

“I don’t want just to sit on a chair three hours”- Children’s experiences of daily life in school-age educare in Sweden

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Abstract: The aim of this study is to contribute knowledge about how children themselves experience their daily lives in Swedish School-Age Educare (SAEC) and how these experiences can be understood in terms of comprehensibility, manageability, and meaningfulness, which are the components of Antonovsky’s (1987) Sense of Coherence theory. To gain insight into children’s perspectives, a mosaic approach was applied, allowing children to draw and participate in group discussions. The study includes 60 children from five different SAECs. The data is analysed deductively, using the three SOC components as a framework. The results reveal that the components are interconnected and affect one another. Children highlight the importance of having opportunities to play and spend time with friends. In this, teachers play a vital role, not only in providing engaging activities but also in maintaining structure, which helps children make sense of their time at the SAEC. Furthermore, the study finds that strict routines and a lack of influence can lead children to perceive their time at the SAEC as less meaningful, making it difficult to understand why certain things are done in specific ways. By applying SOC theory, the study enhances knowledge of what children consider important, ultimately contributing to a stronger sense of coherence.

Key words: deductive analysis, everyday practices, children’s perspective, school-age educare, sense of coherence

Introduction

Research highlighting children’s experiences is limited, but previous studies have, for example, focused on their perspectives on what they like to in SAEC (Cartmel, et al., 2023; Hurst, 2023; Näpfli & Schweinberger, 2025), participation (Haglund, 2015; Simoncini, et al., 2015), wellbeing (Elvstrand, et al., 2025b), and their descriptions of teachers in SAEC (Lager, 2021).

Given the large number of children enrolled in SAEC in Sweden, it is essential to understand what they perceive as meaningful leisure time. In Sweden, nearly half a million children, 80% of children aged 6–12 years, attend SAEC both before and after school hours, as well as during school holidays (Skolverket, 2025). This makes SAEC a significant environment where children spend a considerable amount of time. SAEC is an integrated part of the Swedish school system and is governed by the national curriculum, in which a specific section, Part 4, explicitly regulates the educational mission of SAEC (Skolverket, 2024).

Over the past decades, a shift has occurred in SAEC, which Gustafsson Nyckel (2024) describes as a transition from a distinctly social pedagogical orientation towards an increasing

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emphasis on learning and teaching. According to the governing document for SAEC, the concept of teaching is to be understood in a broadened sense, encompassing the interplay between development, learning, and care (Skolverket, 2024). The curriculum highlights a number of specific areas that the SAEC is tasked with addressing, such as language and mathematics. Equally central, however, is its mission to foster democratic values and to support children's play. Children should therefore, in the SAEC centre, be given opportunities for learning as well as for engaging in meaningful leisure activities.

Furthermore, teaching should be grounded in the children's interests, needs, and experiences. This implies that children are to be granted substantial agency, not only in shaping the type of teaching they encounter but also in actively participating in the teaching situation itself. Despite the fact that the concept of teaching has been applied to SAEC for over fifteen years, research indicates that its meaning remains difficult to define (Elvstrand et al., 2024), which in turn has implications for the children involved. In other words, there exists a research gap that is important to address.

The overall aim of the study is to contribute to knowledge about children's everyday lives in SAEC and what they highlight as meaningful to them. Using a deductive analysis, this will be applied to Antonovsky's theory of Sense of Coherence. The study is based on the following overarching research question:

How can children's descriptions of their everyday experiences in the SAEC be understood in terms of comprehensibility, manageability, and meaningfulness?

Given the study's focus on children's perspectives regarding meaningful experiences in SAEC, several stakeholders within the educational and child development sectors may benefit from its findings: educational practitioners and SAEC staff, policy makers, teacher education, and guardians.

Previous research

Children's perspectives on their time in SAEC have been explored by several researchers, each highlighting different aspects. Recurring factors that children identify as important for them both in Swedish and international studies is to experience a sense of meaning and well-being include opportunities for participation. Further, they highlight social relationships, voluntariness, and the presence of adults who are engaged and provide both time and space for structured and unstructured activities.

Lager and Gustafsson Nyckel (2022), in a field study, demonstrate how children's agency is crucial for perceiving their time in SAEC as meaningful. The study provides examples of how children exercise influence in relation to routines, time, and space, and socio-material conditions by acting in ways that allow them, for instance, to create and maintain relationships (e.g. Elvstrand et al., 2025a). When children feel that time lacks meaning, for example, when they have no one to spend time with or nothing to do, the time spent in the SAEC centre may primarily be experienced as waiting to go home (Hurst, 2017). Children's opportunities for agency and participation must also be understood in relation to the conditions of SAEC, including the physical learning environment and the organisation of time, which enable participation in various ways (Grewell, 2025).