive it as relevant and important, this further holds the promise of leading to positive change in their daily practice that is sustainable over time (Avalos, 2011; King, 2014; Timperley et al., 2007).

Finally, the connection to research provided in the university-supported network has relevance for the development of both identity and agency. As the idea of social practice includes both tacit knowledge and documents, tools and symbols (Wegner, 1998), findings from research can be also seen as one of the tools that inform social practice. The School-Age educare teachers expressed, that partaking in current educational research, it helped inform their sense of efficacy and agency. Thus the engagement with, both passively and actively, research has the potential to assist in deepening the understanding of their professional practice. The process can add to their pedagogical knowledge and even provide avenues for solutions to inquiries. The university- supported network meetings further provided the participants an op-

portunity to be an active part of the research that was being conducted at the university. The invitation to participate in current research can be interpreted as" being treated as a professional, with one's experiences and perspectives valued, contributes to teachers' efficacy, agency, commitment, and engagement in the work of the network and the work of teaching; being treated as a professional may also help teachers construct an identity that is more rewarding and a better fit with how they see themselves (Niaz, 2007, p. 608)."

Discussion

When the Swedish National Agency for Education designated a chapter for the school-age educare program in the 2011 national curriculum, many School-Age educare teachers cheered as they had long advocated for this kind of legitimacy of their work. The interpretation of a curriculum for students in School-Age educare quickly became a topic of debate for both educators and researchers. It is necessary to understand how teachers process and decode curriculum, as this becomes a vital part of the enactment of teaching practices in schools. Professional learning is an important component in supporting teachers' work in the interpretation and implementation of the curriculum in their daily practice. Opportunities for collaborative professional learning that supports teachers' learning across school districts, and collaboration with universities, been proven beneficial in supporting the implementation of new policies and practices (Campbell, 2017, Darling-Hammond et al., 2005). This study found that the teachers who attended the university- supported network felt the support of the extended community of learning while gaining a greater sense of agency by being involved with research- both directly and indirectly- through their participation in the network meetings. This growing agency strengthened their ability to make professional decisions and to act despite outside influences. The potential for creating spaces for teacher professional learning through the support of university-supported network warrants further discussion and investigation and a larger study would be beneficial in understanding how to better support the professional profile and status of School-Age educare teachers.

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Appendix 1

Questions for the brainstorming session

- What do you feel that you get out of attending the network sessions; how do these sessions contribute to building your professional knowledge?
- Is there a space or time where you can share what you learned here with others in your workplace?
- How involved is your principal in professional learning?
- How do you talk about current research at your school-age educare?

Appendix 2

1. Can you please describe the different kinds of professional learning that you have taken over the years?
2. What kind of new knowledge, or skills, do you feel is important for you in your work?