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ABSTRACT
Societal changes during the last few decades have given rise to the expansion of extended systems in nations across the world. Despite differences regarding age groups and relations to compulsory school, the task of extended education is primarily to provide participants with possibilities to learn general or specific content and foster their socioemotional and academic development and learning. In Sweden, the great majority of the younger pupils attend extended education in terms of the school-age educare centres (SAEC), where they meet teaching connected to four different central content defined in the curricula, of which one relates to games, physical activities and outdoor excursions. This study aims to explore and understand how outdoor excursions in school-age educare can be understood in terms of human practising. Based on observations and the philosophy of human practising four themes are discussed: meaningful challenges, content to learn, standards of excellence and time.

Introduction

In recent decades, societal changes have called for the expansion of extracurricular and out-of-school education for children worldwide. Extended education has been adopted to identify this educational field in almost every modern country (Schuepbach, 2018; Schuepbach & Huang, 2018). The foremost aim of such education is to offer participants the possibility to learn general or specific content and foster their socioemotional and academic development and learning (Schuepbach & Lilla, 2020).

In Sweden, 85% of all younger school children are enrolled in the extended education setting of school-age educare centres (SAEC) (Skolverket/Swedish National Agency for Education, 2022a). The educational programme should complement preschool and primary classes by offering pupils recreational activities, stimulating their holistic development and learning and offering them meaningful leisure time (Skolverket/Swedish National Agency for Education, 2022b). Through the School Act (SFS, 2010, p. 800) and the revised curriculum (Skolverket/Swedish National Agency for Education, 2016b), which implied a clarified teaching commission of SAEC, the teachers now must balance between aspects of voluntariness, care, and learning in the process of planning, teaching and evaluation (Hjalmarssson, 2019). The teachers should consider the SAEC’s traditional focus on care and common values; the initiatives, interests and needs of the pupils should be a starting point for experience-based activities.
Teaching in SAEC should be based on the central content defined in the curriculum. One part of that content concerns games, physical activities and outdoor excursions, which is the focus of this study. It should be emphasized that ‘games’ includes play, which is a basic foundation in the school-age educare centre teaching. We see games as a structured form of play, usually undertaken for enjoyment and sometimes as a competition. Games can take various forms, such as tag-games, board games, card games, sports, or any structured activity for amusement or entertainment. This specific content comprises aspects such as allowing pupils to develop a rich movement capacity by participating in physical activities and visiting different outdoor environments.

Due to its unique context, which, among other things, is characterised by age-homogenous groups of pupils, a broader framework for teaching and that teaching only holds goals to strive for, the SAEC has the potential to offer other conditions for selection, transformation, human practising and learning than the school’s teaching. Nevertheless, the Swedish Institute for Educational Research (Skolforskningsinstitutet/Swedish Institute for Educational Research, 2021) states that school authorities, researchers and practitioners agree that there is a need for more knowledge about teaching and learning in SCAE and about the role of SAEC teachers in pupil development and learning and that the function of SAEC as an educational institution has become less and less clear. The invisibility of SAEC pedagogy is based on understanding pedagogy as a knowledge discourse that dominates the compulsory school, where the focus is on subject knowledge and skills. This, in turn, motivates efforts to make the SAEC pedagogy visible and to strengthen how it is expressed in teaching.

Since outdoor learning activities connect to a broader perspective on learning and development than traditional classroom teaching, there is an opportunity to offer education that aligns with the SAEC mission (Holmberg, 2021). Outdoor education is rooted in a tradition where learning is characterized by exploration, discovery, and creation (Beames et al., 2011) and has been shown to increase physical activity among pupils (Londal et al., 2021). Learning and development are encouraged and pursued as children engage in activities, experiment, and acquire new or refined skills in an exploratory manner. However, scholars argue that the didactic theoretical basis for SAEC pedagogy is underdeveloped (Boström et al., 2022) which create challenges for the SAEC teachers in their teaching.

Therefore, we used the theory of human practising (Aggerholm et al., 2018) to explore new perspectives on pedagogical approaches in SAE. Viewed through the lens of theory on human practising (Aggerholm et al., 2018), practising is acknowledged as an active process in which the pupil’s experiences and subjectivity must be recognised. We consider human practising relevant for SAEC teaching, as the goal and the product of practising concerns one’s comportment and being in the world, which can be described as improved habits. Practising is grounded in human freedom and volition. This explorative study outlined practising as a possible way forward to determine and define outdoor teaching at SAEC, which fulfil a tradition of experience-based activities based on pupils’ needs, initiatives and interests and a clarified teaching commission. The result could develop teaching strategies and laying a foundation for further practice-oriented research on outdoor education in SAEC.

