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Games, Physical Activities, and Outdoor Excursions as Powerful Knowledge in Swedish School-Age Educare

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this collaborative project with Swedish school-age educare (SAEC) teachers was to understand and develop teaching, focusing on games, physical activities, and outdoor excursions. Children's insufficient physical activity is a societal problem, and because most Swedish students age 6 to 9 are enrolled in SAEC, this can be a critical educational arena. The concept of powerful knowledge is used to emphasize knowledge that can help students handle contemporary and future challenges, operationalized here by using a typology of roles students are invited to enter by doing activities. The findings show that some roles are more frequent than others, often connected to voluntariness, free time, and teachers' relational approach. The findings also show that in the transformation of teaching, the *how* question seem more of a dilemma to the SAEC teachers than the *what* and *why* questions. We argue that SAEC teaching offers great possibilities to combine different student roles in a way that is more likely to connect knowledge about games, physical activities, and outdoor excursions to their own or others' lives and society. At the same time, teachers experience great challenges in how to teach in a way that meets the specific goals of SAEC education.

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Since the beginning of the 21st century, extended education has become one of the fastest growing fields in international education systems (Hoon Bae, 2018; Schuepbach & Huang, 2018). The importance of the extended education system was shaped by the societal changes of the 20th century, such as demographic and family changes, increased institutionalization of childhood, and increased importance of schooling (Schuepbach, 2018). Numerous programs exist, targeting different age groups to develop learning possibilities outside of the traditional school day. "Out-of-school time" (OST) is one of the most widely used terms for explaining the concepts of extended education (Hoon Bae, 2018). The settings are structured to offer opportunities to learn general and specific content, focusing on the emotional, social, and/or academic development of children and youth. Despite these common institutional features, the settings have developed differently across individual countries (Schuepbach & Lilla, 2020).

In some countries, extended education programs are organized as an extension of the school day and include help with homework or support in different school subjects. Other programs, similar to the Swedish school-age educare (SAEC), offer space for play and creative forms of expression (Skolforskningsinstitutet/Swedish Institute for Educational Research, 2021). The SAEC should complement compulsory school education, stimulate children's holistic learning and development, and offer them recreation and meaningful leisure time. Their needs, interests, and initiatives must form the basis for the activities offered (Skolverket/Swedish National Agency

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for Education, 2022). With approximately 85% of the country's younger school children being enrolled in educare facilities (Skolverket/Swedish National Agency for Education, 2023), this educational arena has great potential to stimulate development and learning (e.g., Hjalmarsson & Odenbring, 2020, 2023).

In 2016, the curriculum was revised (Skolverket/Swedish National Agency for Education, 2016a), and the teaching SAEC commission was clarified. The content was no longer regarded as activities only; teaching became a more prominent part. Nevertheless, staff's educational levels are still insufficient and their educational backgrounds differ (Skolverket/Swedish National Agency for Education, 2023). The educational program for the national SAEC should be determined by the principles, activities, and overall goals and guidelines of the compulsory school curriculum. The purpose and core content of the SAEC educational program includes care, development, and teaching. The teaching aims to nurture students' imagination and collaborative learning skills through play, movement, and creative activities, incorporating various forms of esthetic expressions and hands-on, exploratory approaches. Through play, students are provided opportunities to process experiences, explore their identities, and enhance cooperation, and communication skills. The teaching is designed to inspire and challenge students to experiment with their own ideas and those of others (Skolverket/Swedish National Agency for Education, 2022). Teachers should deliver the core content projected in the curriculum of SAEC: (1) language and communication; (2) creative and esthetic forms of expression; (3) nature and society; and (4) games, physical activities, and outdoor excursions. These four arenas, in turn, include several aspects that should not necessarily be regarded as activities or moments in the SAEC teaching, but rather function as guidelines about what the teaching should cover (Skolverket/Swedish National Agency for Education, 2022).

We focus on the fourth central content area of "games, physical activities, and outdoor excursions," embracing six aspects: (1) initiate, organize, and participate in games; (2) sports and other physical activities, indoors and outdoors during different seasons and in different weather; (3) outdoor excursions during different seasons, as well as the local environment's opportunities for physical activity in nature and other places; (4) safety and consideration for the environment and other people when staying in different natural environments; (5) rights and obligations in nature; and (6) how lifestyle affects health.