Against this background, this study aims to explore and understand how outdoor excursions in SAECs can be understood in terms of human practising (Aggerholm, 2016, 2021; Aggerholm et al., 2018). The following questions will be addressed:

(a) How are meaningful challenges created for pupils in outdoor teaching?
(b) Which content is made into knowledge material for the pupils to learn?
(c) What values are negotiated in the interactions between children and teachers?
(d) What is the importance of time for outdoor education?
Outdoor activities and education

There is a widespread belief that children have a given and innate kinship with the outdoor environment; being in nature is a part of being a child. Policymakers often use this idea to draw attention to the importance of outdoor activities for children’s development and health (James & James, 2012). Similar thoughts can be traced back to Rousseau’s view of children’s need to return to nature (Lindroth, 2011). In Nordic countries, such as Sweden and Norway, the concept of ‘friluftsliv’ has historically defined the value of outdoor life. Gurholt (2018, p. 288) describes ‘friluftsliv’ as a ‘cultural symbol with a spectrum of meanings. In Sweden, a common view is that outdoor education has the opportunity to treat learning and development in a broader sense than what is privileged in compulsory school. Outdoor education connects to a tradition where learning is more than a reproduction of something given in advance and contains elements of innovation, discovery and creation (Beames et al., 2011; Säljö, 2019).

A scoping review of school-based outdoor education in Nordic countries (Remmen & Iversen, 2022) concluded that outdoor education in schools positively influences pupils’ social, mental, and physical health. For instance, physical activity increased when primary school pupils participated in outdoor education during their school days. Furthermore, the study showed that outdoor education, in several cases, had a positive impact on pupils’ cognitive learning. However, scholars suggest that, even if visiting outdoors can positively affect children’s development, there is no strong causative relationship. Instead, the potential is in the specific activities children are allowed to do outdoors that facilitate positive development and not outdoor activities per se (James & James, 2012). Sanderud et al. (2021) argue that materials, such as trees and water, do not hold essential knowledge for children to pick up. Instead, they claimed that how children interact with the outdoor environment is essential for their development.

Tovey (2007) discussed how outdoor environments provide unique support for child activities, different from indoor activities. For children, outdoor activities offer space and freedom to discover and experiment. In relation to indoor environments, outdoor areas are more open and less limited, providing better movement opportunities. Material outdoors affords more significant challenges because it can change and combine more than possible indoors. Moreover, outdoor environments are constantly changing depending on, for example, weather, light, season, animals, vegetation and the flow of water. Tovey (2007) claimed that the more challenges a material offers, the greater the chance children will get involved. Additionally, Tovey describes the indoor environment as an adult domain. There, adults, for example, teachers, control the activities, while outdoor places are more regulated by the children. Accordingly, in contrast to indoor places, outdoor places seem to have the opportunity to become ‘children’s places.’ The concept of ‘children’s places’ is used in childhood geography and describes places children create and explore on their terms (James & James, 2012; Rasmussen, 2004).

Conversely, places designed specifically to meet children’s needs (e.g. indoor spaces and playgrounds), are defined as places for children (Rasmussen, 2004). Consequently, through place-responsive learning, outdoor learning can offer views on knowledge and teaching other than what is dominating indoor teaching. Common to such approaches ‘is that they value experiential learning and teachers’ professional judgement and practical knowledge-in-action’ (Sanderud et al., 2021, p. 2). However, Skea and Fulford (2021) argued that notwithstanding the ambition of an alternative learning environment, outdoor education often focuses on learning that can be utilised in the classroom instead of giving pupils a different way of encountering and engaging with the world.

A study of Danish ‘udeskole’ (Barfod & Stelter, 2019) found that quality in outdoor education does not automatically happen by taking the pupils outside. Barfod and Stelter (2019) concluded that teachers must initiate teaching content if outdoor activities are to contribute to pupils’ development and learning. Furthermore, the teachers in the study emphasised the importance of pupils finding meaning in the teaching and finding it motivating. They expressed that the teaching was successful when the pupils were interested and focused on the task. However, the authors see this position as
a short-term solution, which does not consider pupils’ long-term development. Therefore, Barfod and Stelter (2019) argue that it is not in the selection of teaching content that the teachers plan for pupils’ long-term development; instead, it is present in the teaching approach. The pupils must be given the opportunity to explore, collaborate and create solutions themselves. The teachers in the study believed that such an approach leads to pupils developing agency and believing that they can influence their own lives.