We claim the importance of games, physical activities, and outdoor excursions for children's holistic learning and development for several reasons. Children's insufficient physical activity is a significant societal problem, both from a social and health perspective (Guthold et al., 2020; Nyberg, 2017; Swedish Sports Confederation, n.d., 2016). It has been shown that outdoor education leads to increased academic motivation, improved self-esteem, greater impulse control, higher levels of creativity, and better cooperation skills (Faskunger et al., 2018). Furthermore, outdoor education and being in nature reduces absences due to sickness for both children and educators (Bergström & Tronvik, 2012) and has a stress-relieving effect (Hunter et al., 2019).

We focus on how SAEC teachers base their teaching on the children's positions, opportunities, and perspectives. SAEC is based in a child-centered way of working, where content and activities are stimulated by building on children's interests. Values such as group-oriented working methods and social and relational aspects are central in the Nordic equivalents, as are aspects such as play, leisure, and recreation. We highlight children's roles and positions in various parts of the SAEC's complex mission.

Research aims

The aim of the study is to understand and develop teaching in SAEC, focusing on subject-specific knowledge in terms of selection and transformation of the central content of games, physical activities, and outdoor excursions, as defined in the revised policy documents. The research question is as follows:

How do SAEC teachers view their role in identifying, planning, and implementing opportunities for children and youth to engage in a variety of roles that promote powerful knowledge in an educare setting?

Literature review

Few Nordic studies examine teaching and learning processes in outdoor excursions and physical activity (Remmen & Iversen, 2023). However, research shows uncertainty among teachers in placing teaching outdoors because of a perceived lack of knowledge about both relevant content and methods, as well as difficulties in working according to the curriculum (Rickinson et al., 2004). Conscious work can help teachers in SAEC use outdoor environments to create frameworks for both learning and relational opportunities (Hammarsten, 2022b) and conduct teaching on a scientific basis (Hammarsten, 2022a).

Outdoor learning activities offer education based on a broader view of learning and development. Outdoor education links to a tradition where learning is characterized by inquiry, discovery, and creation (Beames et al., 2011) and has been shown to increase physical activity among students (Løndal et al., 2021). Although outdoor teaching positively impacts students, the potential of outdoor teaching may be found in the activities' specific qualities, not in outdoor activities per se. For example, Sanderud et al. (2021) state that the important thing for students' development is how they integrate with the outdoor environment. A study of Danish outdoor schools (Barford & Stelter, 2019) shows that benefits do not happen automatically just by going outside. Teachers must initiate relevant content for development and learning. This entails creating content that students find interesting and motivating, but relying solely on something that is interesting risks overlooking the focus on children's long-term development. Here, Barford and Stelter (2019) emphasize that both the content and teachers' pedagogical approach are important to produce real conditions to discover, collaborate, and create solutions to various challenges. This can lead to children developing agency and a belief that they can influence their own lives. A study of students' outdoor play in the Norwegian after-school program (Riiser et al., 2019) shows that outdoor play increases the physical activity of all students, including those who are the least physically active. Thus, it is recommended that teachers implement strategies to ensure daily mandatory outdoor play. However, there is a lack of competence in this area among teachers; thus, there is a need for knowledge about how play can contribute to increased physical activity and how teachers can promote it. Riiser et al. (2019) recommend a closer collaboration between the school and external parties with special expertise in planning, implementation, and promotion. We follow this recommendation by developing models for teaching in relation to games and physical activities in SAEC excursions. We do this with the understanding that play is a fundamental cornerstone of pedagogy and teaching in SAEC (Hedrén & Hjalmarsson, 2025; Holmberg & Kane, 2020). Through play, students can take an active role and teachers can provide space for student's own choices while also supporting and guiding the play. The balancing act between voluntary activities and teacher-led activities is one of the defining characteristics of teaching in SAEC (Hjalmarsson, 2013; Hjalmarsson et al., *in press*).

Theoretical framework

We approach the subject-specific didactic question of selection and transformation of knowledge by using Young's concept of *powerful knowledge*. It emphasizes the importance of knowledge in teaching and curriculum development and explores the potential intellectual power that specialized knowledge can give students (Young, 2008, 2013, 2021). Every student is entitled to have access to this knowledge as it is seen to be more powerful in helping them handle both contemporary and future challenges and to move beyond the experience they bring from their everyday lives (Hudson et al., 2023; Young & Muller, 2010). Knowledge should enable students to "generalize beyond their experience" (Young, 2013, p. 110). According to Young, "Knowledge is 'powerful' if it predicts, if it explains, if it enables you to envisage alternatives" (Young, 2015, p. 74). Knowledge related to the central content of "games,

physical activities, and outdoor excursions” could provide both teachers and students with new ways of thinking about themselves and of participating in society; thus, it might be characterized as powerful.

The notion of powerful knowledge is defined as being subject-specific and conceptual disciplinary knowledge, including key concepts, main procedures, and processes of a discipline. Some researchers have elaborated on the notion of threshold concepts as such concepts are seen as possible gateways “opening up a new and previously inaccessible way of thinking about something” (Meyer & Land, 2003, p. 1).

Powerful knowledge and transformation processes

Maude (2016) uses Young’s theories to understand how teaching creates opportunities for students to develop knowledge that (1) equips them with new ways of thinking; (2) equips them with powerful ways to analyze, explain, and understand the world; (3) gives them power over their own knowledge; (4) prepares them to follow and engage in debates about local, national, and global issues; and (5) offers learning about the world. When we focus on knowledge the teachers see as important for students to discover new ways of thinking about and understanding disciplinary content concerning games, physical activities, and outdoor excursions and, importantly, going beyond their personal experiences, we also use the concept of *transformation*. If Young’s focus is on the content of schools and selection of knowledge (*what* to teach), we follow up with Gericke et al. (2018) who argue for an extended understanding of powerful knowledge using the concept of *transformation* (*how* to teach):

Transformation . . . is defined as an integrative process in which content knowledge is transformed into knowledge that is taught and learned through various transformation processes that take place outside and within the educational system at the individual, institutional and societal levels. (p. 432)

Gericke et al. (2018) claim that powerful knowledge should focus on both selecting content and transformation to understand how specific disciplinary knowledge can be made possible for students to acquire.

Gericke et al. (2018) emphasize that studying disciplinary content must include transformations of content in light of the didactical questions of why, what, for whom, when, and how. “Content knowledge” must always be transformed to fit the specific educational purpose of teaching and the specific context. Therefore, there is a need to study processes of transformation in teaching by addressing the why question (*why* to teach), in addition to the what and how questions. Hence, we examine two examples of activities to explore the *what*, *how*, and *why* questions related to the content of games, physical activities, and outdoor excursions.

Methods

The empirical data were produced during a two-year project funded by the national pilot project Utveckling Lärande Forskning (ULF) in English Development Learning Research and commissioned by the Swedish government to develop and test sustainable collaboration models between academia and school systems regarding research, school activities, and teacher education. This project aimed at understanding and developing teaching with a focus on subject-specific knowledge in the selection and transformation of the central content games, physical activities, and outdoor excursions, defined in the revised policy document (Skolverket, 2016a). The methodological framework was based on a model of action learning (Zuber-Skerritt, 2002) as a way for practitioners to develop knowledge by acting, reflecting on practice, collaborating, and learning from actual workplace issues. This approach included individual interviews with teachers, observations of teaching, and reflective group dialogs. The researchers were active during the planning of the actions; later, they also took the role of observers. At the end of each action, the participating teachers had reflective conversations with the researchers to reflect about the action. In these conversations, the teachers addressed different positive

Table 1. Demographic information about the teachers.

Teacher	Gender	Years of teaching experience	Educational background
Eva	Female	21	SAEC teacher education, orientation: child and youth pedagogy
Anna	Female	3	Social pedagogue education Qualified guide in outdoor life, orientation: forest life, canoeing
Jenny	Female	11	SAEC teacher education, orientation: outdoor life, health, identity Sports science, coaching
Stina	Female	3	Primary school teacher education

and challenging aspects. This study design gave the researchers tools to create both an understanding of the complex phenomena at hand and new knowledge in a process where researchers as well as teachers were active.

Participants and settings

Participants for this project were chosen from an existing network of SAEC teachers connected to the researchers' university as they had expressed their interest in working with outdoor activities. The participants are four teachers (Eva, Anna, Jenny, and Stina) with various educational backgrounds and teaching experience (see Table 1). The project involved a small group to develop creative, flexible, and successful strategies to pressing problems. The teachers worked at the same school and represented two different SAECs, including approximately 25 students, each between 6 and 9 years old. Outdoor education in the forest is organized at both SAECs at least once a week at the end of the school day. The school is situated in a rural area close to (walking distance) different types of outdoor environments, like woods and lakes.

Data collection

This study is part of the overall project and based on data from the first action, consisting of reflective group dialogs from meetings with the teachers and the researchers held three times during the autumn term to discuss and evaluate. The meetings were audio-recorded, and 300 minutes were transcribed and analyzed by all three researchers. The teachers did not take part in the later analysis of the material. In selecting the exercises, we concentrated on activities chosen by the teachers. First, the teachers chose and conducted one activity each related to games, physical activities, and outdoor excursions, giving a detailed description of the work and planning with the pupils regarding the following: How did they go into the activity, stay in the activity, and go out of the activity? We explored the potential to transform content into powerful knowledge. Second, the teachers invited us to observe activities connected to the specific content, but these data are not included in this study.