Similarly, Sanderud et al. (2021) investigated Norwegian nature kindergartens. They discussed open-ended problem solving in outdoor education as necessary in a multifaceted world, and that didactic sensitivity is a suitable approach to achieve it. Didactic sensitivity is an approach that highlights teachers’ professional judgement and initiatives for using local resources to facilitate pupils’ growth. Teachers who use didactic sensitivity need the flexibility to adapt to the environment and inspire pupils. This requires knowledge about local conditions and pupils’ interests and needs. According to Sanderud et al. (2021), didactic sensitivity is not planned as traditional lessons; instead, teachers are responsive and flexible to learning opportunities in pupils’ interactions with the environment.

Finally, given the background that the teachers in SAEC should take the initiatives, interests and needs of the pupils as a starting point for experience-based activities, the research presented above shows that outdoor excursions have prerequisites to offer pupils in SAEC a suitable learning environment. However, the organisation of outdoor excursions matters, and the choice of teaching approaches is significant. The examples from Norway and Denmark show ideas of teaching approaches that support experience-based activities. However, there is a lack of knowledge concerning outdoor education in the unique context of the SAEC. Hence, this study proposes a way to conceptualise outdoor excursion teaching approaches in SAEC based on a practising perspective.

**Analytical approach**

We use a theoretical model for physical education elaborated by Aggerholm et al. (2018), in which practising is understood as a form of activity in which humans seek to improve their capabilities through repeated efforts and a process directed at revising, transforming or renewing existing capabilities.

Aggerholm et al. (2018) argue that the most central aspects of practising are agency, content, goal, verticality, effort, uncertainty and repetition. Agency is relevant because practising is an active process in which you need to consider the experience and subjectivity of, for example, pupils. The practising person is aware that they are practising. In this way, practising offers an interesting departure to elaborate SAEC practices that should consider pupils’ needs, interests and initiatives.

Practising is always practising something—a content. A practising activity always has defined content. Simultaneously, a practising activity does not prescribe any particular content. Instead, the teacher and pupil can discover and negotiate the content. However, some activities might be considered more appropriate than others to facilitate practising in a different context. In this selection process, the role of SAEC teachers becomes crucial when planning and setting up situations and activities that allow pupils to practise something.

There is always a forward movement towards getting better at what is practised—a goal-directed activity. However, significant in relation to the SAEC context is that the goals are not concerned with producing external and measurable results or producing a final product. This is because practising is closely related to the qualitative refinement of what is practised. In the case of the outdoors, a pupil will never be finished being receptive to nature. Even pupils with many experiences with nature can improve and refine their habits in nature. Consequently, practising involves qualification, improvement and refinement of what is practised. Aggerholm et al. (2018) described this as the vertical aspect of practising. An act in an activity can be evaluated as better or worse. Therefore, pupils engage in a tension between notions of ‘I can and I cannot’ and strive towards being better at
something. One example could be that pupils move more easily in uneven terrain. Pupils that always stumble move less efficiently than pupils who flow through the terrain.

Therefore, practising is the effort towards being better at something. For example, in the case of a pupil trying to climb up on a large stone, learning requires effort, and the challenge itself can be rewarding. This implies that, from a practising perspective, an effort is not viewed as something unpleasant or to be avoided, but as something meaningful and essential in efforts to get better at something. Pupils trying to climb a stone can experience the effort to reach the top as exciting and pleasurable. Even such a drastic event as falling down can provide a source of joy. In other words, practising is about what pupils do not yet control and involves the possibility of failure and errors, such as falling down a stone. Finally, repetition is a central part of practising, as repetition is essential to the development of individuals. In the context of practising, repetition leads to improvement.

Method and materials

The empirical data used in this study were assembled through observations of teachers and pupils during outdoor excursions in two SAECs at one compulsory school. Each SAEC comprised two teachers and approximately 25 pupils.

One researcher conducted observations on three separate occasions, and two conducted one observation each.

Each pair of teachers went to the forest nearby the school for an outdoor excursion with their pupils one afternoon per week for approximately two and a half hours. Due to each pupil’s stay time and their parent’s hours at work or studies, the groups’ schedules differed. The size of the pupil group also changed during an excursion, when pupils were picked up or given permission by their parents to go home on their own or continue to another extracurricular activity outside of school.