The project, including this study, was conducted in accordance with national ethical guidelines (Swedish Research Council, 2017) and scrutinized by the university's ethical board. All participants, including teachers, students, and guardians, provided appropriate informed consent in speech and/or writing before data collection.

Data analysis

To operationalize powerful knowledge (Young, 2013), we used a typology of different roles students enter by doing exercises. The typology contains four roles, adapted from Otne (2015) and also used and developed in Ljung Egeland and Kulbrandstad (2022): *the subject-specific apprentice*, *the personal expert*, *the empathic individual*, and *the active citizen*. The transcripts from the conversations have been analyzed in a joint qualitative analysis process (cf. Boeije, 2010). Through segmentation, we have worked deductively with the data material and taken our theoretical framework as a point of departure with a focus on the roles that

Table 2. Transformation processes through student roles.

Roles students are invited to enter	Description of the roles	Possible contribution to powerful knowledge related to the central content of games, physical activities, and outdoor excursions
Subject-specific apprentice	Doing activities to work on subject-specific knowledge content	Basis for establishing knowledge and discovering new ways of thinking and acting
Personal expert	Using the knowledge students have from before	Potential invitation to reflect on, generalize, and develop identity; in isolation, there is a danger of only learning what students already know from earlier experience
Empathic individual	Entering a role as another person in a different situation	Engaging with feelings, going beyond the limits of the students' own experience, generalizing from a particular situation
Active citizen	Participating by communicating opinions in different ways	Becoming action-oriented, being able to engage in current debates in society

(Developed from Ljung Egeland & Kulbrandstad, 2022).

emerge. At the same time, we have also analyzed the transcripts inductively to explore other possible themes in the teachers' reflections that could illuminate the research question. Based on this analysis, in the findings we present the teachers' reflections on: the teaching approach, their own didactic choices, and possible new knowledge for the students.

The main analytical framework was originally presented in Otnes (2015) for describing the different roles students enter by writing assignments in middle grade classrooms. Table 2 gives an overview of the transformation processes that might be initiated through the different roles and how the roles connect to developing powerful knowledge (Maude, 2016; Young, 2013).

When students enter *the role of a subject-specific apprentice*, they perform activities closely connected to a specific learning content, such as answering questions about content presented to them. When taking on *the role of personal expert*, students use what they know, which often means their everyday knowledge. While these activities might invite reflection and generalization, the students sometimes only rely on their personal knowledge and, thus, are not challenged to learn new content. The next role, the *empathic individual*, can be working with, for instance, fiction, film, or playing games. The students enter roles as another person to explore new worlds or find ways to cooperate. This role can be powerful because it engages with feelings experienced by other people living in other contexts or in historical times. The last role is being an *active citizen*. In the national curriculum of Sweden, the importance of democracy and fostering active citizens is emphasized, and students should develop the ability to communicate and participate in society. For instance, this could be discussing and deciding things in groups, writing a letter to the editor, responding to a blog, or participating in any kind of election. This means finding the students' own voices and developing their ability to reflect and adopt a critical stance (cf. Ljung Egeland & Kulbrandstad, 2022).

Findings

There are several challenges related to introducing the concept of teaching in this specific educational context. While safeguarding SAEC in taking the students' interests, needs, and initiatives as a point of departure, as well as offering them various forms of expression and methods, teaching must secure the categories that, in the revised policy documents, are the central content. One of the participating teachers, Eva, discusses the SAEC pedagogy: "We do it the other way around. We use another starting point." The teachers work with the students in a conscious and explicit way. Which roles the students take or are invited to take are often decided in the specific situation. The teachers need to have a broad repertoire of knowledge in theory and practice and be skilled at situational teaching. We show how the teachers describe the interplay and dialogue with the students as important aspects in SAEC teaching.

Teachers' reflections when planning for action

The teachers reflect on the teaching and the role of the SAEC teacher but often end up in general organizational discussions about the framework conditions for teaching. They are aware of this. One dilemma is the desire for an extension of the school day that accommodates SAEC time.

We rarely reflect on something like a specific teaching content. It is easy to fall into the primary school pedagogical approach because you are in school all morning. It's a trap, because that's not where we're supposed to be. (Eva)

Previously, the work in compulsory school was more practical, with subjects such as math or Swedish, but now, it is more theoretical. The brain has been focused in the classroom, and you are tired when SAEC time starts because you have been in school activities all morning. Patience and stamina decreases. (Jenny)

The teachers describe how, as an SAEC teacher, one is viewed by teaching colleagues based on what is written on one's diploma – whether competent in a subject and, thus, ending up in the compulsory school's teaching. One's educational philosophy is also influenced by their educational background. What activities are planned are also greatly connected with personal interests.