These occasions followed the same pattern. On every occasion, they started at a gathering point of stones around a hearth. The meeting place was located on a hill. There were rocks, streams, slightly sparser forests, and elements of denser forests. The forest was surrounded by residential areas and was well-used for recreation, as indicated by the many well-trodden paths.

After the pupils sat in the assembly, the teachers told them what would happen that afternoon. The teachers then read a chapter from a book on keeping clean and safeguarding the environment (Håll Sverige rent, 2013). Each chapter ended with a mission for the pupils to complete. The teachers related the mission to Allemansrätten/the Right of Public Access which is a principle, protected by the law that gives all people in Sweden the freedom to roam free in nature as long as they do not disturb or destroy. Allemansrätten is a basic element of Swedish outdoor tradition (Visit Sweden, 2023) Each week, the previous week’s assignment was followed up and elaborated on further. After the week’s mission was completed, the teachers’ provided the pupils with space for ‘free play.’ During these teaching segments, the teachers walked among the pupil’s self-selected groups and asked questions about or confirmed the pupil’s practices, activities and play. The forest excursions ended with a gathering where the activities started, and a summary of what had been done.

Against the background of human practising, Aggerholm et al. (2018) developed four central features for implementing practising, these four features guided the process of observation.

(1) Acknowledge subjectivity and provide meaningful challenges. Here, it is essential to plan and organise teaching that is meaningful to the pupils and makes them interested and engaged. In selecting activities, teachers need to create an interest in stimulating pupils. In this process, it is vital to consider pupils’ agency.

(2) Focus on the content and the aims of practising. When pupils practise something, it is an engagement with a particular content. However, it does not need to be predetermined or specific content. Therefore, content can be discovered and negotiated between pupils and teachers.
(3) Specify and negotiate standards of excellence. Practising includes pupils being better and revealing refined ways of acting or perceiving what they are practising. All educational work has a normative aspect. Thus, it is essential to establish and make visible what counts as valued abilities and requested actions.

(4) Provide adequate time for practising. Since practising involves repetition, teachers must give pupils time to practice. The time pupils need to practice depends on what they are practising and the activity’s purpose. However, if a change is desired for pupils, the activities must be stretched over a more extended period.

Consequently, the observations focused on the themes of meaningful challenges, the content, standards of excellence, and the meaning of time during teaching. We used these themes to analyse key incidents in the observations. The critical incidents illustrated in the results were chosen because they represent recurring segments in the observed outdoor excursions. In the Results section, the selected key sequences are presented, and in the Discussion section, discussed theoretically in response to the study’s research questions.

Inspired by Van Manen (1990), we conducted close observations, an approach also used in Londal’s (2010) investigation of the Norwegian after-school programme, which implies that we navigated between the positions of participation and distance. This means that we did not manipulate the teaching sessions, but we answered the pupils’ questions about our research and their comments about their activities. Close observations are used to find examples that can increase the understanding of what is being studied (Van Manen, 1990). During the observations, we prepared field notes focusing on the teacher’s introduction of activities, the pupils’ and teachers’ actions during the activities and the transitions between different teaching segments, including free play and activities initiated by the teachers.

This study was conducted in accordance with the national ethical guidelines of the Swedish Research Council (Vetenskapsrådet, 2017) and scrutinised by the university’s ethical board. The pupils’ guardians, the pupils, and the teachers were informed of the study’s purpose and that participation was voluntary. The teachers were informed in both written and oral forms and provided informed consent verbally and in writing before the data collection began. The pupil’s guardians were informed and gave their written consent. The pupils were given verbal information by the researchers and teachers and gave their informed consent verbally. Observations of pupils’ interactions could generate displeasure in the children or lead to a reduced desire to participate in the activity or feelings of being inhibited. Therefore, we decided to create trust with the pupils, for example, by being open to what we observed and writing notes in response to the pupils’ questions.

Results

Key incident one—introducing a new game

This segment is an example of a teacher-controlled activity that initiated the observed outdoor excursions. When the pupils and the teachers arrived at the forest, they started by gathering where the teachers told the pupils that they would start the excursion and engage in a new game called ‘Switch Trees.’ The purpose of the game was to learn about different trees and to encourage the pupils to move. The teachers chose a place in the forest suitable for running and with diverse types of trees. The trees were marked with a tag band. So many trees were marked that there was enough for everyone in the group except for one pupil standing in the middle. The pupil with no tree and standing in the middle called out a tree type, for example, ‘All birches change places.’ Everyone standing by a birch tree and the one without a tree must then switch places. The pupil left without a tree had to stand in the middle and call out another kind of tree.