A difference in approach between SAEC teachers and teaching colleagues concerns, among other things, "How should we learn in the forest?" There, the teachers' colleagues' perspective is easily getting dominating, and they find it difficult not to poke at what we do. You are put aside a little. We arrange more practical learning, which should be characterized by play and enthusiasm. We think children learn a lot when they are with us and explore through play, but we never get credit for it. School-age pedagogy should have its own value instead of being considered a tool, as is sometimes done by colleagues. (Eva)

The teachers describe how they usually plan relatively various types of activities linked to the central content of games, physical activities, and outdoor excursions. Eva and Anna, who work together in one of the SAECs, often plan activities in the forest, where nature is used as a resource and the teaching is about how to behave, what to do, and what you can find.

I don't have a teaching licence, but I am a trained social pedagogue and a qualified guide in outdoor life, which is also vocational training. It is a focus on traditional outdoor life, forest life and, among other things, canoeing. I previously worked at an SAEC that was independent from the school and had an emphasis on nature and outdoor life. That experience affected me a lot in my work. (Anna)

Eva and Anna emphasize that they do not want their outdoor teaching to be about competition or performance. They have never engaged in competitive sports and find it difficult to relate to that type of activity in the SAEC. However, Jenny and Stina, who work together in the other SAEC, express different views. Both have a sports background and like to plan activities that have more elements of physical activity and games that can involve winning or losing.

I started as a high school teacher, but then became a SAEC teacher specializing in outdoor life, health, and identity. I have also studied independent courses, sports science, and health coaching. I am very involved in these issues. (Jenny)

The discussions were lively between the two pairs of teachers, and what became clear was that the activities planned for and carried out in the SAEC can be very different and that the curriculum allows for this. We decided that the teachers should choose one activity each related to games, physical activities, and outdoor excursions and then give a detailed description of the work and planning with the students. The descriptions should focus on how the teachers entered, stayed, and stepped out of the activity. The teachers wanted to do their own planning based on their own views of pedagogy and learning and then reflect together with us on the activity.

The SAEC and school are integrated but are still separate. We don't just want to step in as a resource or support for some students who need it. What we do is also important and good! Our work has intrinsic value! We want to show our specific competence and break it down and study it closely. (Eva)

In sum, it is obvious that the teachers have a clear idea that SAEC should be something different and an alternative to what they see as traditional teaching. They highlight that it should be based on exploration through play and not be a supplement to school or seen as special education. However, it is easy to end up in a traditional way of teaching that is reminiscent of primary school, because teaching and subject didactics have received a stronger focus. The teachers are keen to preserve and develop the distinctiveness of SAEC. The how question in the transformation processes seems essential for the teachers to develop.

Teachers' reflections on the action

Eva and Anna chose the activity “forest excursion” and Jenny and Stina chose “play tag.” The teachers gave a detailed description of the work and planning with the students. Their presentations address questions about how they entered into, stayed, and stepped out of the activity. We explored the potential of the activities in transforming content into powerful knowledge, and the activities were reflected on through structured conversations with the four participating teachers. Here, we present the teachers' stories about their activities in full as they were presented in the conversation. Eva and Anna tell us about the activity they have chosen to focus on, namely a forest excursion:

Our idea with the activity was that we get to know more animals and plants in the forest in a playful way. This is often how we think when we make trips to the forest. We want them to have such knowledge with them. We have a nice place in the forest where we often go. We go there and have a snack there. We want them to experience the forest with their bodies. Stop and listen in nature. That they should experience the different seasons. We have taken a gold box out into the forest with us, which the students take turns opening. There is something exciting that we are talking about. It can be a nice stone, a picture of animal poo or a riddle.

We usually plan a short, guided activity, but it is based on play. This time, we had with us cards of animals that you have to hold behind your back. We start as models, and then, the students take turns with that role. We join the game and guess what kind of animal or plant is on the card. The game involves asking each other questions. But you can only guess once per person. The students are very engaged, and there are usually no conflicts. It is a group where there are rarely conflicts, and this means that you can challenge yourself a little more. Then, we often have one or two students who do not want to participate. They can sit next to you. It could be that we are doing something for the first time, and they are unsure of what is going to happen or that they are tired or perhaps very worried. Sometimes, it takes a while before the students have understood the game. We spend quite a bit of time getting everyone to understand and be prepared.

Then, we have a free moment when they can do what they want, but we are always there to support and participate in the game. This time, they got down to business and played a cat game, which they have played many times. That game keeps evolving, and this time, the cats started throwing cones at each other. We teachers stepped into the game and started challenging our ways of throwing the cones. There were reactions and discussions about how to throw cones in a nice or dirty way. We want to be involved in developing the game. We think it's an educational game.

Then Jenny and Stina tell us about the activity they have chosen to focus on, that is, playing tag:

We had 10 students with us and were in the schoolyard. We entered the game with the idea that the students would be involved in leading the game and that their roles would change. This meant that we teachers were also in the game and counted, hid, and hunted. We started by discussing the rules of the game. Playing tag is a game you can play in a few different ways, and we put a lot of emphasis on having a learning conversation about rules in sports and about playing together and taking different roles. It's about having respect for rules and the roles you have. We see this as a selection we have made for teaching linked to this central content. We try to have a variety there with which games or sports we plan to play. And we have the students with us in that planning.

We got into the game and participated ourselves. The fighter came out, and it really was an adrenaline rush. We thought it was a very good atmosphere and only minor conflicts. It probably had a lot to do with having this learning conversation before we started playing.

When we had finished the game and were on our way to the snack, the students talked about how they felt so happy and energetic when we played, but now, they were very tired. We talked about what dopamine is and how you can then get a dip. When we sat at the snack, we talked a lot about what happens in the body when you move.

In the reflective conversation, the teachers highlighted two aspects they saw. One is how the activities offered by the teachers are strongly influenced by their own knowledge and experience from their education and from their interests. The second is that, during this action, they consciously worked to shape the activities in collaboration with the students, and their input was allowed to guide the direction the activity and communication took. Both teacher teams returned to how the roles the students were invited to take in activities were central and the importance of how the teachers participated in the play and conversations. The teachers describe how both fun and rewarding it was and that they could both support and challenge in the play.

Students' roles

During the third meeting, we further reflected on the students' roles. The curriculum stipulates that the students should be given the opportunity to try different roles and be challenged by, for example, practicing taking different roles in a group and taking different roles in play. We have focused on whether the students were given different roles in relation to knowledge content in the activities the teachers chose to reflect on.

The role of the subject-specific apprentice

Table 3 illustrates the role of the subject-specific apprentice, namely doing activities to work on disciplinary content. The teachers reflected on their ideas about what disciplinary content was transformed in the activities.

This content was presented during the forest excursion, while talking together, while having food in the forest, while playing tag, and while talking in the dining hall afterward. The teachers paid attention to several aspects of the central content of games, physical activities, and outdoor excursions, such as organizing games and sports; outdoor activities during different seasons; rights and obligations in different nature environments; and how diet, sleep, and the balance between physical activity and rest affect mental and physical well-being.

So, what kind of transformation processes can we see? Here, the role of a subject-specific apprentice means learning the disciplinary content presented by the teachers. These activities are often in a traditional classroom and closely connected to answering questions about the content. This can be the basis for establishing knowledge and discovering new ways of thinking. Our impression is that this role is given to students less often than in a traditional classroom. What the teachers have described is more of a learning conversation where both teachers and students had time and space to talk about their experiences with the learning content and ask authentic questions. The role of a subject-specific apprentice might be a necessary step, but it must be combined with other roles if it is to be part of a transformation into possible powerful knowledge.

The role of the personal expert

Some examples show that, before and during the activity, the teachers drew on the students' personal experience. When invited to take on the role of personal expert, the students should have used what they knew from before – that is, their everyday knowledge. Hence, both their own and the other students' experiences could be made visible to themselves and the whole

Table 3. The subject-specific apprentice.

Activity	Transformative role: Disciplinary content
Case 1: Forest excursion	Plants, animals, seasons, the law of Outdoor Access Rights, rules in games
Case 2: Play tag	Rules in games, nutrition, dopamine, adrenaline

Table 4. The personal expert.

Activity	Transformative role involving students' experiences from before
Forest excursion	Knowledge of plants and animals from the students' experience as a starting point
Play tag	Different rules for this specific game from the students' experiences as a starting point; questions about physical well-being, body and health after the activity

group. In the examples, this can be seen in the introduction. By combining explicit knowledge from the discipline and the students themselves, the activities invite students to reflect and generalize. In these cases, one might say that the use of everyday knowledge aims at “unlocking” the children’s prior knowledge as part of the process of learning disciplinary content [Table 4](#).

The teachers describe an explorative way of working to strengthen the students’ sense of belonging and engagement with the activity. In the encounter with the content, students unlock their everyday knowledge and then explore the content related to plants and animals, rules in games, and physical well-being.