Some pupils were unfocused and did not listen to the teacher’s instructions. Once the game started, several pupils did not understand the rules of the game. Thus, the teachers’ planning did
not work. Many pupils said they wanted to play a different game. For example, they went to other trees and started playing with friends. The teacher interrupted the game and gathered the pupils to repeat the game’s rules. The teacher also asked the pupils if they thought the game was difficult, but did not get satisfactory answers. When the game resumed, it was closer to what the teachers had intended. Nevertheless, after a while, the teachers interrupted the game and gathered the pupils. They talked about what did and did not work with the pupils, and emphasised that a new game is challenging to learn until they had tried it several times. The teachers established that it is more fun when you know the game and suggested that they try the game another time.

**Key incident two—building a windbreak**

This example illustrates the primary activity carried out on the outdoor excursions. In this case, the pupils would build their windbreaks. The teachers divided the pupils into groups of four to five. Each group was given a tarp and ropes. The groups’ task was to choose a place in the forest where they thought it was appropriate to build their windbreaks. The teachers did not give specific instructions about where or how windbreaks should be built; the pupils would decide this themselves. However, the teachers asked the pupils, ‘What should the windbreaks protect?’ and ‘Which place is suitable to build on?’ Once each group had received their materials, they searched for a location to build their windbreak. The children discussed this animatedly and moved around, looking for a campsite about 20–200 metres from the gathering place. They explored various places in nature and discussed that it should be a ‘cosy’ and a ‘secret hut.’ They did not always agree, and there were sometimes lively group discussions.

All the groups chose places with suitable trees to tie the ropes to the tarp. Overall, the pupils were focused on and engaged in the task. However, a few did not participate in the activity, which sometimes led to disagreements among the pupils. During the activity, the teachers visited the groups. Here, the teachers talked to the pupils about how they had planned to build their windbreak and why they had planned it that way. Ideas were developed in a dialogue between the teachers and the pupils as to whether it was a suitable way to build and how the continued construction should occur. In one case, the pupils had put the tarp on the ground, at which point the teacher asked the pupils if it protected against rain and the sun. The pupils replied that it would protect against insects on the ground. The teachers also intervened more physically in the pupils’ construction, showing which knots could be used to hang the tarp. Some groups imagined that they had a campfire outside their windbreak, and some imagined it was raining, so they would have to seek shelter in the windbreak. When the pupils finished their windbreaks, they started playing around their camps and engaging with other groups.

**Key incident three—‘Allemansrätten’**

This segment illustrates the teacher-selected content recurrent in the observations. The teachers used the material ‘The great eagle adventure’ to teach about ‘Allemansrätten.’ This activity builds on teaching about ‘Allemansrätten’ during the regular school day. The pupils worked with a map where they would find out which way was most appropriate to get to the ‘eagle nest’ if they followed what applies in the ‘Allemansrätten.’ For example, cultivated land and paddocks were included on the map. The teachers emphasised the importance of closing a gate if they passed through one to prevent animals from escaping. Furthermore, the teachers said that the most important thing to remember was not to disturb and not destroy nature, and they wondered if anyone could give examples of what it might mean to disturb. One pupil said that it was disturbing if you shouted. The teacher wondered what happens if you scream near a small hare cub, and a pupil answered that the hare is frightened. Next, the teacher wondered what it might mean to destroy nature. Someone answered that you could be uprooting flowers that you
are not allowed to pick. When the teachers guided the conversation, the pupils were interested and wanted to be involved in teaching about ‘Allemansrätten.’ However, pupils’ engagement was lower when they, based on the map, would discuss ‘Allemansrätten.’ Additionally, some pupils applied ideas about ‘Allemansrätten’ in free play. For example, a pupil bent a small tree and asked his peers if he was destroying it, to which they said that he was not because the tree had not been damaged.

**Key incident four—building a bridge**

This example illustrates free play. Free play occurred after the teachers felt that the mandatory elements had been completed. Three pupils went to a dried-up stream. The stream furrow was about one metre deep. The pupils started searching for logs lying on the ground. They intended to put these over the streambed to build a bridge. They found logs of varying thickness, length and tree species. They helped each other place these over the streambed. When they had placed a couple of logs, they tried to balance themselves on them. However, they noticed that keeping their balance was too unsafe and difficult. They then changed the construction and added other logs that were stronger and straighter. One of the pupils then tried again to balance themselves. This time, it went better, and the pupil managed to walk on the logs over the stream. The group then continued to refine the bridge design to make it more stable and easier to walk on. Finally, all three pupils crossed the stream on the logs. Furthermore, they changed the bridge so they could sit on it together. Once they had succeeded, they began reworking the bridge to make it less stable again. The interpretation is that they did this to make it more unstable, so that it would be more exciting and a greater challenge to cross. All three pupils showed engagement in the process of building the bridge. They discussed a lot with each other while they were constantly on the move. They also expressed many emotions when testing the bridge, such as joy, uncertainty and excitement.