In both activities, the students’ own thoughts, opinions, and arguments come up naturally in connection with playing tag. They are given the opportunity to reflect on and discuss why norms and rules are needed. In this way, the teaching can contribute to a deeper understanding of the interaction between individuals and how common needs should come before the individuals. They also could develop an understanding of what affects their own physical and mental well-being. During the forest excursion, they talk about and listen to what they previously have heard, seen, and read about animals and plants in the forest, both at school and home. Then, there is the opportunity to capture and build on all the students’ thoughts and knowledge in a conversation. By letting students listen to each other, taking everybody’s experiences seriously and giving them the opportunity to ask follow-up questions, interest can be created for in-depth and continued communication. It is a complex process to partly learn to converse and partly gain an understanding that people have different experiences, different ways of looking at what is right and wrong, and different ways of naming and putting words to things.

Unfortunately, activities may only invite students to rely on their personal knowledge without being challenged to learn new content. Thus, this is a possible contribution to powerful knowledge because the combination of the roles ensures that the students go beyond their prior knowledge.

The role of the empathic individual

Other examples show an invitation to enter the role as an empathic individual, that is, entering the role of another person in a different situation [Table 5](#).

Through the content, students can try taking on different roles in a group, to stay in different outdoor environments and learn to take other people into account. Games of various kinds, from organized games with clear rules to fantasy games, such as different kinds of role-playing games, give students the chance to try different roles by taking their own and listening to others’ initiatives in the game. One long-term goal of SAEC teaching is “to create and maintain good relationships and to cooperate based on a democratic and empathetic approach” (Skolverket, 2016b, p. 17). According to Michael Young (2013), this is powerful because it engages feelings that are experienced in particular contexts but common to all human beings and offers knowledge that can be generalized to other areas and situations.

Table 5. The empathic individual.

Activity	Transformative role involving empathy
Forest excursion	Take different roles in play
Play tag	Take different roles in play, fantasy in play

Table 6. The active citizen.

Activity	Transformative role involving active citizenship
Forest excursion	Form and discuss the rules. Leadership – democratic decisions
Play tag	Discuss the rules – democratic decisions

The role of the active citizen

Finally, parts of the activities exemplify the role of an active citizen, which means participating by communicating opinions. In the national curriculums of Sweden, the importance of the school's contribution to democracy and fostering active citizens is emphasized. One way of doing this is by developing the ability to communicate and participate. This means finding the students' voices and developing their ability to reflect and adopt a critical stance [Table 6](#).

The teachers state it is valuable that the students have the opportunity to reflect on what democracy means and to practice democratic principles, working methods, and processes through various forms of play. A foundation is laid for the students' understanding of democracy by allowing them to take on different roles, sometimes leading and sometimes following. What the teachers highlight as central in these activities is that they themselves participate in the game to create security for the students to try different roles, but also by challenging the students from time to time and making them think. The teachers tell us that humor is important in the classes and that it is fun to joke together. We argue that the students practice a genre in which they can take the role as an active citizen, becoming action-oriented and able to engage in current debates in society.

Teachers' reflections after the action and planning for the new action

We argue that the focus on students' roles showed both us and the teachers something new. This is how the teachers reflected on powerful knowledge as a curriculum principle and educational sociological concept:

I think that it becomes even clearer what our specific competence is and how we see our mission when we break it down like this and see a picture together. For me, it is very much about doing practical things in social life that the students can relate to what they have done at school. A little more so. You go out and do practical nature knowledge, for example. These pieces can be picked up in the SAEC as well. I am very passionate about the students being able to be in nature and the forest and that we should start from them ourselves when we do things. Otherwise, it will be forced and we will not change anything. (Anna)

It is not my primary thought when I think through an activity that it should be teaching, but I think that it should lead to a different understanding of society and life than the one you get in school. This is related to the needs of the students simply. The thing that has given the most in this is that we get the time to reflect together and put into words what we want to do and that you give your input with theories and research. You get a new thought, and that can be enough to develop something small that feels important. This thing about roles is very central to us at the after-school centre, and it can be unspoken and perhaps unclear what it really means and what it means that the students are given and take different roles. That it matters what and how we do. (Jenny)

I miss . . . a common platform for us in the region sometimes. Where we can exchange experiences. But it's not simple either. Our job is complex, and we can easily get stuck in practical details and get nowhere. (Eva)

What all teachers highlight as what they see as the most powerful in their teaching is the awareness that they work in a very conscious and explicit way *together* with the students. Which roles the students take or are invited to take are often decided in the specific situation. As a second action, the teachers invited us, the researchers, to observe activities also connected to the specific content, but, as mentioned above, these data are not included.