**Key incident five—the gathering**

This example illustrates a gathering with which all forest excursions ended. Overall, the final gathering aimed to get the children to reflect on what they had accomplished in the forest. The pupils sat with the teachers in a circle and summarised what had happened during the forest excursion. After two hours in the forest, the educators called out to the children to come back to the meeting place. The children were asked to sit on their seat cushions and be quiet. It took a while, but finally, the children had calmed down and took turns telling what they thought was the best thing about being in the forest. Several children spoke out of turn and were reminded by the teachers which child had the floor. One of the teachers said that the best thing was that no child was alone, but that everyone was part of the activity all the time. The teacher praised a child who invited a friend into the play. As the best thing, most pupils highlighted various aspects of the fact that they had been with friends and that they had cooperated well. The teachers’ instructions were mainly about getting the pupils to sit still, be quiet and listen when other pupils were talking. There were fewer pupils at the final gathering than when they started. That is because pupils had to go home at different times.

**Discussion**

This study aimed to explore and understand how outdoor excursions in SAEC can be understood in terms of human practising. With inspiration from Aggerholm et al. (2018) features of human practising, four questions were addressed. The first question considers acknowledging subjectivity and providing meaningful challenges.
**Meaningful challenges**

If teachers aim to motivate and enable practising, they need to plan and organise teaching that is meaningful to the pupils and makes them interested and engaged. In selecting activities, teachers need to create an interest to stimulate pupils. Practising is an active process in which you must consider pupils’ experience and subjectivity. Therefore, it is essential to consider pupils’ agency.

In the outdoor excursion, the teachers’ navigated between steering the pupils in the desired direction and, at the same time, being responsive to their wishes. We agree with Aggerholm et al. (2018, p. 11) that practising draws attention to a fundamental problem of pedagogy: ‘how can one intervene to cultivate another person’s capacity to use his/her freedom?’. The authors suggest an approach in which no specific instructions or explanations are given. Instead, the content of activities is presented with the aim of triggering a desire and passion in the pupils to practise specific content. During the observations, we saw such moments, for example, in Key Incident Two, when pupils were instructed to build a windbreak. The teachers introduced the activity and provided material with which to build it. Still, the children were free to build the windbreak everywhere in the forest and construct it according to their wishes. In this case, the teachers’ initial planning for the session on building windbreaks had aspects that challenged the pupils. However, at the same time, they were given degrees of freedom to build the windbreaks in ways they decided on their own.

Additionally, the segment introducing a new game shows the difficulty of presenting meaningful activities initiated by the teachers. There was limited space for the pupils to influence this activity. The teaching was based on the teachers’ idea that pupils should learn about several types of trees. The teachers told the pupils that they would appreciate the game more when they had learned it better. This aligns with the fact that education is an effortful and discontinuous progression, where challenges and resistance are essential sources for development (Aggerholm, 2021). The negative aspect of an experience is, therefore, not whether a person likes something or not; it is a question of something different or unexpected. This means that pupils find it challenging to learn something new. Therefore, it can be necessary for a teacher in SAEC to find activities where learning challenges also become meaningful. The example of the pupils who built a bridge is worth noting. Here, pupils discovered meaningful challenges in the forest independently without the teachers’ input. Instead, the pupils’ interactions with material in the forest created the activity.

Tovey (2007) argued that outdoor environments offer unique opportunities for pupils to find challenges and can provide learners with a non-pre-determined material, open to explore and experiment with. However, even if previous research has shown several positive benefits of outdoor education, scholars argue that the potential is in the specific activities which children are allowed to do outdoors that facilitate positive development and not outdoor activities per se (James & James, 2012; Sanderud et al., 2021). Likewise, the results showed that the pupils’ actions changed depending on the teachers’ choice of activities. Consequently, a specific didactic competence as a SAEC teacher is required to organise meaningful and challenging activities for pupils. Considering the results, one aspect may be how much a SAEC teacher and pupils should control outdoor activities. The results showed that pupils found challenging and meaningful activities in free play and teacher-directed activities. However, engagement could be lower when the activities were entirely teacher-led, with minimal space for pupils’ own regulation. These activities had a clear pre-defined goal; if the pupils did not commit to it, the activity did not work. Furthermore, our interpretation is that these activities were similar to teaching in a compulsory school. This leads to the second research question regarding content.

**Content to learn**

Practising emphasises the importance of defined content. When pupils practise something, it is an engagement with content. In relation to this, the role of SAEC teachers becomes crucial when
planning and setting up situations and activities that allow pupils to practice something. However, it does not need to be predetermined or specific content. Therefore, content can be discovered and negotiated between pupils and teachers.

The results show that the nature of the content varied. On some occasions, the content was clearly teacher-directed, while on other occasions, the content was pupil-initiated. In the example about ‘allemansrätten’ in Key Incident Three, the teachers provided specific content. Their ambition was to teach facts about rules and regulations in nature. These activities prescribed pre-defined goals with little space for the pupils’ interpretation.

In addition to teacher-initiated content, the pupils were encouraged during free play to create their own projects in the forest based on their individual interests, such as building a bridge in Key Incident Four. There was no predetermined end to the activity. They continuously, in dialogue with each other, changed the design and refined it to cope with more weight, being broader and having a more appealing appearance. This also confirms that there was no unconditional doing without a goal to build a better bridge based on nature’s opportunities. It was, therefore, possible to build a better bridge, and the pupils developed more refined ways of acting. Based on their actions, our interpretation is that the content appealed to the pupils’ needs and interests.

In between teacher-initiated and child-initiated content was the example of building windbreaks. In this case, the content was discovered and negotiated between the teachers and the pupils. The teachers walked around and asked questions about what the pupils were engaged in, and encouraged the pupils to reflect on specific knowledge content. For example, the teachers talked to the pupils about how they had planned to build their windbreak and why they had planned it that way.

Consequently, the content that appeared in the results varied from teacher-initiated content (e.g. ‘Allemansrätten’) to content created by the pupils in free play. In the teacher-initiated content, it was clear what the pupils were to learn, and with the compulsory school as a norm, this can be seen as reasonable content. Hence, teaching is based on a knowledge discourse that focuses on subject knowledge and skills. In contrast, we highlighted the long-term significance of the pupils’ self-selected content. Likewise, Barfod and Stelter (2019) said that learning about the content itself does not have to be the most decisive, but for pupils’ long-term development, it is the way they act in relation to the content that is central. The pupils are given the opportunity to explore, collaborate and create solutions themselves. Gurholt and Sanderud (2016) proposed that in outdoor education, children should be viewed existentially as active explorers and playful agents in shaping their selves, knowledge, skills and worldview. In a study by Barfod and Stelter (2019), teachers observed that such an approach leads pupils to develop an agency and a belief that can influence their own lives. Nevertheless, the content becomes central for an activity to be meaningful and to get pupils involved. Barfod and Stelter (2019) found that teachers must initiate teaching content if outdoor activities are to contribute to pupils’ development and learning.

**Standards of excellence**

The third research question concerns what counts as valued abilities and requested actions. Practising means that pupils should be better and discover refined ways of acting or perceiving what they are practising; there is always a forward movement towards improving at what is practised — a goal-directed activity. However, the goals are not concerned with producing a final product, because practising is related to the qualitative refinement of what is practised. According to a practising model, pupils should be involved, agree on what counts as excellence, and establish their own relationships.

When the children were in groups constructing windbreaks, they were involved in a dialogue with the teachers about the best design. In this case, the teachers facilitated reflections with questions like ‘How does the tarpaulin protect against rain when it is on the ground?’ and by bodily action showed how they could tie a knot so the tarp would not collapse. In this dialogue, there is a negotiation
between the pupils and the teacher on how the windbreak could be built to protect from different weather (wind, rain, sun, etc.)

On the other hand, the pupils negotiated standards of excellence with other children, for example, when they balanced on trees over a stream. It was obvious that the pupils were allowed to establish their own relationship to that excellence and determine the meaning of excellence individually and in groups (cf. Aggerholm et al., 2018).

In the example of gathering, the teachers’ instructions focused on subjectification (cf. Biesta, 2020). In this case, the aim of teaching in SAEC is to improve pupils in aspects such as autonomy, democracy and empathy. Our interpretation is that there was a slight dialogue between the pupils and the teachers about what counts as better and worse. Most frequently, the pupils should agree with what the teachers suggested; for example, that they should not talk when someone else is talking and be a good friend.