Discussion and practical conclusions

The research question of this article addressed how SAEC teachers view their role in identifying, planning, and implementing opportunities for children and youth to engage in a variety of roles that promote powerful knowledge in an educare setting. In the Education Act (Boeije, 2010, p. 800), it is emphasized that the teaching that takes place in SAEC must complement the school's teaching. The teachers in this study mainly highlight that it is the educational and didactic form of SAEC that constitutes the supplement. Students should be given the opportunity to take part in teaching in a different way, such as acquiring practical knowledge, and that the teaching is connected to everyday activities in students' lives and the experiences they bring to school. It is about students being able to do what is missing in school and getting the opportunity for a different kind of learning. Not least is play-based pedagogy, described in previous studies as a fundamental foundation in SAEC education, and involving students in planning the lessons, which create conditions for enthusiasm and engagement (Hedrén & Hjalmarsson, 2025; Holmberg & Kane, 2020). It also becomes clear that there are great variations in how teaching is carried out even at the same school. When the teachers describe their teaching, they have clear goals for what they do and they plan based on subject-specific knowledge they want their students to learn and practice. The interaction between teachers and students and between students is central and the teachers stress the importance of creating pedagogical relationships and that they all learn from each other. The results highlight the balancing act in which teachers provide planned teaching sessions that connect to the core content of SAEC, while also giving students space to play and explore independently (e.g., Hjalmarsson, 2013; Hjalmarsson & Hedrén, *in press*).

Despite the challenges of SAEC, our findings reveal possibilities for unique conditions, providing the potential for students' identity and knowledge development. The challenges and possibilities constitute important conditions to develop education to empower students. SAEC can offer students activities where they take different roles and conquer knowledge that provides them with new ways of thinking about the world and makes them go beyond the limits of their personal experiences. The overall impression is that the role of the subject-specific apprentice is the least frequent one offered in activities or the least explicit role students are invited to take. More frequent roles are the personal expert, the empathic individual, and the active citizen, and they are often connected to certain aspects of voluntariness and free time, but also to the teachers' relational approach. Focusing on powerful knowledge, we argue that, when the roles are combined, students are more likely to be helped to connect knowledge about games, physical activities, and outdoor excursions to their own or others' lives and to society. Although the term *personal expert* has a positive connotation, Young's critical comment that "pupils do not come to school to know what they already know from experience" (2013, p. 111) spurs our interest in observing how this role might be combined with other roles and integrated in a teaching sequence. By working with classmates, students also have the opportunity to share experiences.

Knowledge is powerful if it enables young people to discover new ways of thinking, better explain and understand the natural and social worlds, think about alternative futures and what they could do to influence them, have some power over their own knowledge, be able to engage in current debates of significance, and go beyond the limits of their personal experience (Maude, 2016). Our work demonstrates that SAEC can transform physical activity and outdoor excursions into knowledge for students. Given the increased sedentary behavior among children, students' physical activity in school has largely revolved around duration, intensity, and frequency for the students to achieve positive physical health effects (Borgen et al., 2021). This approach risks excluding students who lack experience in sports and physical activity. From our findings, we suggest that it is often still unclear to SAEC teachers what constitutes knowledge in this context and what students are supposed to learn. Our study shows that SAEC teachers can organize teaching where physical activity contributes to a broader education for the students by allowing them to assume roles other than that of a sporty and physically active individual. Teaching in SAEC has an emphasis on a variation of ways of working with students and on different

forms of expression. Play pedagogy is central in SAEC and create an opportunity to focus less on performance requirements and more on making students dare to try new things and to find out what they think suits them when it comes to physical activity and outdoor excursions. We believe that this type of education has better potential to contribute to the holistic health for all students.

Limitations and future directions

A few limitations of this study need to be mentioned. There was a small sample and not representative, and we only present two activities. The purpose was not to generalize these findings to Swedish SAEC teachers and teaching.

This study provided information about SAEC teachers' knowledge about and understanding of teaching related to the central content of games, physical activity, and outdoor excursions. The findings of this study suggest that although the SAEC teachers were well aware of the possibilities of teaching in SAEC and how to accomplish a good outcome, they still expressed a need for reflection about how to evaluate and justify SAEC teaching. It is therefore important for teacher trainers to include these questions in teacher education. Thus, additional studies are needed in several directions. On a national level, SAEC teachers should be surveyed about their beliefs about SAEC teaching in general and about this central content specifically, SAEC teaching practices should be observed to generate more knowledge about the variation in SAEC teaching, and we should ask the students to tell us about their experiences of this specific form of teaching.

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