The result shows that the teachers’ intention with the teaching was to give pupils the knowledge and skills to stay in nature. What was valued as necessary occurred at various levels, as specific knowledge about nature (e.g. types of trees), moving and integrating with nature (e.g. free play), and being able to engage in outdoor life (e.g. building windbreaks). In addition, aspects emerged that dealt with a common base of values (e.g. being a good friend). Overall, this gives a picture of holistic learning and the multifaceted mission of SAEC. However, from a practising perspective, it becomes interesting how teachers negotiate standards with pupils. The results show that dialogue between teachers and pupils about what might be the best or right way to act creates a fruitful relationship between content and challenge, and that the pupils’ experience is meaningful. This was illustrated in the design and construction of windbreaks, which integrated teachers, pupils and nature. According to Sanderud et al. (2021), with didactic sensitivity, activities are not planned as traditional lessons; instead, teachers are responsive and flexible to learning opportunities occurring in pupils’ interaction with the environment.

**Time**

Finally, because practising involves repetition, it is essential that teachers enable pupils to have time to practice. The time pupils need to practice depends on what they are practising and the activity’s purpose. However, if a change is desired for pupils, the activities must be stretched over a more extended period.

The SAEC visited the forest for two hours each week. This provided an opportunity for continuity for the teachers and the pupils. Hence, the teachers could work with their material for a longer period. For example, Key Incident Three showed how the teachers prolonged the use of the ‘the great eagle adventure’ for teaching about ‘Allemansrätten.’ Furthermore, the pupils were able to familiarise themselves with the local place and explore the forest based on their previous experiences of the forest. The continuity of returning to the same forest every week creates a framework and sustainability for the pupils, within which the teachers can create space for new challenges and discoveries.

The challenge for the teachers was that the pupils finished at various times, and the number of pupils varied during the time they were in the forest. It was then difficult to plan because it was unclear how many pupils there were at any given time and because they did not know which pupils were on each occasion.

In the context of our observations, the SAEC can teach specific content for an extended period. From a practising perspective, this creates conditions for pupils’ in-depth learning (Aggerholm et al., 2018). We agree that if pupils are to develop habits to engage with nature, they must have the opportunity to spend considerable time in nature. Moreover, thanks to the repeating schedule, the pupils can be in the forest throughout the year and face the vicissitudes of nature. Outdoor environments are constantly changing depending on, for example, weather, light, season, animals, vegetation and water flow (Tovey, 2007). Another advantage of returning to the same place is that
the teachers gain knowledge of that place, which opens up the flexibility to adapt to the environment and what inspires pupils, which Sanderud et al. (2021) call didactic sensitivity.

**Conclusion**

This study has limitations concerning its methodological approach. For example, outdoor excursions take place in a broader spatial context than what is customary in indoor teaching situations. This implies that we might have missed situations relevant to the study’s purpose and questions. We are also aware that we could have returned to the observed situations if we had used video recordings instead of field notes. The study does not claim to capture pupils’ views of the teaching in which they are participating. However, we see value in future research taking the pupils voices about their experiences participating in SAEC teaching into account, as this has not been done to an exceptionally high degree in national research (Elvstrand & Närvänen, 2016).

Moreover, we would like to emphasise that the examples in the study are used to illustrate various aspects of outdoor excursions that were suitable for our analysis. Thus, events in the activities developed in ways other than in our examples. Above all, we want to emphasise that not all pupils will be active in free play. During the observation, we noted pupils who were lonely and passive and, in some cases, approached the teachers during free play.

In line with SAEC curricula, where children’s initiatives, needs and interests become the basis for experience-based teaching, outdoor excursions in SAEC, understood in terms of human practising, open the opportunity to develop teaching strategies in SAEC. In practising, the SAEC teacher becomes essential. The process of practising can be inspired and guided by teachers, who can give direction to the process and serve as models to which pupils can aspire. Consequently, SAEC teachers need to trigger the process of child reflection, awaken interest in new perspectives, and offer outdoor activities that primarily involve exploration and receptivity to the unknown rather than teacher-led content with predetermined outcomes.

**Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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*Peter Carlman* The main focus of Carlman’s research is various social science aspects of young people’s relationship to sport and physical activity. He is interested in questions related to young people’s values and representations of themselves as sporting individuals, and how they are valued and presented by others in and through different arenas and at the intersection between different arenas.

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